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May 30, 2002

TO: Student Affairs Extended Directors' Council

FROM: Kim Reicher 
Assistant to the Vice President

RE: Materials for June 3 Extended Directors' Council Meeting

Please find attached a copy of a document entitled "Learning Community Initiative for the University of Wyoming." Please review prior to the discussion on learning communities that will be held during the extended Directors' Council meeting on June 3.

attachment

Learning Communities Initiative for the University of Wyoming

The University of Wyoming Learning Communities Initiative purposefully creates collaborative, interdisciplinary learning environments that aim to improve the quality of undergraduate education by encouraging opportunities for faculty, staff, and students to synthesize knowledge through integrating academic and social learning.

Vision Statement for University of Wyoming
Learning Communities Initiative, June 2001

Purpose Statement

In this proposal, we describe rationale and methods for launching a learning communities initiative at the University of Wyoming. Our vision is to build on existing learning communities that already successfully operate on campus. In addition we propose to create new collaborative, interdisciplinary learning communities. Faculty who choose to participate in learning communities may work together to restructure the curriculum so that students can improve their ability to synthesize their learning and increase interaction with faculty and fellow students.

Background

Time magazine recently recognized institutions and programs in higher education that “know how to help newcomers survive and thrive” through establishing learning communities for incoming first-year students, increasing their retention rates by as much as six percent or more.¹ However, as with many of the best educational initiatives, the idea of learning communities is not new. Learning communities, formal and informal, have existed at UW and other universities for decades; often, established programs have all the characteristics of a learning community without being defined as one.

The current concept is rooted in the 1930s work of John Dewey and Alexander Meiklejohn, who focused on active learning and citizenship.² More recent permutations of the learning community concept are defined this way:

Learning communities . . . purposefully restructure the curriculum to link courses or coursework so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning as well as increased interaction with faculty and fellow students . . . Learning communities are also usually associated with collaborative and active approaches to learning, some form of team teaching, and interdisciplinary themes.³

Curricular structure within learning communities runs the gamut from completely integrated courses such as those offered at The Evergreen State College (where a student registers for one 16-credit course per term) to links between two or more existing courses. Residential components may also be included.

Alternative delivery systems offer a way for institutions to respond to the challenges of a changing student audience, public pressure for reform, and the emphasis on accountability.⁴ In

¹ Ellie McGrath. *Time's Colleges of the Year: Welcome Freshmen!* *Time*, 10 September, 2001: 64-66.

² Dewey, John. *How We Think*. Lexington, MA: Heath, 1933; Dewey, John. *Experience and Education*. New York: Macmillan, 1938; Meiklejohn, Alexander. *The Experimental College*. New York: Harper and Row, 1932.

³ Gabelnick, F., MacGregor, J., Matthews, R.S., & Smith, B.L. *Learning Communities: Creating Connections Among Students, Faculty, and Disciplines*. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 1990. 41.

⁴ Boyer, E.L. *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America*. New York: Harper & Row, 1987. Gabelnick, F., MacGregor, J., Matthews, R.S., & Smith, B.L. *Learning Communities: Creating Connections Among Students, Faculty, and Disciplines*. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 1990. 41.

- Validating students by sending them the message that they are responsible for their own learning and their success is important to the institution;¹⁰
- Helping students evolve from a dualistic “black versus white” approach, to a more relativistic view as they see multiple viewpoints on the same subjects;¹¹
- Increasing student involvement and satisfaction as they become deeper learners, making connections among disciplines and within their own experiences, and recognizing the value of lifelong learning.¹²

Benefits for Faculty and Administrators

Because the University of Wyoming already supports the undergraduate teaching mission, Learning Communities fit well with our institutional culture. Creating new Learning Communities at UW and reframing current institutional efforts under a learning community rubric will:

- Generate new excitement among teachers and learners by engaging diverse elements of the University community in a climate of rich dialogue, discussion, and debate;
- Integrate discussions of Learning Communities within the general education revision process to provide more curricular coherence;
- Position the University to obtain grant funding;
- Provide a focus for a coordinated marketing effort;
- Add a new dimension to future Academic Planning discussions;
- Increase curricular experimentation that invites viewing pedagogies through a new lens;
- Emphasize assessment mechanisms as a natural part of teaching-learning processes;
- Create collaborative environments in which sharing and mutual learning replace competition.

Action Plan and Timeline

We propose the following two actions:

1. Establish a learning community steering team that includes the current Institute Team and additional UW academic and student affairs professionals (Fall 2001). The function of this steering team will be to bring together key administrators, faculty, staff, and students to guide the learning communities initiative at UW.
2. Provide support for the campus community to participate in a Learning Community Summit that brings together nationally recognized leaders on Learning Communities and interested UW faculty, administrators, staff and students. The purpose of this summit will be to increase campus-wide awareness of this initiative and to explore ways in which learning communities can contribute to our retention and marketing efforts, program assessment, and the general education revision (Spring 2002).

¹⁰U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement: National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment, *Realizing the Potential: Improving Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment*, Washington D.C.: GPO 1996.

¹¹ Students enter institutions of higher education at varying stages of intellectual development. Perry, W.G., Jr. *Forms of Ethical and Intellectual Development in the College Years: A Scheme*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass. 1970.

¹² Tinto, V., P. Russo, *Coordinated Studies Programs: The Effect of Student Involvement at a Community College*. *Community College Review*, 1994.

While the term “learning community” has only recently emerged in the literature, there are many examples of existing programs that meet the definition of a learning community. Are you aware of any existing programs that your unit currently participates in or supports?

Learning communities, by their very nature, blur the lines between curricular and co-curricular instruction. How might Student Affairs units work with Academic Units to create such a seamless environment?

The literature on learning communities suggests that students are not the only beneficiaries of learning community involvement, and that instructors can also be impacted through curricular experimentation and a renewed sense of learning. What potential benefits do you see for Student Affairs to partner in these endeavors?

The “Student Learning Imperative” and “Principles of Good Practice for Student Affairs” documents reframe the role of Student Affairs within the Higher Education Organization. (The concept of learning communities is a natural offshoot of these documents.) How do you see our organizational philosophy in relation to these documents?