Utilizing Multiple Interlocking Learning Communities to Form a Center for Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

The trend toward implementing models for Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTL) for academic support in higher education is gaining momentum. Whether due to external influences, such as the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, which promotes inquiry about teaching and learning, or more related to internal forces such as the pressure to improve student retention, learning assistance administrators and teaching faculty increasingly share a common mission. The CTL movement assumes that significant learning takes place in multiple environments in and out of the classroom and that learning is a social interaction dependent on multi-layered and diverse learning communities. A case study at Randolph-Macon College suggests that moving learning centers toward the CTL model can effectively address some of the biggest challenges in the current postsecondary climate, such as retention, use of limited resources, and increased access.

Faculty and administrators openly acknowledge that major challenges are facing colleges and universities in the new century, including an increasingly diverse learning population, financial challenges, pressure to improve retention rates, and a renewed emphasis on defining specialized institutional missions (Hanes, 2007; Marcy & Guskin, 2003; O'Meara, Kaufman, & Kuntz, 2003). Unfortunately, pressure from unfunded mandates, emphasis on change for change's sake, and turnover in key personnel can result in collective institutional frustration, or, perhaps more critically, may distract stakeholders from making use of assets already in place to address such issues. The recognition and utilization of non-traditional learning communities on campus, in conjunction with an emphasis on the scholarship of teaching and learning, can lead to positive solutions to many of these problems.

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Background

There is a growing recognition that colleges and universities are complex organizations that contain many overlapping and unique learning communities (Blande & Bergquist, 1997; Cambridge, 2000; Gabelnick, 1990; Leskes, 2003; Marcy & Guskin, 2003; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). For example, education students entering the teacher training program become a special cohort within the larger school and, in essence, become their own learning community. Students and faculty participating in an advising cohort for freshmen only also become a unique learning community. Faculty members engaging in specific pedagogies, like active learning, may form a learning community (Cambridge, 2000).

Within a larger organizational structure, communities such as these can support one another without compromising their individual core missions, and by doing so, they may create new and better learning communities (Delohery, 2006). Although the idea of colleges and universities as laboratories for group behavior theory may seem to reside more within the realm of the sociologist than the pure pedagogue, the collaborations and multiple learning interactions beyond any specific discipline or degree track taking place on campus historically have been a defining aspect of what is a college education (Light, 2001; Marcy & Guskin, 2003; Moore, 2006; Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

One recent trend in higher education aimed at addressing the current challenges has been the grouping of services for the support of both teaching and learning in the same physical location. As older tutoring centers, advising spaces, and specialized facilities from the 1960s and 1970s are remodeled or replaced with newer structures, many schools have intentionally reorganized various offices that fit naturally together. In some literature, this trend is referred to as centralizing the core mission of teaching and learning (Cambridge, 2000). This trend recognizes and values many types of learning, including the learning that faculty experience as well as the learning that takes place outside of the classroom. The desire to better understand the teaching and learning mission has resulted in the creation of Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTL), like those at Stanford University and Harvard (C. Roland Christensen Center for Teaching and Learning, Harvard Business School, 2007; Cambridge, 2000; Denman, 2006; Freedman, 1994; Teaching and learning: The Center for Teaching and Learning, Stanford University, 2006). CTL as organizational entities are predicated on the philosophy that teaching and learning do not take place in a vacuum and that campus communities are self-reflective, dynamic, and constantly evolving (Leskes, 2003). The emergence of CTL is symptomatic of the growing need colleges and universities have to take advantage of and cultivate multiple interlocking learning communities that already exist (Marcy & Guskin, 2003; Shapiro & Levine, 1999).

A thoughtful examination of these extant campus learning communities immediately uncovers new opportunities for connecting teachers and learners. Many colleges and universities have already redefined their freshmen curricula using such a philosophy, particularly in order to emphasize small and interconnected learning communities in the first year experience. In doing so, most have found that freshmen retention rates go up, students

find areas of personal interest more quickly, and the classroom becomes more dynamic, interactive, and reflective (Erickson, Peters, & Strommer, 2006). Other schools have redefined learning communities within special programs or content majors, deliberately creating small cohorts of students within larger programs (Kight, Gaynor, & Adams, 2006).

A national focus in higher education on the shared teaching and learning mission has intensified in recent years. More institutions are growing outward from traditional student learning assistance centers to establish learning-and-teaching effectiveness centers to assist faculty development and to increase the effectiveness of student learning (Arendale, 1997). Such Centers for Teaching and Learning rely implicitly on collaboration between various learning communities (faculty, advisors, coaches, students, staff, etc.). Nor is the trend limited to higher education (DiRamio & Wolverton, 2006; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). There is also recognition that learning communities are a key to successful inclusion classrooms at the middle school and secondary school level, to cite one example (Berry, 2006). In simple terms, there is an increasing awareness that colleges and universities have the potential to be far greater enterprises than the sum of their various parts (Leskes, 2003). Savvy faculty members and administrators should be poised to tap into these dynamic possibilities and should view the process as one of enhancement, rather than improvement for change's sake. Likewise, the tendency to view any type of change as a potential threat to administrators' influence or self-determination should not obscure the fact that the CTL model may actually increase the status of the learning center and the influence it can wield in the academic community.

Randolph-Macon College as a Case Study

The impetus for examining multiple learning communities can occur as a result of direct action or more indirectly through policy renewal or curriculum updates (Leskes, 2003). Colleges or universities struggling with retention rates, dwindling finances, or even crises of mission should consider the CTL model as a natural opportunity for creative renewal.

At Randolph-Macon College (R-MC), a small, private liberal arts college in central Virginia, such a change came about as a result of direct administrative action. A recent reorganization of the student learning center, The Higgins Academic Center (HAC), along with the adoption of a new curriculum, provided the opportunity for a new interlocking of existing learning communities. For example, a writing center that had formerly operated as a separate entity was re-conceptualized as part of a Writing Across the Curriculum initiative and moved administratively into the central learning center, the HAC. The many changes initiated at R-MC, largely due to the new curriculum, make it an appropriate case study to examine in the effort to maximize the potential of various learning communities.

Pre-History of the Higgins Academic Center

The Higgins Academic Center at R-MC evolved from the merger of several separate programs designed to provide academic support for students. In the late 1970's, an English professor created a writing center within the English department to assist students with their writing. In the mid-1980's, a compensatory program called RISE (Randolph-Macon's Initiative

for Successful Education) was developed to address the needs of incoming freshmen at-risk in English and mathematics skills. Also in the 1980's, the writing center added peer-led tutoring for other subjects as well as a peer mentoring program.

The Center united academic support and disability support services for students in the early 1990's and named the center in memory of an alumnus with a learning disability who died shortly after graduation. The HAC was housed in a few small rooms in a women's residence hall with a staff of two full-time professionals, a center director, and a disability support services coordinator. Both reported to the Dean of Students within the Student Affairs division. By the late 1990's, the Center was providing tutoring and mentoring support for all enrolled students with an emphasis on those with disabilities and freshmen who were identified as struggling academically in the first semester. The HAC was a successful academic support center for students but did not have as a primary mission providing faculty support for teaching.

The HAC Evolves from Various Learning Communities

In 2003, the liberal arts curriculum at the College was radically altered to better reflect the updated mission of the College. The curriculum's objectives focused on the cultivation of "those qualities of mind and character that contribute to life-long learning" (R-MC academic catalog, page 7). At the heart of the new curriculum was a three-course first-year experience (FYE) required of all freshmen and eligible transfer students. As a result of the new curriculum with its focus on active student learning and increased student engagement, greater emphasis was placed on excellence in teaching (Peters, 2006).

As an outgrowth of the new curriculum and its focus on pedagogy, the academic Dean of the College determined that the HAC could physically and philosophically house a Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) that would continue to support students but also provide resources and support for faculty. The administration moved the center's reporting line from under the aegis of the Dean of Students to the academic Dean of the College in order to provide academic emphasis to the changes. Simultaneously, the Center's physical location was moved to a newly remodeled residence hall with a spacious first floor specifically designed to serve as a CTL. The space included faculty meeting areas, other important academic offices, and an atrium available for larger meetings.

Concurrently, the Dean renamed the Director of the center "Director of Instruction," elevated the DSS coordinator to a Director of Disability Support Services, and added three new Directors of Technology Support Services, Speaking Across the Curriculum, and Writing Across the Curriculum. The center was then comprised of five major strands and directors, all of whom reported directly to the associate academic Dean of the College. The final addition to the new structure was the appointment of the "Higgins Fellows," five experienced professors who were to serve as advisors to the five Directors and to generate faculty-led initiatives under the CTL umbrella.

The Higgins Fellows

Randolph-Macon is a close-knit community of scholars dedicated to the liberal arts and active in their professional disciplines. The faculty recognizes that to instruct students to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world, their teaching effectiveness must constantly be enhanced by vigorous professional and intellectual activity. "Effective teaching requires continued change, development, scholarship, inquiry, improvement, growth and awareness of developments in the discipline and in pedagogy" (Faculty Handbook, 2006). Five master teachers, recognized by their colleagues as outstanding models of teaching, are appointed by the academic Dean for two year terms as Higgins Fellows.

The Fellows advise the five HAC Directors on programming needs voiced by the faculty and also lead faculty discussions concerning teaching practices as well as advances and changes within the field of higher education. Programming ranges from informal morning coffees focused on topics of mutual interest to formal sponsorship of distinguished guest speakers chosen for their outstanding merits related to some aspect of the teaching experience.

The appointment of the Higgins Fellows represented a bridge between the old curriculum and the new way of connecting teaching and learning across various learning communities and, thus, was a most important piece in the redesign process. In a time of great change, they facilitated and articulated the faculty mind in relationship to the new CTL and the changes to the new curriculum.

The First Year Experience (FYE)

At the heart of the liberal arts education is the curriculum. The newly adopted curriculum at R-MC offers students a comprehensive educational opportunity and includes exposure both to broad perspectives across disciplines and a deeper understanding of the single discipline in which they major. To foster learning in both areas of the curriculum, the faculty created a first year experience to increase student engagement in the learning process. The first year experience has as its foundation three courses, a two-course First-Year Colloquium and the First-Year Seminar in Exposition and Argument. First-Year Colloquia are two-semester, interdisciplinary courses open only to freshmen and eligible transfers, with speaking instruction embedded across the curriculum rather than taught in separate classes. Writing skills are taught in the seminar in English and Argument and are intensively reinforced across the curriculum. Students in the FYE are guided in this endeavor by faculty dedicated to excellence in their disciplines. The newly reorganized Higgins Academic Center hires professionals who serve as resources and sponsors for programming on professional teaching techniques, academic strategies, and other research-based educational resources useful to those teaching in the FYE. Support to students and faculty is now available in all areas of teaching and learning, expanding upon traditional programs like peer tutoring for students and faculty mentoring to include new initiatives, such as the Higgins Fellows' lunch time workshops. Integration of various learning communities is an intentional keystone to the new curriculum (Mentkowski & Associates, 2000).

Office of Instruction

The Instruction area of the HAC not only continues to provide traditional academic support to students, but it now also provides more resources and support to faculty and staff. For students, a team of peer tutors and mentors, trained and supervised by the Director, work as partners with students who seek tutoring, mentoring, supplemental instruction, or supervised study hall services. The staff also provides academic support for students in the FYE who require more intensive structured intervention. As an example of an expanded interlocking of existing services, the Directors of Instruction and Disability Support Services now work as a team to map out academic support strategies with students who may be referred by faculty, parents, coaches, staff, or themselves. The major goal of this intervention is to assist the students in identifying and developing more successful learning strategies.

The two directors also collaborate directly with academic advisors and instructors to provide better feedback. For example, in collaboration with the Director of Instructional Technology and faculty, a new computerized system that provides feedback via e-mail to referring faculty was installed in the center. In addition, far more often than under the former tutoring center model, the Instruction and Disability Directors now provide more teaching resources for faculty, coaches, and staff. Departments may request consultations with the learning center professionals on issues related to teaching students with learning differences, and they may request that the directors provide direct instruction to their students.

Other collaborations between the Director of Instruction and staff members include partnership with coaches to provide special support to at-risk athletes. The Director of Instruction also collaborates with the Director of Counseling and Career Planning Services to provide non-academic support for students in addition to the academic side. Through these interlockings of existing learning communities, the Instruction area's services have evolved from the traditional tutoring center support for students to a more inclusive center supportive of students, faculty, and staff.

Office of Disability Support Services (DSS)

Since the disability support services office was joined with the tutoring program in the early 1990's, R-MC has been committed to providing reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. In addition to providing support to individual students, the office has grown within the new CTL model and now provides faculty with more direct access to resources related to disability through workshops, newsletters, special class offerings, and individual consultations with faculty.

The office also provides consultation and direct instruction related to disability and accommodation to class groups and athletic teams at the request of professors and coaches. Changes in the new model have also resulted in disability being integrated into the new curriculum through courses offered to all students through the honors, sociology and/or first-year experience departments. The DSS office also disseminates disability research findings and leads new cooperative research with faculty (particularly FYE) and/or other HAC directors.

The Speaking Center and Speaking Across the Curriculum

New to the re-formed center is the position of Director of Speaking Across the Curriculum and an accompanying speaking center. The new curriculum requires that faculty in the first year colloquia provide instruction and emphasis on improvement of communication skills. The new Speaking Center, located within the HAC, supports the College's efforts to improve students' abilities and to use a range of communication activities as tools to enhance student learning. The Center offers peer consulting and tutoring for students as well as resources to assist faculty. Speaking Center professionals also collaborate with faculty to provide classroom instruction. The Director supports faculty by sponsoring programming on professional teaching techniques related to the discipline and by providing academic strategies and other research-based educational sources.

The Writing Center and Writing Across the Curriculum

The Writing Center, another reconfigured branch of the newly modified learning center, supports the College's effort to improve student writing across the curriculum (WAC). A full-time director of WAC in a tenured faculty position was added to the staff of directors when the HAC was expanded. The Writing Center offers workshops and other resources to support faculty across the curriculum as they prepare and enhance courses that emphasize writing. Students also seek help from the Writing Center, which provides free tutorial services staffed by the program director and CRLA-trained peer tutors. The director collaborates with other HAC staff on program development and initiates opportunities for better collaboration with faculty.

The Writing Center has also sponsored a number of formal and informal writing groups on campus, building additional learning communities that include students, faculty, and staff participants. The net result is a heightened sense of R-MC as a community of writers.

The Office of Instructional Technology

The Director of Instructional Technology position was added to the HAC team as part of the reorganization to focus on teaching and learning with technology. The director offers support to faculty and students on the use of various instructional technologies with an emphasis on the design and development of programs that enhance teaching and learning. The director also works in the classroom with FYE groups and other classes, faculty, and staff and collaborates with other HAC Directors to provide technology training to CRLA-certified peer tutors who work with students and faculty.

Implications and Discussion

Over the course of several years, the transition at R-MC from a traditional academic support center for students to a true teaching and learning model within a Center for Teaching and Learning was filled with successes and challenges. The construction of additional administrative positions and programs, for example, immediately created a budget challenge, but it also produced a heightened intellectual synergy.

The benefits, however, are tangible and quantifiable. To cite just a few examples, retention rates and graduation rates for students with disabilities have improved dramatically as a result of becoming part of the CTL (roughly 90% of an original 2001 freshman cohort graduated in the spring of 2005); the process of identifying struggling freshmen has been refined and prioritized earlier in the first year experience (compliance rates for freshmen in probation programs increased two years in a row); and the numbers of freshmen going into probation programs have decreased (from 26% in 1999 to 17% in 2007).

At R-MC, literally dozens of learning communities have been identified that function outside of the classroom. An advisor and his or her group of advisees is a perfect example of a learning community that exists outside the classroom. In a less formal setting, all of the residents along a students' dorm hall are part of a learning community. The programs organized by the Higgins Fellows create small learning communities of faculty and staff. Increasingly, faculty and staff at R-MC are viewing the teaching and learning mission as predicated on recognizing and utilizing all of the diverse learning communities on campus.

Most administrators, such as the president or provost, are in unique positions to impact learning communities. When they recognize and cultivate learning communities, the mission of the CTL is enhanced. In many cases, a chief administrator may be in the best position to see how diverse and plentiful the learning communities are.

Administrators of CTL must view their centers as key pieces in the learning communities puzzle. CTL are by definition positioned to serve diverse constituencies and enhance programs that are already in place. In times of fiscal challenge, CTL are able to engage in activities that don't necessarily require more money. At R-MC, for example, tutors now schedule their drop-in hours within athletic study halls and no additional funding is required. Another unique learning community was created. Creating such opportunities requires recognition of how comprehensive and complex the postsecondary learning environment already is and identifying preexisting relationships that can be connected.

The annual summer school program at R-MC is another example of how preexisting learning communities can be complementary. The summer school administrator has consistently noted how faculty responded positively to the opportunity to teach something different or to work with a smaller group of students during the summer term. The summer school program creates a learning community within the larger community, and those relationships carry over into the next semester and into other programs. There are unique learning experiences that can only occur in the relatively short summer term.

These types of opportunities are obviously not earth shattering news to many people, but they should open eyes to the possibilities. The opportunities created have not cost significant new amounts of money—in the case of summer school they actually generated positive income (the unexpected boost in enrollment generated additional tuition revenue)—and they simply required recognizing the myriad forms of learning that had already been

taking place for many years. The recognition of such learning sets the stage for thinking outside of the box and imagining other possibilities.

To cite another example at R-MC, a unique learning community was created by the partnership between the Career and Counseling Center and the freshman academic support program (Macon Academic Progress) that resulted in new activities and cooperative interventions. Peer tutors and mentors working with at-risk freshmen were trained by counseling center personnel. Other learning communities at R-MC include learning center relationships with athletics, the study abroad office, residence life personnel, advisors, etc. When these communities are connected through the CTL and consistently linked to classroom learning and to other services, groups, and communities, exciting things become possible.

Learning center administrators, like presidents or provosts, are often in a unique position to see all of the parts interacting with the others (Delohery, 2006). From that position, many other audiences (faculty, other campus offices, peer tutors and mentors, etc.) would likely be very interested in knowing how to make sense of it all and how to use principles of leadership to help others take advantage of cooperative opportunities. By moving toward a Center for Teaching and Learning model, colleges and universities make it more likely for the creative opportunities to crystallize.

Conclusion

The experience at R-MC and the literature on CTL and learning communities suggest that there is great untapped potential in the varied learning already taking place on college and university campuses. By utilizing the CTL structure and fostering institutional support for recognition of diverse learning communities, colleges and universities may be able to refine their educational missions and do so within the budgets they already have. They may also be able to adopt and embrace a philosophy that is as old as the notion of the liberal arts education itself: no learning exists in a vacuum; learning is a social activity and we are social beings; and everything is connected.

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