



Learning Communities at College of the Canyons

What is a Learning Community?

Learning communities can take a variety of forms, but the idea of an academic learning community is to link or cluster two or three classes for the length of an academic term. Typically, the classes involve common themes, historical periods, issues, or problems within society. The faculty who teach in the learning community integrate the specific content within each of their courses. A small group or cohort of students optimally enroll in all of the classes within the cluster collectively.

Why Enroll in a Learning Community?

Learning communities improve the quality of learning as students make stronger connections with the subject and see the relevance of the content as it applies in the larger context of their lives. The benefits to students are numerous. Students have an opportunity to interact more with students in their cohort and develop stronger relationships while gaining a greater appreciation for diversity. In addition, since students are able to synthesize the material from a variety of different disciplines, critical thinking and problem solving skills are enhanced. There is a greater sense of accomplishment, as students in learning communities tend to remain with their learning communities for the entire session. As a result, *more* students complete their coursework within the learning community than they might in a traditional course, improving their grade point average and retention rates for the College.

Where Are Learning Communities Taught?

Traditionally, learning communities are taught on campus. For example, the cluster of classes might be scheduled two days a week, and the student would enroll in three classes that are scheduled back to back. However, innovative campuses, such as College of the Canyons, is offering learning communities integrated into a field studies program.

College of the Canyons Learning Community Mission Statement

The mission of the Learning Communities program is to create an environment where students can develop intellectual and academic skills through a well-organized interdisciplinary core of courses. This, in turn, creates greater curricular coherence with a group of faculty achieving a coordinated effort of leadership and excellence to deliver the best academic preparation.

College of the Canyons Learning Community Vision Statement

The vision of the Learning Communities program is to promote student ownership of their learning experience and to encourage life-long study through high quality formal and informal, educational experiences.

The academic outcomes of learning communities are well known; they, for example, increase student retention rates, encourage academic achievement, emphasize motivation and involvement, improve time of degree completion, and enhance intellectual development. And, with regard to faculty, learning communities create classroom learning based on co-teaching, interdisciplinary collaboration, and experiential learning. Learning communities encourage *Engagement, Progress, and Success*.

Field Studies/Residential Learning Community Model

College of the Canyons has a long history of offering diverse and innovative educational opportunities for our students. From our classes on the Valencia campus, we have expanded into the local community high schools, created a new campus on the east side of the valley, and expanded into the internet. Our expansion has not only been geographic, it has also been spatial: from 18 week courses, to the current compressed calendar, short-term classes, weekend and one-day courses. Throughout all of this diversification, we have also expanded our curriculum to meet the educational, economic, and inspirational need of our students and our community. One option that has long been considered is the concept of Field Studies. This program could provide students the opportunity of a hands-on, experiential education at a location away from the main campus. Although long discussed and desired by some, it appears that 2008 might be the time for COC to initiate a Field Studies program, so that our students can take advantages of the many educational opportunities that COC offers, from “the canyons to the highest mountains”.

The Field Studies Learning Community model will allow students to live in dorm-type settings temporarily while enrolling in a combination of courses. Taking the courses off-campus provides a fresh, innovative dimension to students’ college experiences. Orientation workshops will be offered prior to the class so that students receive needed information on what will be expected and how to prepare for the trip.

One of the most common definitions of a learning community derives from the work of Alexander Meiklejohn (Meiklejohn, 1932) which offered a deliberately restructured curriculum to meet the educational objectives of a specific cohort of students and their faculty. Meiklejohn also saw the curricular structure of the learning community as a mitigating influence upon further fragmentation and isolation of the curriculum and community within the institution (Miller, 1998, p. 44). John Dewey espoused collaborative learning that “would foster community and poise the teacher as more of a facilitator within a group of learners than merely as an outside authority” (Dewey, 1933, p. 59). In the late 1960’s, Joseph Tussman professed the efficacy of designing college curricula within programs that would unite faculty and students in distinct communities (Tussman, 1969).

Field studies courses provide a learning community experience which promotes diversity, embraces excellence, encourages insightful faculty-student interaction, and works to develop a

strong sense of community. Academically themed communities can emphasize active service-learning experiences, study-abroad opportunities, and field-based research.

At the root of the residential learning community model developed by the College of the Canyons is that there exists at COC a substantial population of students whose academic success and ultimate retention can be significantly enhanced by a residential, interdisciplinary, outcomes-based academic experience distinguished by its emphasis on intensive mentoring and peer support as described by Tinto, Goodsell, and Russo (1993).

Many studies have shown that residential learning communities are important to institutions of higher education that wish to enhance the college experience for its students while increasing retention. The findings of this study suggest that undergraduates from different majors can achieve academic success and find considerable satisfaction with their collegiate experience by participating in a residential learning community that emphasizes writing and critical thinking skills, as well as teamwork and service-learning. The implications are particularly significant for large urban and suburban colleges where students must travel distances between campuses to attend classes or employment, and often have difficulty meeting with faculty and peers for help or for socializing. A residential learning community, even during its first year, can mitigate many of these difficulties and produce extremely positive results. Additionally, these findings should encourage institutions who wish to start a residential learning community to build into the first-year design multiple links between students, faculty, curriculum, and co-curriculum. It is very apparent that the presence of these variables contributes to student success, whether a program is new and/or united by academic major.