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Developing a comprehensive learning community program: Navigating change through shifting institutional priorities

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Developing a comprehensive learning community program: Navigating change through shifting institutional priorities

Abstract

This is the third of a three-part series which will share information about how a mid-size, comprehensive university has worked to a learning community program, including a residential curriculum. This article focuses on how those working with Learning Communities navigate program development during changing institutional priorities.

Keywords

learning communities, living learning communities, curriculum development, institutional change

Background

This is the final of our three-article series where we describe a shift in institutional priorities and how that shift negatively impacted Learning Communities (LCs). From this piece, we hope that other practitioners can anticipate and plan for on-going institutional support, and develop a strategy if that support diminishes. As noted in our previous articles, (Workman & Redington, 2015, 2016) the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) began LC initiatives in the mid-1990's. As a result of changes in university leadership which resulted in shifting institutional priorities, the program known as Success UNI ended in 2008. In spite of the changes in administration, the university's Department of Residence (DOR) continued its support of the previous program by offering living options based on students' academic year in school. In addition, the director continued to push for a rebirth and re-commitment of an institutional-wide LC program. During the 2013-2014 academic year this goal was realized. The University of Northern Iowa had new leadership and began to shift its priorities back to an academically-focused residential experience. In collaboration with the Provost and Executive Vice President of Academic Affairs and the Vice President of Student Affairs (VPSA), the Learning Community Advisory Council (LCAC) was formed to move the LC program forward.

Curriculum Development and Implementation

During the course of the 2013-2014 academic year, the LCAC focused on three priorities: marketing, assessment, and curriculum implementation. The team worked with staff from the Office of University Relations to create a comprehensive marketing plan for learning communities that took into account current students, faculty and administrators, as well as prospective students and families. Results of these efforts included the development of a brand, the launch of a learning community website, and the creation of several key print publications. The publications were designed for different audiences, including prospective students and their families, admissions counselors, high school guidance counselors, and those students who had already committed to the university and signed a housing contract.

Assessment was a primary focus for the LCAC in 2013-2014. The Director of Institutional Research led this initiative. A Qualtrics survey was developed which allowed for datasets to be developed. The data would allow for comparative analyses as the learning communities evolved over time. In addition, a multi-year comparison of grade point averages was undertaken.

Finally, the Department of Residence revised the programming model and developed a residential education curriculum. Known as "PAC" (Personal

Development, Academic and Intellectual Development, Community and Cultural Engagement), the curriculum was designed specifically to meet students needs in the four types of LLCs: springboard (first year students), STEP (second and third year experience program), academic (biology, business, education, honors, music, and exploring majors), and UC (upper class students).

In the summer of 2014, members of the LCAC attended the National Summer Institute on Learning Communities (NSILC). As a result of the institute, the LC curriculum was created. Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson, 2006) served as the foundation for the curriculum which provided specific developmental goals and learning objectives based on a student's year in school.

A priority of the LCAC was that the curriculum serve not only students involved in Living Learning Communities (LLCs), but those involved in non-residential LCs. LCAC members agreed that in order for this goal to be accomplished, support was not enough. Institutional action was needed. The LCAC identified key campus partners necessary to accomplish an institutional-wide LC implementation. Partners included faculty and staff working with the university's general education curriculum known as the Liberal Arts Core, orientation and new student programs (which includes pre-matriculation communication), enrollment management (which includes admissions, financial aid and the university registrar), as well as various academic programs. Key individuals were invited to join the LCAC or one of its working groups in hopes that the LC program would move beyond a residential focus to a campus-wide student experience (Workman & Redington, 2016).

An Institutional Shift

While strong momentum was built during the 2014-2015 academic year, the beginning of the 2015-2016 year caused a halt in LC progress. The long-time Director of Residence Life accepted a position at another institution, leaving the DOR without a director for a semester. The Director of Residence Life also served as co-chair of the LCAC and was the driving force for not only residential LCs, but for the campus-wide LC program. The remaining co-chair, who was completing her second year at the university, turned to the newly-appointed Provost and VPSA for guidance on moving forward with both a co-chair appointment and direction for the LC program.

A current ancillary member of the LCAC, serving as the newly-appointed Director of Success and Student Retention, was appointed co-chair of the LCAC. While she had been part of the council, her involvement to that point was working specifically with new student orientation and the peer mentor program, which supported the Liberal Arts Core. Given her focus and background, she was not in

a position to become an overall expert in the LC program or to provide essential leadership. The charge for both co-chairs was to “keep the program afloat” until a new Director of Residence Life was in place. It seems from an institutional standpoint, there would be no true priority on the LC program until that individual was in place. This was a clear indication that Living Learning Communities would be the focus and that LCs without a residential component were no longer a priority. In fact, those working with the LCAC interpreted this communication to mean the commitment from the administration was waning.

During the course of the fall 2015 semester, the LCAC dedicated time to ensuring the residential components of the LC program remained strong, evaluating the existing LC curriculum and determining what changes needed to be made, and who, if anyone, should be brought to the LCAC table. It was a high priority from both LCAC co-chairs that the DOR remained represented, even in its time of transition. The two Assistant Directors of Residence Life divided meeting attendance based on their schedules. While it was helpful to have the department represented, having the Assistant Directors switch off was challenging. Although they were on the same page about what was needed from a residential standpoint, they struggled to maintain momentum and coherence, as they filled each other in on the previous meeting they had missed.

With the many leadership positions in transition, it was clear that LLCs would not advance until a new director of residence life was in place. The Assistant Directors had too many responsibilities and were unable to focus the time and energy necessary to move the program forward. No additional departmental or institutional support was provided to the program; it seemed that the Assistant Directors were expected to keep the program afloat until staffing was complete.

The start of the spring 2016 semester brought additional institutional change. When the Director of Residence Life was hired, it was quickly determined he would serve in the role as LCAC co-chair, replacing the Director of Success and Student Retention. Additionally, the VPSA announced his retirement. He immediately moved out of his role and spent his remaining time at the university performing special project work for the president. The institution appointed an interim VPSA and launched a search for someone to permanently serve in the role. In retrospect, this may have been the key moment that determined the LC program would no longer be an institutional priority. With the LC program being a joint initiative of the Provost and VPSA offices, it seemed that the LCAC now had lost half of its institutional support. This, coupled with another new co-chair and continued lack of direction, in many ways set the LCAC up for failure.

In recent years, a formal charge for UNI committees, councils, and task forces had been jointly issued by upper administrators. The LCAC had not

received a formal charge from the Provost or VPSA, and began to express frustration with the lack of institutional direction. Given the change in VPSA staffing, the council looked to the Provost for a formal charge to offer clarity and support to the members of the LCAC. This caused yet another shift in the work of the LCAC. As opposed to actively moving forward with pre-existing goals, the group re-assessed not only what they wanted from the program, but what they believed would realistically be approved by the Provost. Based on previous conversations with the Provost, both LCAC co-chairs believed his institutional priority would be to continue to develop the LLC program and to cease efforts on non-residential LC development.

In March 2016, the Director of Residence Life, Executive Director of Residence, and a current LCAC member (the Director of the Liberal Arts Core) met with the Provost to gain a formal charge. The other co-chair and the rest of the LCAC members were not invited to this meeting. The decision, whether intentionally or by oversight, to exclude other key members of the leadership team was problematic, given our collaborative ethos. Instead of a closed meeting, a more effective and inclusive strategy would have been for the Provost to attend a LCAC meeting. Had the whole program truly been an institutional focus, bringing multiple constituents to the table would have been useful moving forward. To date, a formal written charge from the Provost and the VPSA has not been provided to the LCAC. The group was correct, however, in assuming the focus would be on LLCs. Communication through unofficial routes has clearly stated that efforts to develop non-residential LCs will cease.

As the semester concluded, the university president announced his departure to assume the presidency of another institution. While the president had not been actively engaged in the development or implementation of learning communities, he was an ardent supporter of them and had included commentary about the vision in some of his statements throughout his time at UNI.

As it stands now, the provost has been appointed interim President. In recent weeks, the Board of Regents has hired a search firm and appointed a committee of university faculty, staff and students to select the 11th president of the University of Northern Iowa. As was stated earlier in this article, a search for a new VPSA was conducted but was deemed a failed search. The institution will continue for the foreseeable future with the current interim Vice President for Student Affairs. The decision to begin a search for a permanent VPSA will depend on the timing and process for the university presidential search.

With the shakeup of university leadership, the authors of this article series are concerned about the future of the LC program. It seems clear that LLCs will continue to exist. Only time will tell if they will develop and grow in breadth and depth. It remains to be seen whether the residential living communities will contain an academic component. For the imminent future, the existence of non-

residential LCs seems to be in doubt. The new leadership will have to determine whether learning communities will have a place at UNI or whether history will repeat itself and the LC program will be terminated, just as the Success UNI program was in 2008. While the LLCs are in a better place than they were between the years of 2008-2013, the overall learning community program is back at square one.

Lessons Learned

The experience in working with the LCs at UNI has been gratifying and edifying. The development of the LC program over the past two years has taught the authors of this series many lessons. The most relevant can be summarized in the following quote from the *Learning Community Research and Practice* Associate Editor, Sara Huntington, “[UNI’s] situation highlights the problems of sustaining institutional initiatives (S. Huntington, personal communication, June 14, 2016). As authors of this article series, individuals who played key roles in developing the LC program, and higher education professionals committed to the positive student development an institution-wide LC program can provide, the current state of the program is frustrating. The challenge to any large-scale program is sustainability through institution change. That change can be as minimal as a member of a committee needing to step away to as substantial as a university president announcing their departure. The UNI program fell short in true institutional commitment. Although commitment to the conceptual framework and plans was voiced, the institutional resources, including funding and personnel, was not provided at a level that was needed to sustain the program. The noteworthy success of UNI’s LLCs is only a small piece of what we worked to achieve. In the future, the authors hope institutional priority will be given to non-residential LCs. While it may be a long-term and somewhat lofty goal at this point it is one we deem necessary to support both residential and non-residential student success by meeting the changing needs and expectations of our student populations

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