

RETENTION AND GOAL COMPLETION: LEARNING COMMUNITIES
AQIP Annual Update, 2008

A. Describe the past year's accomplishments and the current status of this Action Project.

The Learning Communities (LCOM) AQIP Action Project was highly successful in reaching its goals over the past academic year. The LCOM director, key faculty, and administrators achieved the following:

- 1) One of the key objectives of the LCOM project was to increase the number and variety of LCOM course offerings. LCOMs sections increased from 3 in 2006-07 to 16 in 2007-08. Having 16 LCOMs increased the cultural impact of the project because so many more students and faculty members participated. Almost 400 students had an LCOM experience in FY08, an increase of 330 from the previous year. In addition, after surveying students and counselors about students' preferences for learning communities, more learning communities with On-Course (first year college success class) attached as well as more communities geared toward students in developmental courses (reading, writing, and math) were scheduled for the coming year, 2008-2009. During Fall 2008, 15 LCOM sections are being offered.
- 2) Another key objective over the past year was to provide incentives for students to participate in LCOMs, especially the underrepresented population of students we originally targeted with this initiative. During FY07, the College awarded scholarships to 34 LCOM students with a total value of \$25,400. For FY08, we secured \$110,500 dollars in scholarship funding from private foundations and provided scholarships for 150 students participating in LCOMs, who fit the criteria of being either first generation college students, English Language Learners, or students of color.
- 3) Recruiting students and faculty into the LCOM program is important, but the true measure of the project's effectiveness was the achievement of various outcomes related to student satisfaction, retention, and academic achievement. The following quantitative and qualitative data show the overall level of satisfaction of students with the LCOM experience as well as an increase in retention rates and GPAs of LCOM students when compared to the general population.

QUALITATIVE DATA: We completed a survey of students after Fall 2007 to assess their satisfaction with their LCOM experience. Results from those surveys indicate that students are more actively engaged when registered for learning communities. The results of Spring 2008 interviews with 30 students and 14 faculty members and a survey completed by 65 students conducted by an outside evaluator offer encouraging data on the Learning Community Experience.

- Overall, almost all (97%) of LC students rated their experience in the LC as positive by strongly agreeing and agreeing.
- Almost all (97%) indicated they strongly agree and agree to encourage new students to participate in a LC.
- Almost all (90%) reported that participation in the LC made their transition to college easier.
- Students strongly agreed and agreed with instructors by noticing how the instructors had contributed to the values of their LC experience in a positive way (93%), followed by feeling comfortable visiting and/or communicating with instructors outside of class (88%), and seeing how the instructors helped them see the connection with the course/assignments in their LC (87%).
- Learning was impacted with 92% reporting strong agreement and agreement with their assignments in their LC classes connecting their coursework to relevant learning, followed by enhanced learning from their academic experience (87%).

- Furthermore, relationships with peers were impacted with 95% indicating strong agreement and agreement by their formation of one or more friends in the LC, followed by collaborative work with LC classmates creating a positive learning experience (95%).
- Conversely, over 10% indicated strong disagreement and disagreement with the instructors helping them see the connection with the course/assignments in their LC (13.4%), followed by their learning was enhanced from this academic experience (13.3%).

We are still in the process of analyzing the results of other areas of the study and assessing the implications of the recommendations.

QUANTITATIVE DATA: Students who participated in learning communities were retained at much higher rates from fall to spring semester than students who didn't participate in learning communities. From Fall 2007 to Spring 2008, 63% of students who did not participate in LCOM were retained. In contrast, 78% of LCOM students were retained. Additionally, 86% of students who participated in an LCOM which included On Course (a first-year experience course) were retained. After Fall 2008, we will be able to measure year-to-year retention rates, which will help us to truly gauge the level of success in helping students to persist.

4) Another major accomplishment of the project this year was to increase the amount of faculty professional development held for faculty in LCOMs. We realized that many faculty members were teaching in LCOMs, but not intentionally integrating their assignments and course objectives. Research (Mansilla 2004) shows that deeper levels of learning occur in learning communities in which instructors intentionally integrate rather than simply "link" their courses. In May of 2007, two-day training for LCOM faculty was completed, with over 30 faculty members attending. Additional faculty development activities were held on Fall 07 and Spring 08 professional development days. This past spring we also held two informal gatherings for faculty to share effective practices and problem-solve on issues related to learning communities. We received positive feedback about these informal sessions and will continue them in the coming year. Finally, during the summer, the College sent a team of seven faculty members and the Vice President for Academic Affairs to Washington State for The Evergreen State College National Institute for Learning Communities.

5) Finally, we wanted to disseminate "best practice" information about Learning Communities at IHCC to others, especially other institutions in the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System (MnSCU). The LCOM director and a Reading instructor trained faculty at other institutions through conference presentations at the MnADE (Minnesota Association of Developmental Educators) Conference (Sept. 07), the MnSCU Realizing Student Potential Conference (March 08), and the MnSCU Student Affairs Conference (Feb. 08).

Reviewer's Comments: *This is a large-scale complex action project in pursuit of the basic AQIP criteria of helping students learn. The increased number of sections and students indicates that this organization has made reasonable progress toward their goals. While the institution measured qualitatively, it was interesting to note the number of qualitative measures involved. It was also interesting to note the process the organization used to expand the number of LCOM's from 3 to 16. This process was clearly focused on continuous quality improvement. Expanding from a handful of faculty and students created a critical mass, which moved the project from a pilot study to an institutionalized objective. This action project also created some additional opportunities for professional development, higher overall retention, best practices among faculty and a general sense of collegiality among faculty.*

B. Describe how the institution involved people in work on this Action Project.

1) PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION: Those directly involved with LCOMs on campus included the LCOM Director, a faculty counselor, and a Retention Specialist, who served in a support staff position related to LCOMs.

2) FACULTY: Faculty members from many different disciplines were involved in learning communities over the past year. First, there was an increase in the number of faculty involved in learning communities. In 2006-2007, we had 15 faculty members were involved. In 2007-2008, over 30 members participate. This was a result of a robust recruitment effort by the LCOM Director, who spoke at professional days and contacted key faculty on campus to participate. We also regularly recruited new faculty to participate by doing general presentations at professional days and attending new faculty orientations.

3) COUNSELORS: We also had significant support and contact with the counselors. A counselor was appointed to serve as primary contact for students in Learning Communities, and that counselor came to LCOM classrooms to inform students about registration, on-campus services, other LCOM opportunities in future semesters, etc. Also, the counselors actively promoted LCOMs to new students through orientations. The LCOM video was shown at all orientations with a follow-up by either the LCOM director or counselors about the benefits of LCOMs for new students.

4) LCOMs are not successful without ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT. IHCC has the support of key administrators, including many deans and the Vice President for Academic Affairs. The LCOM director met regularly with academic deans, the Vice President for Academic Affairs, the Vice President for Student Affairs, and the Foundation Director to discuss scheduling, registration issues, funding, data collection and research, and other issues that make LCOMs successful not just in the classroom, but at the institutional level. The Vice President for Academic Affairs also attended the intensive 5-day LCOM planning retreat at Evergreen State, demonstrating her commitment to LCOMs on our campus.

5) OTHERS involved in LCOMs on campus included: marketing (development of marketing materials including DVDs and website); the Director of Multicultural Affairs, who assisted with recruiting; and the IHCC Foundation Director, who along with administrators, continues to search for and monitor grant funding to support LCOM initiatives.

Reviewer's Comments: *The steady increase in involvement among faculty and students created a sense of involvement within the college community. Both strength and a weakness is the commitment of the LCOM director. Without the LCOM director's strong recruiting efforts, one wonders how successful the expansion would have been. When talking a pilot project beyond its initial stages it is important to create a structure that remains in place when personnel change. Attendance at the conference in Washington is an example of how this effort might be institutionalized. By participating in this conference additional faculty and staff will return with a renewed focus on the implementation of LCOM's.*

C. Describe your planned next steps for this Action Project.

In June of 2008, five faculty from various disciplines (biology, sociology, English, photography, math) as well as the outgoing LCOM director, incoming LCOM director, and Vice President for Academic Affairs all attended a 5-day highly-reputed National Summer Institute on Learning Communities at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. Throughout the institute, attendees worked on a "campus action plan" which required reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of LCOMs. The IHCC

team developed a LCOM work plan with a 3-year timeline and responsible parties for 5 key initiatives related to improving the College's LCOMs. The team determined that the following five initiatives are central to advancing LCOMs and the culture of Learning Communities at Inver Hills:

1) Every learning community will have at least two integrative assignments. Since learning communities are built on an intentional integration of course disciplines, it is important that faculty members have the tools to be successful through ongoing professional development opportunities. Therefore, we plan to complete more faculty development activities around integration of assignments. We will do this by holding two half-day training sessions each year, creating a handbook for faculty teaching in LCOMs with models of effective integrated assignments, establishing criteria for faculty about the expectations of LCOMs, and determining best times/opportunities for ongoing faculty development (lunch'n learns, summer retreats, informal gatherings, etc.)

2) Every learning community will have at least one out of class experience. Research on learning communities has shown that out-of-class experiences, such as service learning opportunities, trips to museums, Earth Day clean-ups, and even informal events like pizza lunches, significantly increase the students' sense of community, which can lead to higher levels of success in LCOMs. Therefore, we plan to encourage faculty to embed at least one out-of-class experience into their LCOMs. We will help inform faculty of this process by writing a manual for faculty about how to do field trips and establishing a resource contact list for off-campus activities.

3) Learning community program faculty will have opportunities to meet together for professional development, including curriculum planning, pedagogy, and program assessment. This objective relates to #1 above. In order for faculty to make the most of the LCOM experience for themselves and their students, they must have time and opportunities to meet together and plan their LCOM goals, including integrated assignments, out-of-class activities, syllabus and course calendar planning, etc. This planning requires them to do work beyond that required in a stand-alone class. Therefore, we would like to identify an ongoing source of funding for faculty to participate in LCOMs. This might include stipends or release credits. We will work closely with administrators (see C5) to identify a reliable funding stream for this important work.

4) Establish an Advisory Board which meets once a semester and a Learning Community Committee that meets once a month. Over the past year, although the LCOM project has had involvement from many areas on campus, much of the work for program planning and goal setting has fallen on the shoulders of the LCOM director. Therefore, we would like the LCOM project to have more input from other key stakeholders. The advisory board will be made up of the LCOM director, the VP of Academic Affairs, an off-campus resource (such as an LCOM director from another campus), a counselor, the registrar, and one or more academic deans. They will work together to make "big picture" decisions about funding, faculty stipends, registration issues, and long-term planning. The LCOM committee will be made up primarily of faculty teaching in LCOMs to help initiate faculty development activities.

5) Administrators will take the lead in solving logistical and organizational issues related to implementing learning communities. As stated above, administrative support is essential to effective LCOM programs. Therefore, we have the commitment of our VP for Academic Affairs to make LCOMs a priority. We will work, as well, with other administrators on campus to imbed LCOMs into the campus culture, for example, by requesting that all interviews of potential faculty and administrators have a question about experience with or willingness to be involved in learning communities.

Reviewer's Comments: *The next set of goals that are indentified will move this project forward in the institutions attempts to institutionalize learning communities. The formation of an LCOM committee*

shows responsiveness to stakeholders and others opinions. This committee will provide a forum for the systematic review of the processes that will make this a successful project. Having a group made up from a variety of perspectives will help get the "big picture" view that is so important to the success of a comprehensive project like this.

D. Describe any "effective practice(s)" that resulted from your work on this Action Project.

The LCOM team developed several effective practices:

- 1) This past year LCOMs were integrated with the first-year college success course, OnCourse. OnCourse was brought to the campus in 2006-2007; and, last year, it was intentionally added to a number of LCOMs as an additional 1-credit course. Our research on retention last year showed that although LCOMs have higher rates of retention than the general student population, when LCOMs are combined with OnCourse sections, the retention rates were even better. In fact, 91% of new full-time students in Fall 2007 were retained to Spring 2008 when they took a learning community with an OnCourse class together. That winning combination has led us to include OnCourse in many more LCOMs for the coming year.
- 2) We also feel strongly that having a wide range of learning communities available on our campus has been a very effective practice. Many LCOMs began organically, when two "like-minded" instructors requested to work together. Those "organic" pairings are still important, but we have balanced those with LCOMs that will meet the needs of more students. Therefore, we have developed "intentional" learning communities to meet the needs of various populations, including an EAP (English for Academic Purposes) LCOM for English Language Learners, LCOMs for developmental courses (including reading, writing, and math), and LCOMS for specific career programs (such as law enforcement and pre-nursing). This wide range of programming has made LCOMs successful on our campus.
- 3) Another effective practice that resulted from this project is what we call the "curb cuts phenomenon." When we originally proposed the LCOM initiative on campus, we were targeting "under-served" students, first generation, academically at risk, financially vulnerable, and students of color, who often have difficulty persisting in college. However, Learning Communities (and OnCourse) were open to all students. There are two positive results from this "open-door" policy: open enrollment normalizes the intervention (at-risk students are not labeled); also, the positive results of the intervention, while targeting under-served students, applied to all engaged students. These results are compared with curb cuts, which were initially intended for those with disabilities, but which actually benefited many segments of the population, from babies in strollers to people on bikes, to shoppers pushing carts. We are glad to see that the initiative positively affects a much broader range of students than those originally targeted.
- 4) Another effective practice we explored last year and plan to integrate in the coming year is the use of Structured Learning Assistance (SLA). This is a model of academic support for students in which students receive additional instruction by a tutor in a group setting to help them succeed in the course. Students are required to attend until the first exam. After the first exam, attendance at SLA meetings is optional for those students who were successful while the SLA meetings remain required for students who did not do well. The Learning Assistant helps students work on study techniques, test-taking skills, and note-taking skills, using content specific to the course. Courses with low success rates are targeted (e.g., psychology, biology, sociology, and others) for first-year students. The objective is to identify high risk courses rather than high risk or at-risk students (Arendale, 2007) and provide academic support to students in those courses. Research has demonstrated that supplemental learning programs can improve access and retention in developmental education courses as well as college-level classes (Higbee,

Arendale, & Britt Lundell, 2005). SLA was studied in depth last year, two learning assistants were hired this summer, and SLA was piloted this summer and will be incorporated into two LCOM sections this fall.

***Reviewer's Comments:** Combining the On-Course experience into the LCOM's was a good example of using practical field research experience and applying it to the current situation. In addition, combining the natural pairings of like-minded faculty with the needs of student learners reinforces the learning centered environment, which is essential to project success and institutional buy-in. The unintended consequences or "curb cuts" of this project are many. The broad range of student impact and the addition of new techniques focused on student retention and success is evidence that this project is expanding beyond its initial focus. The strong leadership of the LCOM director and the broad base of institutional support reflect the quality of this project and its impact on the overall institution.*

E. What challenges, if any, are you still facing in regards to this Action Project?

The College faces several challenges in this project:

1) The campus team that attended the National Institute for Learning Communities became highly aware of the differences between linked courses and learning communities. The team recognized that many of the College's "Learning Communities" were actually linked courses. Research indicates that students in courses that have curricula that are integrated are much more successful and get many more benefits from the courses. These integrated courses create true learning communities. Linked courses provide little more than the social integration benefits. We plan to address this need by doing more intentional professional development for LCOM faculty in helping them understand the importance of integrating their courses in a deeper way and providing them with the tools and time to make more effective curricular integration a reality for all LCOMs. (See C1 and C3 above)

2) There were a few course pairings that did not attract enrollment. These Learning Communities had to be cancelled. We have addressed that by surveying students and counselors about which pairings and offerings best meet student needs. As a result, we have monitored the types of LCOM offerings and matched them more effectively with our student population.

3) We have also had some difficulties with gathering data. Barriers that hampered the College's research efforts included difficulties in counting the underserved because of data privacy considerations and the lack of local control over the data entry system which is provided by the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU). We have taken steps to address this barrier. This past year we contracted with Iowa State University's Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies to conduct focus groups and analyze resulting qualitative data for the program (See A3). Through the its Center of Excellence Access and Opportunity grant, the College has contracted with the University of Minnesota to help it determine how to measure the impact of multiple interventions and how to determine which combinations of interventions work best with which populations. This research should help us to better measure the impact of LCOMs on targeted populations and students as a whole.

***Reviewer's Comments:** These challenges reflect a higher order thinking on the overall project. As the logistics of this project move beyond its initial stages it is important to note that the focus has shifted away from those elements to the quality and depth of student learning in the LCOM's. Contracting out the research elements of this project will allow the college to focus on implementation and service and place the focus of research on the results and the continuing action steps.*