Do Learning Communities Make a Difference?

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Introduction

Introductory political sciences courses can be both a blessing and a curse for professors. At many universities they are required classes, creating a demand for more sections and hence more professors. However, these classes are often sizable and, to make matters worse, full of disinterested students. A recent report finds that only 28% of the freshman class of 2000 believes that it is very important or essential to keep current with political affairs (Bennett and Bennett 2001). Teaching in a room full of disinterested students is a formidable challenge. What strategies can political scientists employ to teach these courses more effectively?

The adoption of learning communities in introductory political science classes is a promising method of responding to these challenges and is well documented by Arthur Sanders and his colleagues at Drake University (Sanders 2000). The learning communities model can provide a method for delivering large introductory courses and making the experience more meaningful for students because they help create small communities of students with an academic purpose (MacGregor 2000). At Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi (A&M-Corpus Christi), learning communities have been a central part of the general education curriculum for all full-time, first-year students since the 1994 fall semester.

Learning communities are widespread at A&M-Corpus Christi, but do they make a difference? The aim of this article is to:

- Review the literature justifying learning communities;
- Identify learning community goals;
- Present the development of the learning communities at A&M-Corpus Christi;
- Discuss the structure, requirements, and teaching in the U.S. Government and Politics "linked class learning community;"
- Analyze the goals of learning communities;
- Discuss the implications both for A&M-Corpus Christi and for universities considering creating learning communities.

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Review of Literature

What are Learning Communities?

Cross defines learning communities "as groups of people engaged in intellectual interaction for the purpose of learning" (Cross 1998). In learning communities students and faculty organize into smaller groups with an integration of curriculum (Shapiro and Levine 1999). While there is not a consensus on a precise definition of learning communities, the overall idea is that students and faculty are brought together in ways that will make for a more meaningful educational experience (Sanders 2000).

One method of forming learning communities in large classes is to have the same group of students enroll in a linked group of courses. This arrangement is known as the "linked class learning community," and involves attaching a small enrollment class, such as first-year seminar or composition, to a larger one (MacGregor 2000). Students could enroll in one of six composition courses, for example, that are linked to one large political science course.

Why Bother Making These Communities?

A growing body of literature strongly suggests that learning communities can address some of the obstacles to learning in modern universities (Gabelnick et al. 1990). Learning communities are not a new concept and their rebirth has occurred at a time when universities are experiencing a more diverse study body (Shapiro and Levine 1999). Universities are fragmented institutions that do not actually create an educational community; hence learning communities can add cohesion to the university (Gabelnick et al. 1990). This is meaningful because a sense of community at college has been found to affect student satisfaction with college (Gardiner 1998). Thus, learning communities can help students bond with each other and the university. Learning communities can also help students become socialized to college (Shapiro and Levine 1999) and contribute to positive views about the institution (Cross 1998).

Findings From Previous Research

Previous research demonstrates that learning communities lead to increased student success in college (Shapiro and Levine 1999). Not only can learning communities help students find greater coherence in what they learn, but they can also increase intellectual interaction among the members of the community (Gabelnick et al. 1990). Growth in intellectual interests among students is more likely among those in learning communities (Cross 1998). Hence, learning communities offer numerous benefits—benefits that can be quite valuable for students making the transition into introductory political science courses.

A major shortcoming of much of the learning community research is that there is minimal research in the evaluation of the effectiveness of learning communities. Sanders' research is noteworthy because the research focuses on political science and, unlike much of the previous research, evaluates the effectiveness of learning communities (2000). Sanders found that the learning community in his study did improve student performance in introductory American government. Also, consistent with the goals of learning communities, the students were able to incorporate materials from all of their learning community courses. A major difference between the learning communities in Sanders' research and those at A&M-Corpus Christi is in their breadth. Sanders' findings are based on a one-semester experience with a relatively small class at a private university. At A&M-Corpus Christi, learning communities have been a regular part of the curriculum since 1994 and include large lecture classes (150 students or more).

Why Are Learning Communities Important For Political Science?

Learning communities can be of special salience to political scientists for several reasons. The large lecture is a fact of life on many campuses and a downside to these large classes is that students frequently feel lost. One of the chief advantages of learning communities is that they allow for large lecture courses (often necessary for budgetary reasons) yet divide those students into

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smaller groups that have scheduled class meeting times. The disinterest in politics of first year students (Bennett and Bennett 2001; Mann 1999) can be combated by having students meet in smaller groups to discuss and write about politics. In addition, students can find connections with other courses. A learning community can help students understand the important connections that politics has in their lives.

Goals

Thus, goals of learning communities are to:

- Create a group of students who work together (Shapiro and Levine 1999);
- Increase intellectual interaction (Gabelnick et al. 1990);
- Enhance student learning (Cross 1998; Shapiro and Levine 1999).

Learning Communities at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi

A&M-Corpus Christi is a state university with a growing student body of approximately 7,400 students (approximately 5,100 students fall 1994). Roughly 38% of the students are Hispanic, 60% female, 75% full-time, 61% under 25 years of age, and 81% are undergraduates. A&M-Corpus Christi admitted its first freshman class during the fall 1994 semester. Prior to fall 1994, A&M-Corpus Christi had been an upper-division undergraduate and graduate university.

Development of Learning Communities

The faculty developed linked class learning communities as part of the new core curriculum (general education). The expectations were consistent with learning community goals. The goals were to create groups of students who work together, increase intellectual interaction, and keep failure rates low by enhancing student learning.

Out of this process the "Tetrad" was born and made its debut during the fall 1994 semester.[1] Tetrads are learning communities composed of four courses. These four courses are two large lectures (maximum enrollment 275 students), first-year seminar (FYS), and English Composition (EC). The FYS and EC have maximum enrollments of 25 students. One of the Tetrads includes American History to 1865 and U.S. Government and Politics as the two large lecture courses.[2] Students enroll in both large lectures and also into linked seminars and composition classes. Additionally, the students in a seminar section are also in the same composition class section.

As with most ambitious projects, there were unanticipated problems with the program's design and implementation. Weak linkages among the classes in the learning community were a major concern. Also, the four course format presented scheduling problems for the students. The scheduling problem led to learning communities that had students who were not enrolled in all four courses. Finally, there was a sense among the large lecture faculty that the FYS spent too much time on "college experience" material at the expense of content from the large lecture courses.

To address these problems, reforms were implemented for the fall 2000 semester. To eliminate some scheduling problems and to further improve the links between the classes, a Triad learning community was created. The Triad is composed of one large lecture course, FYS, and EC. For example, the American government Triad includes American Government, FYS, and EC. Also, the college experience material was dropped from the curriculum of the FYS. Efforts continue to this day to improve the links and to improve communication between the entire participating faculty in the Tetrads and Triads with the goal of creating successful linked class learning communities.

University Support

The Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi Core Curriculum First-Year Learning Communities Program sponsors Teaching Institutes during August and January the week before classes begin for the fall and spring semesters. The Teaching Institutes gather all of the instructors and professors teaching in the coming semester's Triads and Tetrads for planning sessions. During these planning sessions, the learning community instructors and professors meet to create and develop assignments, syllabi, and work activities for the semester.

The large lecture professor typically takes the lead role in these collaborative meetings. Organizing and leading these learning communities is a time consuming process, thus large lecture professors who participate receive credit for teaching two courses instead of one. Finally, each learning community has a great deal of autonomy in developing their program.

U.S. Government and Politics Triad

Common themes are beneficial for connecting the courses in a learning community. The themes typically chosen for the American Government Triad learning community are: 1) What is the role of government? and 2) How do diverse experiences shape our interpretations and perspectives? The themes are important because they supply linkages across the courses that re-emphasize the learning community.

U.S. Government and Politics Large Lecture

The textbook used in the U.S. Government and Politics Triad is *Understanding American Government* (Welch et al. 2001).[3] The material is presented using a multimedia driven lecture format with numerous pauses for reflection and discussion. The outlines are presented with web pages which offer a guideline for the presentation, and include electronic photos, sound, and video files where appropriate. In addition to the web page outline, web sites are used to provide context. A presentation on interest groups, for example, includes visits to interest group web sites. At the end of most classes, students are asked to write and turn in responses to two questions: 1) What is the most important thing you learned in class? and 2) What question remains uppermost in your mind? This exercise is known as a *Minute Paper* (Angelo and Cross 1993); the students submit these responses to their seminar leaders and political science professor. The responses are shared and can serve as discussion points in the seminars since several questions are answered at the beginning of the next political science class.

The students earn their grades by taking five non-cumulative, multiple-choice exams with the option of writing assignments. Students can earn up to 500 points on their exams (5 exams × 100 points = 500 points) and up to 50 points if they complete two optional writing assignments.

First-Year Seminar and English Composition

MacGregor writes that learning communities can be vital for large classes because those developed in the seminar and composition classes are small and have an academic purpose (MacGregor 2000). A learning community has an academic purpose when the students sense that the learning contributes to the other

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classes in the community. Furthermore, MacGregor argues that learning communities foster an understanding of course content obtained through student collaboration and provide useful feedback for students.

The FYS is a one-credit class and is an essential component of the linked class learning community. Seminar leaders are either graduate students or adjuncts with at least a master's degree.[4] A&M-Corpus Christi does not offer a graduate program in political science, so seminar leaders in the political science learning communities rarely have previous expertise or training in politics. Rather, seminar leaders who express an interest in politics are assigned to the Triad and Tetrad political science learning communities. Seminar leaders attend a training workshop during the summer that focuses on developing their talents as discussion leaders and facilitators of learning. The seminar leaders teach their own FYS courses and serve as graders for the large lecture course.

In seminar, students have a valuable opportunity to explore issues and controversies raised by the readings and large lecture presentations. Furthermore, because of their smaller size (25 students maximum) the seminars provide a less intimidating environment for student participation. Through this community the students share ideas and learn from each other in an interactive and supportive environment. Students often work in groups to answer questions and discuss material. Also, the seminar leaders can adapt their class to address any particular themes or issues that need additional emphasis. Finally, the seminar leaders can provide useful feedback for the professors on how well the students understand the material.

The English Composition faculty works closely with the seminar leaders in selecting readings and developing assignments. EC is a two course sequence—English 1301 and English 1302. English 1301 examines the principles, techniques, and processes of analyzing and writing. English 1302 builds on this foundation and focuses on research and report writing. Students often work in groups to develop and discuss their research topics and assignments. In the U.S. Government and Politics Triad, rather than writing about traditional literary themes, the students research issues that have political connections. Typically, most first-year students in learning communities enroll in English 1301 during the fall semester and English 1302 during the spring.

The composition professors and seminar leaders foster the learning community by creating strong links between their classes. Assignments often count for credit in both classes, their syllabi reinforce each other, they create course web pages that make clear links across the learning community, and some of the composition and seminar leaders share common reading assignments. Additionally, they present themselves to the students as a team.

The learning community thus seeks to achieve the goals of working in groups and increasing intellectual interaction. The expectation is that the ability to work in groups and an increase in intellectual interaction will enhance student performance.

Projects

Connections across the linked learning communities in the U.S. Government and Politics learning community are reinforced by the projects. The projects are writing assignments that integrate the composition instruction with political science material. The points earned from the projects are optional in the political science class, but are required assignments in EC. Hence, most students earn the 50 optional points. The project assignments are collaboratively created among the U.S. Government and Politics Triad instructors and vary from semester to semester. A notable feature of learning communities is that they promote collaboration among teachers (Bystrom 1997). The composition classes are research classes so the EC faculty assists the students in researching issues of interest to them. Typically, the EC faculty also has a librarian visit their class to provide instruction on using the library's electronic resources. This presentation is not a generic library tour; rather, it is tailored to the class assignments. As the students research their issues, their seminar leaders help them see how politics affects their issues. Furthermore, as the students begin exploring the issues they are guided by the themes of "what is the role of government" and "how do diverse experiences shape our interpretations and perspectives."

For example, if a student is interested in surfing (A&M-Corpus Christi is minutes from the beach), they would proceed to examine how government and politics can affect surfing. The student could examine policies dealing with water quality, beach erosion, or the creation of more surf parks. Additionally, the student would examine what, if any, role government should have and examine the differing viewpoints of the various stakeholders. After the student researches the issues, he or she investigates the means to advocate their issue. They might advocate the formation of an interest group, or launch a media campaign. The key is that the students are learning about government and politics and sharing these ideas in a learning community. This is a semester-long undertaking divided into three smaller projects.

These projects count for credit in all components of the Triad. Since each project builds on knowledge and material from those previous, the final project is the culmination of their work. The EC professors and seminar leaders grade students on the quality of their written work, research, and links to the material from the political science class. Projects are graded on an accept/resubmit basis, allowing students to resubmit projects that are not initially accepted.

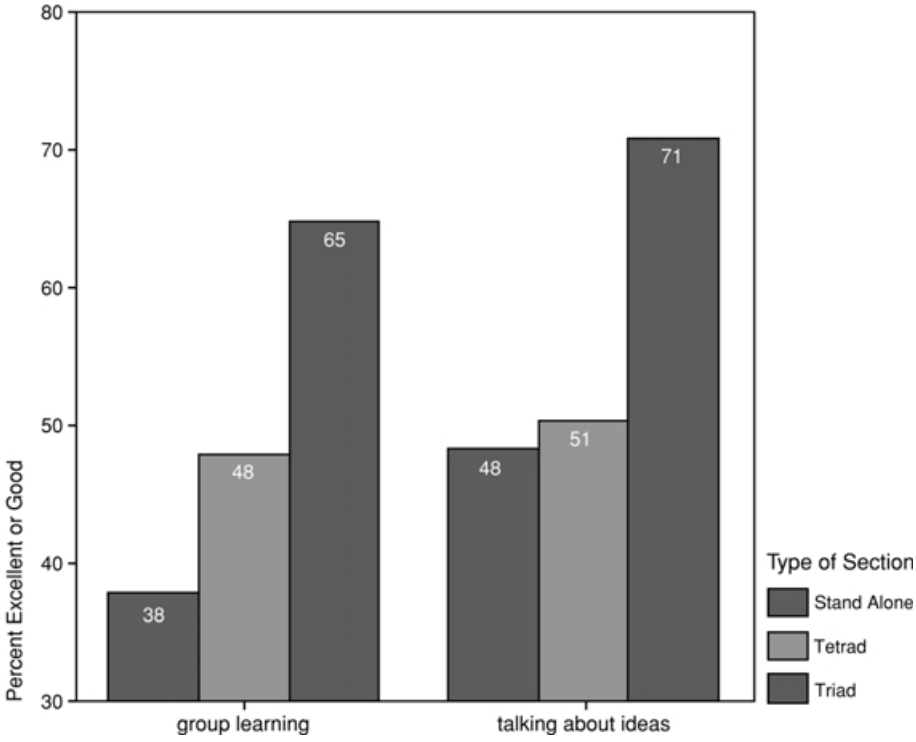
Data

Each semester from fall 1999 through spring 2001 the Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi Core Curriculum Program administered an end of semester survey to all students in core curriculum classes.[5] The "create a group of students who work together" and "increase intellectual interaction" goals are analyzed with two items from the survey. The items ask students to respond to the following statements: "This course has enhanced my ability to learn in groups of students" and "This course has resulted in my talking much more with my friends about ideas." The percentage of students that respond with "excellent" or "good" in a section of U.S. Government and Politics will serve as the unit of analysis.[6] Thus, the course section and not the individual student is the unit of analysis.[7]

Additionally, a goal is to "enhance student learning"; this goal is operationalized with failure rates. Comparing failure rates poses some methodological problems because the evaluation criteria used in the Triad and Tetrad learning communities include assignments that are not given in the stand alone sections (not part of a learning community). The students in the stand alone sections do not have the option of earning 50 points from project assignments, hence a comparison of final grades would not be valid. Thus, rather than looking at the overall failure rate for each section of U.S. Government and Politics, the percentage failure rate on the exams will be used.[8] The time period for the failure rate analysis is from spring 1999 through spring 2002.

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Figure 1
Comparison of Stand Alone, Tetrad, and Triad Sections: Group Learning and Talking About Ideas



having the lowest and the Tetrads in the middle. The positive response in the Triad was 65% for the ability to learn in groups question. The Tetrad sections had a 48% positive response and the stand alone had the lowest at 38%. According to the findings, the Triad learning community is achieving the "create a group of students who work together" goal.

The "talking about ideas" findings are in the second grouping. The bar representing the Triad section yields the highest percentage of positive responses at 71%. This compares to the stand alone at 48% and the Tetrad at 51%. Students in the Triad section are the most likely to positively report that the class led them to talk about ideas with their friends in comparison to the stand alone and Tetrad sections. The results indicate that the Triad is more effective at meeting the "increase intellectual interaction" goal than the Tetrad and stand alone sections.

Failure Rates

Figure 2 presents the findings from the comparison of exam failure rates by type of section. The expectation is that the learning community sections of the Tetrad and Triad, by enhancing student

Analysis, Observations, and Findings

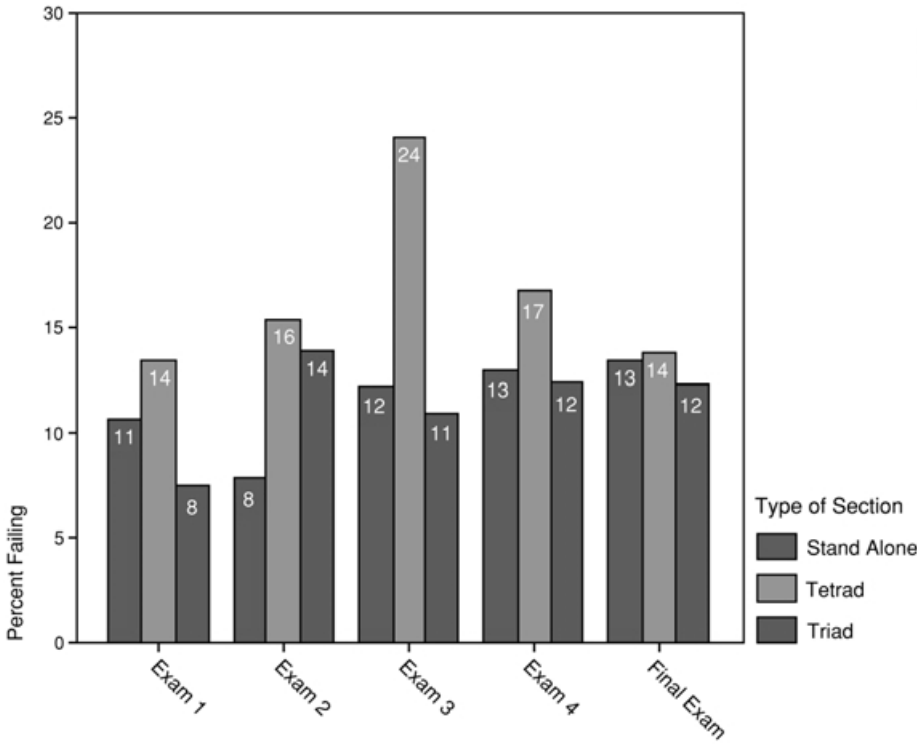
Analysis

Group Learning and Talking About Ideas

To investigate the role of the learning communities, a comparison will be made between stand alone sections of U.S. Government and Politics (spring 1999 through spring 2001), Tetrad sections (from spring 1999 and spring 2000), and a Triad section (fall 2000). The expectation is that the learning community sections (Triad and Tetrad) will have a higher percentage of excellent or good responses to the group learning and talking about ideas items compared to the stand alone sections.

Figure 1 presents a comparison of the percentages broken down by section type. The first grouping presents the findings for "group learning" with the different bars representing the type of section. The group learning finding indicates that the Triad section has the highest percentage of positive responses with the stand alone sections

Figure 2
Comparison of Stand Alone, Tetrad, and Triad Sections: Percent Failing Exams



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learning, should have the lowest failure rates. Each grouping represents an exam and the bars in each grouping represent the failure rate for the section type. On four of the five exams the Triad sections have the lowest failure rate. The stand alone sections have the lowest failure rate on exam 2. The Tetrad sections have the highest failure rate on all of the exams. Overall, the evidence suggests that only the learning communities in the Triad are having the desired effect of lowering the failure rate and meeting the "enhance student learning goal."

Observations From the Triad Learning Communities

The quantitative analysis offers positive support for the Triad learning communities, yet there are some features of the learning communities that are difficult to quantify. The following observations from the Triad learning communities can put the quantitative analysis results into context.

Create a Group of Students Who Work Together

Seminar leaders and composition instructors have the most impact on the "create a group of students who work together" goal because of group-based assignments and discussions. Perhaps the most important part of creating a group of students is that they can get to know each other easier in smaller classes. The same 25 students are in composition and seminar. They develop friendships and relationships that are helpful with studying, solving problems (including non-academic problems), and developing a sense of belonging.

Increase Intellectual Interaction

The seminar leaders and composition instructors are much closer to the students than the large lecture professor. They have reported that the students do sense that the classes are connected and that they are able to better understand the material because they write about and discuss it in three classes. It has also been reported that many students actually enjoy researching their topics and that they find it interesting that government and politics are linked to things that are of interest to them. Some students have become so interested in the issues they researched that they became active with local interest groups.

The learning community also increases intellectual interaction for faculty and instructors. The semester-long interaction among the faculty and instructors leads to dialogues about innovative approaches to teaching and intellectually invigorating academic discussions. Also, the seminar leaders and composition faculty (possibly because they are not trained in political science) raise interesting points and interpretations about the material that may elude the political science professor.

Enhance Student Learning

Another positive result is that the discussions of the material do not end with the large lecture; discussion in FYS and the student research in EC extends the political science material beyond the large lecture course. An additional benefit of the learning community is that the students learn to write from trained EC instructors. The political science professor and seminar leaders support the EC instructors instead of teaching composition.

The students have differing reactions to the enhancement of student learning goal. One student, in an anonymous written response to a question about what is working well in a U.S. Government and Politics Triad wrote: "I feel that the seminar classes are very helpful. In my eyes it is very hard to comprehend most of the material in such large lecture classes [sic]." Not all students enjoy the learning community. One wrote in response to the same question: ". . . it is torture to have three 'political science' classes a day."

Findings

The findings indicate that the learning communities found in the Triads are achieving the learning community goals. Group learning is developed and students are more likely to discuss ideas with their friends, indicating an increase in intellectual interaction. Also, student learning is enhanced because failure rates are lower in the Triad learning community. The Tetrad learning community is not as successful in fulfilling the learning community goals.

Why are the Triad learning communities more successful in achieving the goals than the Tetrad learning communities? A plausible explanation is that in a Triad all of the energy, assignments, and focus is on the content from one large lecture instead of two. In a Tetrad, FYS leaders and EC instructors must balance their time with content from two large lectures. The Triad has more focus, whereas the Tetrad is diffuse.

Conclusions

The expectation from the literature is that learning communities should make a difference for students. The evidence supports the expectation. The linked class learning community with one large lecture course (Triad) creates a group of students who work together, increases intellectual interaction, and enhances student learning. The evidence supports the use of learning communities for first-year students. The evidence does not support the use of linked class learning communities with two large lecture courses (Tetrads).

Learning communities are an additional tool political science professors can employ in dealing with the challenge of teaching disinterested students in introductory political science classes. The students benefit from the additional time spent on the material, discussions, and writing. Furthermore, students learn to work together, there is an increase in intellectual interaction, and they perform better on exams. Learning communities are not a panacea, but they do make a positive difference.

The learning communities do not just make a difference for students. Professors and instructors also benefit by not teaching in isolation. Collaboration on research is common, but many toil in isolation with teaching. The learning community model allows faculty members to collaborate on teaching, and as collaboration is expected to improve research, it should also improve teaching and learning.

The implications for A&M-Corpus Christi are clear–continue with the Triads and continue to work at making stronger learning communities. Additionally, the remaining Tetrads need further assessment. If they are not meeting the learning community goals, they should be converted to Triads. Assessment of the other learning communities needs to be a priority. Also, steps should be taken to explore the possibility of expanding learning communities into junior and senior level courses.

What are the implications for universities considering creating learning communities? Sanders ably demonstrated that faculty members interested in moving to a learning communities model could start on a small scale (Sanders 2000). An institutional commitment is essential. Resources are needed to hire and support seminar leaders and composition instructors, and fund faculty release time. A commitment of time is also required. The

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learning community faculty and instructors must dialogue with each other and spend more time before and during the semester planning and coordinating their courses. Furthermore, it takes time to evaluate and refine a learning community program. It also takes faculty and instructors committed to the philosophy of learning communities. Personnel must also be flexible and committed to teamwork.

The commitment and development of learning communities at A&M-Corpus Christi has been demanding and often frustrating. However, the work has come to fruition. The Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi First-Year Learning Communities Program was recognized as one of 13 "Institutions of Excellence in the First College Year" by the Brevard College Policy Center on the First Year of College (2002) and was one of five Texas institutions of higher education honored in 2001 with the first annual Texas Higher Education Star Awards from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. Overall, learning communities do make a difference. This is a system that can make introductory required political science courses a more positive experience for students and faculty. It is a demanding process, but it is worthwhile.

Notes

1. The learning community was originally called a Triad. The Triad consisted of a large lecture component (two courses), first year seminar, and English composition. In fall 2000, this original Triad was renamed a Tetrad because it has four courses.

2. Tetrad A included Environmental Science and Sociology while Tetrad C included Psychology and Music Appreciation.

3. The choice of books and assignments varies according to which professor is teaching.

4. The Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi Core Curriculum First-Year Learning Communities Program hires the seminar leaders. Faculty members participate in the interview stage of the hiring process.

5. The survey instrument used before spring 1999 is not compatible with the one used from spring 1999 through spring 2001. Data is missing for the spring 2001 Triad. All of the data is from the author's sections of U.S. Government and Politics. This survey was discontinued because of a desire among faculty to assess the core curriculum with a different set of measures.

6. The response options are excellent, good, satisfactory, poor, very poor, and not applicable. The not applicable category is dropped when calculating the percentages.

7. The analysis will examine the author's sections of U.S. Government and Politics.

8. Even this is problematic. As students who are failing drop the class, it can drive up the passing rate on exams.

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