By Aaron M. Brower and Karen M. Dettinger

What **IS** a Learning Community?

Toward a Comprehensive Model

Learning communities are too valuable, argue the authors, to let them become just another buzzword. It's time to look closely at what they are, to determine what they aren't, and to set forth specific expectations and criteria.

IN HIGHER EDUCATION we talk a lot about learning communities and their potential to transform students' lives. But do we really know what learning communities are? Indeed, the concept has become so widely used, for so many different types of programs and activities, that it risks becoming yet another trendy flavor-of-the-month buzzword. Are classrooms that incorporate collaborative learning really learning communities—even if they are modeled after the successful University 101 courses at the University of South Carolina? What about residence halls that promote so-called community among their residents? Do they count?

If learning communities are going to realize their potential, we need to come to a general understanding of what they are (and what they are not) and what we want them to achieve. In this article we push this discussion by presenting a model that makes explicit the features, processes, and outcomes that we believe are necessary elements of learning communities. Some readers may wonder why we need a model of learning communities. Isn't it enough that different types of learning communities exist, each with their own strengths and emphases? Do they all need to be viewed against a strict model or prototype of what a learning community "should" be? We believe that having a model can greatly enhance our ability to see what our programs do and do not do well. A model can provide the concept of *learning community* with an anchor that keeps it from drifting into the buzzword sea. It provides specific programs with a benchmark, a coherent prototype, and a backdrop against which the emphasized features of a program can be highlighted. It also provides a way to highlight those features that we thought were present but that in fact are not.

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The model that we have developed incorporates the curriculum-based continuum that Faith Gabelnick and her colleagues describe in their 1990 book *Learning Communities: Creating Connections Among Students, Faculty, and Disciplines,* but the model also includes learning communities that are not curriculum based. It specifies that learning communities, to be considered as such, must integrate academic subject matter and social interactions while providing the physical space or facility for an intellectually stimulating environment to emerge. Furthermore, learning communities must be designed to develop a triad of responsibilities within students—professional, ethical, and civic. Above all else, the development of learning communities must be idea driven: we must think comprehensively and conceptually about the goals, purposes, and program components of these communities—making choices about their strengths and emphases.

WHERE DO *COMMUNITY* AND *LEARNING* FIT IN?

BEFORE WE DESCRIBE the model in detail, let us first consider two fundamental principles on which it is based: community and learning.

The term *community* conjures up images of a warm, caring environment in which friends and neighbors support and care for one another. These positive connotations may help explain the inherent appeal of the term *learning community.* We agree with John Gardner, however, who explains in a 1996 article for the *Community Education Journal* that our nostalgia for the sense of community that was (and perhaps still is) a feature of small-town life may be somewhat misplaced. Many of these communities were characterized by attributes that are not practical or desirable in today's educational institutions: resistance to change, hostility toward newcomers, demand for strict conformity, and limited or nonexistent contact with the outside world. These communities were

typically built around homogeneous religious affiliations, ethnicity, economic status, or occupations. According to Gardner, communities today, "if they are vital, continuously build and rebuild their shared culture and consciously foster the norms and values that will ensure their continued integrity." Today's communities must learn to live with change, to allow room for individuality within the community, and to "maintain highly permeable boundaries."

We raise Gardner's cautions to emphasize that at least two challenges exist when we try to create our own learning communities. First, they must stand for something, meaning they must have a boundary that defines who is and is not a member. People will join a learning community because of its unique identity, mission, goals, or opportunities. But we also know that students often join learning communities to escape other aspects of the university. The challenge, therefore, is to create communities that have strong identities without being elitist, that are defined by their goals and missions rather than by who they exclude.

Second, a learning community must be large enough both to accomplish its goals and to include all members who wish to join. It cannot be so large, however, that an individual is lost within it. When we define a community as a group of individuals committed to shared values and goals, who purposefully come together and work together to reach these goals, then diversity is encouraged not just for ideological reasons but also because different perspectives, experiences, and backgrounds contribute to the collaborative efforts to achieve the community's goals. Unlike formal organizations, which are designed and constructed around well-defined hierarchies and roles, community members and roles evolve over time through a sense of shared commitment, obligations, and resources. Finding the right mix of roles, tasks, and number of members is an ongoing process of trial and error.

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But there are lots of ways to build community: for example, through shared adversity, such as in Army boot camp or fraternity hazing; by working toward shared goals, say, as committee members working together on a long-term project; and through shared risks or excitement, such as the experiences of shared-needle intravenous drug users or college students bingeing on alcohol. In our view, learning communities specifically develop community through shared learning activities.

We view learning itself as a transformative process in which individuals make sense of the world around them by integrating new information and experiences into what they have previously learned. Learning incorporates both the development of a broad knowledge base and the acquisition of integrative thinking skills. It is our contention that transformative learning that takes place in a community setting can and should result in the development of professional, ethical, and civic responsibilities. Professional responsibilities refer to how one acts in one's work life, ethical responsibilities describe one's code of behavior for determining right and wrong, and civic responsibilities are those that dictate how one treats others and how one fits into a community. Responsible behavior in these three arenas, coupled with a broad knowledge base and the integrative thinking skills needed to employ it, embodies our view of the epitome of a successful college graduate. George Kuh presents a similar vision in *The Learning Imperative* (1984).

A PYRAMID MODEL OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES

OUR LEARNING COMMUNITY MODEL grows out of these principles of community and learning. To truly capture the multidimensional nature of learning communities, we have created a three-dimensional figure that visually demonstrates how academic, social, and physical components can interact to facilitate the development of professional, ethical, and

civic responsibilities in students (see Figure 1.). The following paragraphs describe in detail the components of learning communities that are represented by the model.

Academic, Social, and Physical Components of Learning Communities. We define the academic component of a learning community as its curriculum content; the social component as the interpersonal relations among students, faculty, and staff; and the physical component as the place or facility where the community meets or resides. We argue that for a program to create a community effectively and enhance learning in the ways we have described, it must integrate these three components to some degree. That is not to say that programs that incorporate only two of these components are without value or are not innovative; what we are saying, however, is that they are not learning communities. Our purpose in making this distinction is to give program planners clear guideposts they can use in program development.

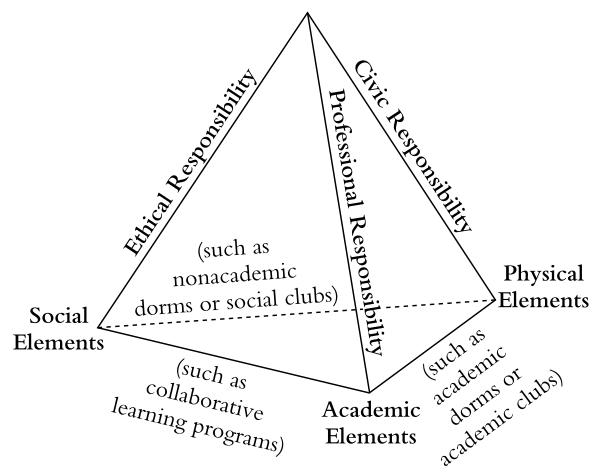These three components are represented horizontally on the base of the model; thus individual programs

Figure 1. Learning Community Pyramid

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can be located on the model's base according to the degree to which they combine the three components. For example, a program such as a seminar focused on classroom discussion and group activities—one that tries to achieve a balance between the academic and the social and includes the physical only insofar as it has students gather in a seminar room—would be located midway between the academic and social points, slightly inside the pyramid and near the academic-social edge, to reflect the small influence of the physical component.

Development of Professional, Civic, and Ethical Responsibility. Where a program might be positioned vertically on the pyramid shown in Figure 1 would depend on the extent to which it worked to promote each of three responsibilities: professional, civic, and ethical. It is essential that learning communities intentionally work to achieve the development of student responsibility in these areas. There are many examples of programs that are successful at this, either intentionally or unintentionally, in one or more of the three areas. What sets learning communities apart is their explicit and intentional focus on all three responsibilities.

For example, when academic classrooms incorporate features that connect academic work to students' life after college (by working on real-world problems in class or bringing professionals into the classroom), they encourage students to develop themselves professionally—to see themselves as professionals in the particular academic field. Residence halls that facilitate community involvement (through, for example, shared governance or explicit community development activities) help students to develop a sense of civic responsibility—to view themselves as part of a larger community. Students recognize the interdependence inherent in a community: being accountable to others and holding others accountable. Finally, when social groups engage in activities that are prosocial (such as community service or participation in organizations such as Student Environmental Action or the College Republicans), students develop a sense of ethical responsibility—a value system that provides guidance for individual students'

lives and helps them to learn interpersonal norms as well as the consequences of their actions.

We recognize that the concepts of professional, civic, and ethical responsibility overlap in many ways, as do the means by which individuals develop them. In fact, to develop each of these responsibilities, one must have a variety of experiences—experiences that genuine learning communities can offer.

USING THE LEARNING COMMUNITY PYRAMID FOR PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND DESCRIPTION

A PROGRAM'S ABILITY to help students achieve these outcomes can be visually represented on the model in Figure 1 in conjunction with the three components described earlier. The top of the pyramid represents what might be described as the ideal learning community. Here all three kinds of responsibility and the three campus components (academic, social, and physical) come together to create a learning environment that promotes the development of transformative learning in a community setting. Learning communities of this type, although rare or maybe even nonexistent, provide a comprehensive and integrated experience for students' learning and living. Such a program would contain a balance of social, academic, and physical components. Examples of learning communities that are closest to the top of the pyramid are some degree-granting residential colleges within universities that are civically, professionally, and ethically focused. James Madison College, at Michigan State University, which we discuss in more detail later, is very close to this ideal.

We have intentionally designed this pyramid model to create a comprehensive definition of learning communities that is somewhat restrictive. Clearly the bottom points of the pyramid are not learning communities according to our definition; neither are programs that do not incorporate the responsibilities represented by the pyramid's edges. We do not know, however, how far up the pyramid one must go—that is, how many of the

components and responsibilities must be incorporated—for a program to count as a true learning community. The conceptual and empirical work has not yet been done to define reliably how much of each dimension is necessary to obtain the outcomes desired of learning communities.

Our aim in presenting this model is to give program planners a framework for critically examining new and existing programs. Thus, by placing a program into this pyramid model—on or near various faces or edges, at various heights, and suspended within the pyramid's interior—planners will be better able to appreciate the program's unique strengths and emphases and see possibilities for improvement. In the next section, we demonstrate how the model can be used by examining four well-known learning communities and explaining where they can be can be placed on the pyramid and why (see Figure 2).

The Bradley Learning Community at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. This is a residence hall for first-year students that is linked by way of faculty and reserved course sections to three undergraduate certificate programs at the university. Bradley's
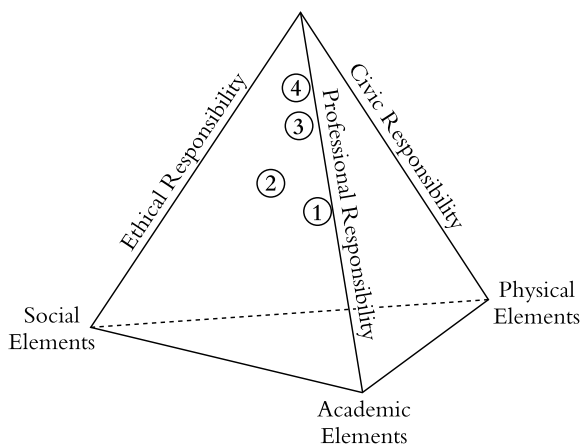
① **Bradley Learning Community:** Middle on civic and ethical responsibility; near the social-physical face

② **Freshman Interest Groups:** Middle on ethical and professional responsibility; near the academic-social face

③ **Residential College:** High on all three responsibilities; balanced among all three faces

④ **James Madison College:** Even higher on all three responsibilities; balanced among all three faces

Figure 2. Placement of Four Programs
on the Learning Community Pyramid

strength is its focus on civic and ethical responsibility, its original mission. And although Bradley does incorporate some academic components, they are not as fully developed as the school's social and physical space components. Consequently, there is little focus at this time on professional responsibility. The school would therefore be best placed within the pyramid's interior: about halfway up on the civic and ethical responsibility dimensions, and closer to the back face of the pyramid than to the middle.

The lack of emphasis on academics raises an important issue: to become more balanced among the three key elements of the model, Bradley will need to build more specific academic content into its program—to provide a more uniform "academic anchor" for students, for example. However, whether this would make Bradley a "better" program is open for discussion. It is already successful in meeting its original mission. The key is that program planners going through the process of identifying and fine-tuning the mission and goals of their program can use the pyramid model to clarify what their program does and does not do and thus identify its gaps and strengths.

Freshman Interest Group (FIG) Programs. Originally developed at the University of Oregon, these programs could be placed at different locations in the pyramid, depending on their focus. FIGs are nonresidential programs designed for first-year students. They link three courses around premajor topics so that a cohort of approximately twenty-five students travels together through their first semester. Typically, an upper-division student serves as a peer mentor and coordinates FIG activities, which might include integrative seminars, study groups, or sessions designed to help students learn about the campus. The level of faculty involvement varies and may or may not include collaborating on course syllabi, attending seminars, and mentoring students. Because FIGs create opportunities for students to interact with one another and their peer mentor, they can contribute to creating ethical responsibility.

On the basis of this general description of FIGs, with their focus on integrating academic and social elements to enhance professional and ethical responsibility, we have chosen to place them a bit more than halfway up on the face of the pyramid defined by the professional and ethical dimensions. It is interesting to note that if a physical component were added to FIGs, they would be enabled to better promote civic responsibility.

The Residential College at the University of Michigan and James Madison College at Michigan State University. These are both examples of programs that might be placed fairly high and centrally

within the pyramid. Both are degree-granting residential programs in which classrooms and faculty offices are located within the residence hall setting. Both programs integrate academics into a dedicated physical space—the residence hall environment—while developing programming that encourages students to learn together and to interact with one another and with faculty. We have, however, placed James Madison closer to the peak of the pyramid because its program is explicitly built around professional, ethical, and civic responsibility. Students enrolled in The Residential College select majors from the College of Literature, Science and the Arts, while students at James Madison College select from four distinct majors related to social relations, international relations, political economy, and political theory.

We wish to reemphasize one very important point about this model: we do not believe that programs that are either high up the pyramid or centrally located are necessarily better (that is, more effective, productive, or healthy, or better experiences for students). In fact, we assume that different programs are designed with different goals and objectives in mind. The Bradley Learning Community, for example, was purposefully designed to promote civic and ethical responsibility and is not currently focused on professional development; FIG programs are explicitly course-based and not residential; and The Residential College is explicitly a comprehensive liberal arts college. The point of this exercise is to develop a clearer understanding of which features of a particular program are its strengths by placing it within a comprehensive model that links it conceptually to other, very different programs.

CHARACTERISTICS COMMON TO ALL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

ALTHOUGH WE HAVE emphasized that the mission and goals of individual learning communities vary considerably, there are some characteristics common to all learning communities—characteristics that must be built into the design of the community process. All learning communities are purposefully designed to do the following:

- Develop a sense of group identity in which all participants recognize one another as learners, while still valuing the contributions of each individual. Students recognize that participants are neither solely independent nor dependent.

- Provide facilities or spaces in which people can come together to meet and engage in transformative learning activities.

- Create a supportive environment that engages new students in the life of the institution. Activities and programs are designed to engage a continual stream of new members.

- Develop a seamless student experience that integrates social and academic experiences. Although the level of integration will vary, activities and programs are designed to enable students to bring their personal interests into their academic work, as well as to bring their academic work into their personal and social activities.

- Develop connections among disciplines, recognizing that although ways of knowing may be discipline specific, knowledge and concepts are not.

- Provide the context for developing complex thinking skills—including divergent, flexible, and critical thinking—and social cognition, creativity, and metacognition, whether the focus is on civic, professional, or ethical responsibility. Programs and activities are designed so that students interact

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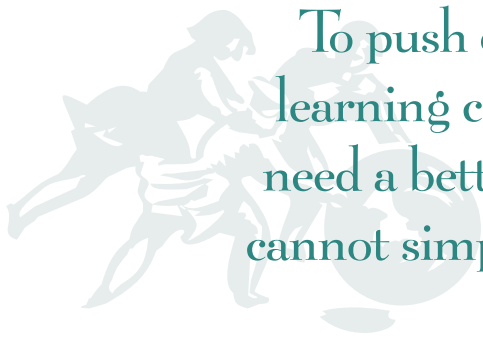
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with material at a much deeper level than simply receiving information.

• Continually evaluate both the process and the outcomes. Modifications should be made as necessary. A learning community continually evolves as new members enter. Although this is essential to the vitality of the community, it also requires that the community be continually evaluated to ensure that its stated objectives continue to be met.

THE LEARNING COMMUNITY idea has great appeal, and it has great potential to provide truly transformative experiences for the students, faculty, and staff who participate in such communities. But to push our own thinking about the value of learning communities to higher education, we need a better definition of what they are. They cannot simply constitute everything that is new and wonderful in higher education. In our model we have not chosen to define learning communities in terms of their domain (that is, curricula, residence halls, or individual classrooms) in the educational sphere. Rather, we have defined them as integrated,

comprehensive programs in which transformative learning takes place through a community process as students develop professional, civic, and ethical responsibility. Our definition is meant to be concrete—it is meant to define which programs are and are not learning communities. Learning community planners must define their own specific goals and objectives, which must lead to the specific processes and outcomes that make up their program. We hope that our model will allow more careful analysis and evaluation, which can lead to more fully comprehensive, articulated, and effective learning community programs.

NOTES

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