

Faculty Perceptions of Learning Activities and Learning Communities
FINAL REPORT – May, 2004
Iowa State University
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BACKGROUND

In May of 2002, Corly Brooke, Doug Gruenewald, and Shari Ellertson from Learning Communities (LCs) met with Mack Shelley and Robert Reason from the Research Institute for Studies in Education (RISE) to explore conducting a program evaluation of Learning Communities at Iowa State University. Several areas for evaluation were brainstormed, including: faculty involvement, student affairs and academic affairs connections, programmatic effects of Learning Communities on campus, profile and perceptions of learning community coordinators and their role.

At the Learning Community Advisory Committee retreat in June 2002, a high priority was placed on exploring faculty involvement. It was determined that the goals of the survey would be to understand faculty perceptions of learning activities, curricular and co-curricular interests, perceptions of learning communities, and supports and barriers to learning community participation. As a result, a Learning Communities survey was designed by RISE and Learning Communities administrators. See Appendix A for the survey. The survey was administered through RISE during Fall 2002.

SURVEY SAMPLE, ADMINISTRATION, AND RESPONSE RATE

Sample: All faculty, instructors, clinicians, and lecturers in the seven undergraduate colleges at Iowa State University (N= 1559).

Survey administration: Surveys were distributed to the sample on September 27, 2002. A reminder postcard was sent on October 2. A second letter and copy of the survey was sent to non-respondents on October 14.

Response Rate: 655 surveys were returned, for a response rate of 42%.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS

Sex: 35% of respondents were female whereas 65% were male. Females were represented in the sample at a higher rate than the ISU population where females comprise 31% of the faculty.

Race/ethnicity: 85.6% of respondents were Caucasian, 8.9% were Asian/Asian American, and the remainder identified as African American, Hispanic/Latino/Latina, Multiracial, or Other. The proportion of Caucasian respondents in the sample represents the same proportion in the ISU population (85.6%). The other race/ethnicity categories on the survey were not parallel to those used by ISU Institutional Research; therefore, they cannot be compared to the ISU population.

Mean number of undergraduate courses taught annually = 3.01

Mean years teaching at the college level = 16.37

Mean years teaching at Iowa State = 12.59

Mean hours spent with students weekly

In class or lab = 8.45

Out of class or lab = 5.98

Academic Rank and Tenure Status of respondents are illustrated in Figures 1 and 2 below.

Figure 1 – Respondents by Academic Rank

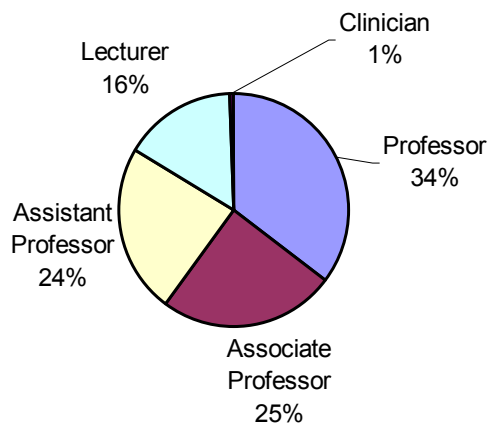
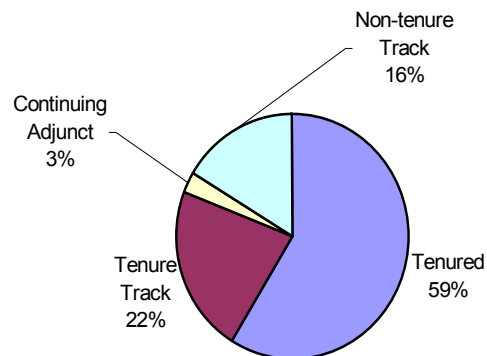
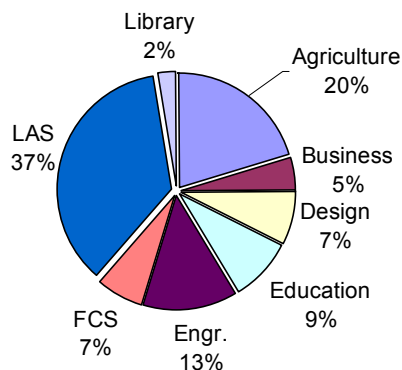


Figure 2 – Respondents by Tenure Status



College affiliation: The largest percentage of respondents was from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (37%) and the smallest percentage of respondents was from faculty in the Library (2%). College affiliations of respondents are illustrated in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3 – Respondents by College Affiliation



The proportion of respondents in each college is comparable to the ISU population of faculty: LAS (37% of respondents: 41% of ISU faculty), Agriculture (20%: 19%), Engineering (13%: 14%), Education (9%: 7.5%), Design (7%: 8%), FCS (7%: 5.5%), Business (5%: 5%), and Library (2%:2%).

Demographic Comparisons:

- Associate professors comprised 24.5% of the sample, but 30.7% of those who participated as LC Coordinator or course instructor.
- Tenured faculty comprised 58.8% of the sample and 64% of those who participated as LC Coordinator or course instructor.
- Tenure-track respondents comprised 22.1% of the sample, but only 14.6% of those who participated as LC Coordinator or course instructor.

- Women comprised 35.2% of respondents, 43% of LC Coordinators or course instructors, and 46% of those attending at least one Institute.
- Caucasians comprised 85.6% of respondents, but 91.7% of those who participated as LC Coordinator or course instructor.
- LC Coordinators or course instructors reported 2.5 years more college teaching experience, and 3.0 years more ISU teaching experience, than the total sample.
- LC Coordinators or course instructors reported spending 0.7 hours/week more with students in class/lab and 1.5 hours/week more with students outside of class/lab than the total sample.

IMPORTANCE OF ACTIVITIES TO STUDENT LEARNING (QU. 8)

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of various activities for enhancing student learning using a 4-point scale. The scale included: great importance, some importance, little importance, or no importance. More than 30% of respondents indicated the following items had “**great importance**” for enhancing student learning:

- 1) Collaborative, active teaching and learning strategies (54%)
- 2) Career exploration (e.g., field trips, internships) (48%)
- 3) Group projects for class (44%)
- 4) Out of class contact with faculty related to academic discipline (e.g., field trips) (32%)

More than 30% of respondents indicated the following items had “**little or no importance**” for enhancing student learning.

- 1) Academic emphasis in residence hall programming (39%)
- 2) Course specific Supplemental Instruction, coordinated by the Academic Success Center (37%)
- 3) Informal time with faculty members (e.g., dinners, cultural events) (36%)
- 4) Service learning or community service participation (30%)

INTEREST IN PARTICIPATING IN CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES (QU. 9 A. – E.)

Respondents were asked to rate their relative interest in participating in various curricular activities using a 3-point scale. The scale included: great interest, some interest, and little/no interest. More than 30% of respondents indicated the following curricular items were of “**great interest.**”

- 1) Participate in faculty development activities related to collaborative, active teaching (34%) → 44% indicate they are currently participating in this activity
- 2) Collaborate with faculty members in another discipline to develop a course based on connections between disciplines (31%)

More than 30% of respondents indicated the following curricular items were of “**little or no interest.**”

- 1) Collaborate with residence hall staff to enhance students’ in- and out-of-class learning (66%)

Current participation. Respondents also were asked to indicate whether they currently participate in the various curricular activities. The degree of interest and the level of current participation appear to be highly related (i.e., if there is high participation, there is also a high level of interest) in all cases except for item 9.b. (“Collaborate with faculty members in another discipline to develop a course based on connections between your disciplines”). On this item, 31% express a great interest, however only 21% indicate they are currently participating in this activity. Therefore, developing collaborations between faculty in different disciplines appears to be an area where further development could occur.

INTEREST IN PARTICIPATING IN CO-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES (QU. 9 F. – N.)

Respondents were asked to rate their interest in participating in various co-curricular activities using a 3-point scale. The scale included: great interest, some interest, and little/no interest. More than 30% of respondents indicated the following co-curricular items were of “**great interest.**”

- 1) Meet with students to discuss their personal and professional goals (43%)
- 2) Meet with students outside of class to discuss course content (41%)
- 3) Engage in mentoring relationships with students (37%)

More than 30% of respondents indicated the following co-curricular items were of “**little or no interest.**”

- 1) Meet with students in residence halls or dining areas (63%)
- 2) Coordinate a learning community (61%)
- 3) Have meals with students on campus (49%)
- 4) Invite students to your home for social or academic functions (48%)

Current participation. Respondents also were asked to indicate whether they currently participate in the various curricular activities. Again, the degree of interest and the level of current participation appear to be highly correlated in all cases (i.e., if there is high participation, there is also a high level of interest).

PARTICIPATION IN LEARNING COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES (QU. 11 & 12)

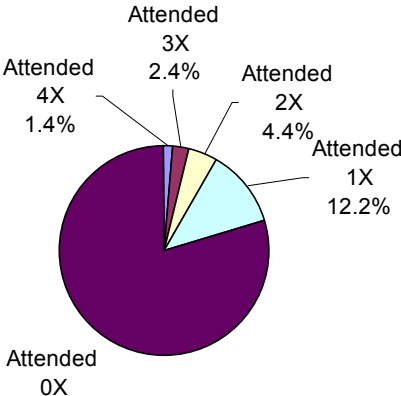
Participation as a learning community coordinator or course instructor. The majority of respondents (86%) have not participated as either a learning community coordinator or course instructor. Eighty-nine respondents (14%) indicated they have participated as either a learning community coordinator or course instructor.

Participation as a learning community coordinator or course instructor was **significantly related to:**

1. The value placed on various learning activities. In all cases, participation appears to be related to placing “some” or “great” importance on the following activities at rates higher than expected:
 - Service-learning and community service ($p < .001$)
 - Informal time with faculty ($p = .017$)
 - Out of class time with faculty ($p = .006$)
 - Group projects ($p = .019$)
 - Academic emphasis of residence halls ($p = .001$)
 - Course-specific supplemental instruction ($p = .003$)
 - Collaborative teaching/learning strategies ($p < .001$)
2. Interest in participating in each curricular activity listed on Question 9. In all cases, respondents indicating participation as an LC coordinator or course instructor indicated “great interest” at rates higher than expected.
3. Interest in participating in each co-curricular activity listed in Question 9, except “serving as an undergraduate advisor” and “meeting with students to discuss personal or professional goals.” In all cases, respondents indicating participation as an LC coordinator or course instructor indicated “great interest” at rates higher than expected.

Participation in the Learning Communities Institute. Another potential involvement opportunity is through the annual on-campus Learning Communities Institute. Level of participation in Institutes is illustrated in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4 – Number of Institutes Attended

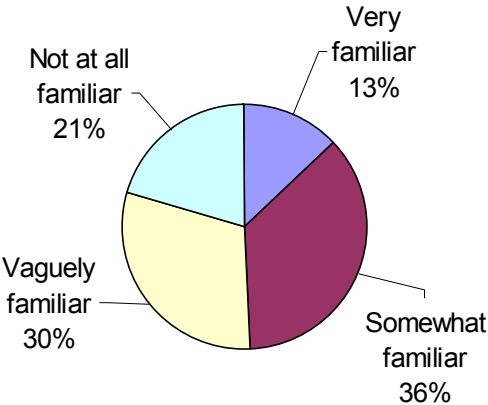


Over 20% of respondents indicated participating in at least one Learning Communities Institute. Given that only 14% of all respondents have been involved as learning community coordinators or course instructors this may suggest that some individuals have explored the possibility of learning community involvement through the Institute, but then did not get involved. It would seem to be important to further explore the perspectives of this subgroup of individuals to understand possible reasons (if any) for non-participation. Furthermore, it may be beneficial to identify such individuals and actively recruit them for learning community involvement.

FAMILIARITY WITH ISU'S LEARNING COMMUNITIES (QU. 13)

Respondents were asked to rate their familiarity with learning communities on a four-point scale. Value labels were "very familiar (4)" "somewhat familiar (3)," "vaguely familiar (2)," or "not at all familiar (1)." An illustration of overall familiarity with learning communities is presented in Figure 5.

Figure 5 – Overall Familiarity with ISU Learning Communities



By Rank. Associate professors were most familiar with ISU learning communities ($n = 154$, $M = 1.58$), followed by full professors ($n = 224$, $M = 1.50$), assistant professors ($n = 148$, $M = 1.26$), lecturers ($n = 96$, $M = 1.18$), and clinicians ($n = 3$, $M = 1.0$).

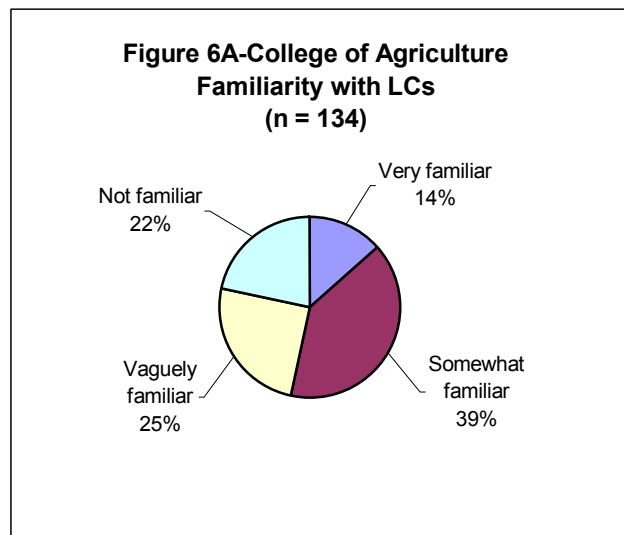
Familiarity with LCs was **significantly related** to Academic Rank

- Assistant Professors were more likely than expected to indicate "not at all familiar"
- Associate Professors were more likely than expected to indicate "somewhat familiar"
- Professors were more likely than expected to indicate "very familiar"

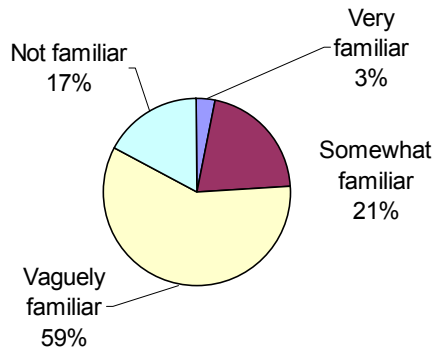
By Tenure Status. The majority of tenured (39%), tenure track (35%), and continuing adjunct (63%) faculty were "somewhat familiar" with learning communities whereas the majority of non-tenure track (36%) were "not at all familiar."

Familiarity with LCs was **significantly related** to tenure status. Tenured faculty were more likely than expected to indicate "somewhat" or "very familiar" whereas tenure-track faculty were more likely than expected to indicate "not at all familiar."

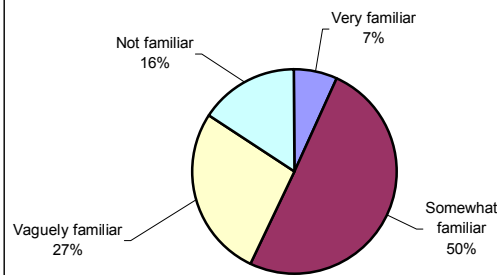
By College. Faculty in the College of Education were most familiar with LCs (61% reported being "very familiar" or "somewhat familiar") followed by faculty in the College of Design where 57% were "very familiar" or "somewhat familiar." Faculty in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences were the least familiar, with 92% reporting "vaguely familiar" or "not at all familiar." They were followed by faculty in the College of Business where 76% reported being "vaguely familiar" or "not at all familiar." Level of familiarity with LCs was not available for faculty affiliated with the Library. Level of familiarity by college is illustrated in Figures 6 A-G below.



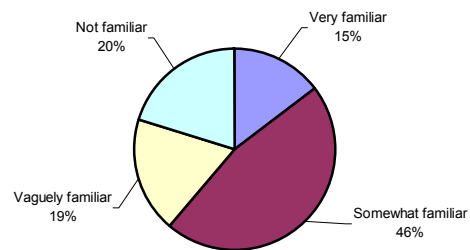
**Figure 6B-College of Business
Familiarity with LCs
(n = 30)**



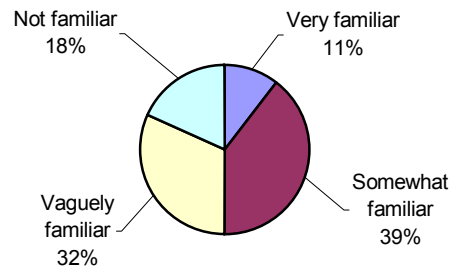
**Figure 6C-College of Design
Familiarity with LCs
(n = 48)**



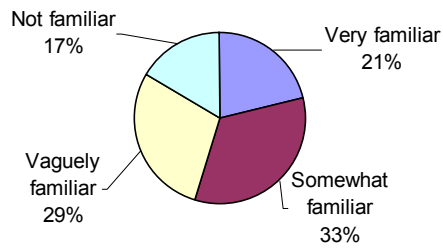
**Figure 6D-College of Education
Familiarity with LCs
(n = 60)**



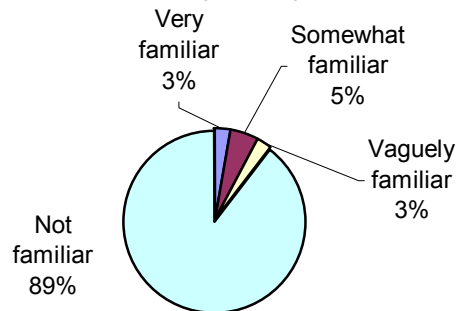
**Figure 6E-College of Engineering
Familiarity with LCs
(n = 85)**



**Figure 6F-College of FCS
Familiarity with LCs
(n = 44)**



**Figure 6G-College of LAS
Familiarity with LCs
(n = 238)**



RESPONSES TO OPEN-ENDED SURVEY QUESTIONS (QU. 12, 14-16)

Responses to open-ended questions have been examined for general themes. Summaries of these themes and sample comments are included below.

QUESTION 12a: Why did you decide to participate in Learning Communities?

Major themes (in order of frequency):

- Doing it for student education/benefit
- Doing it for personal/professional benefits (i.e., research, interact with students, collaboration)
- Doing it because they were asked or it was assigned
- Believe in the idea of LCs

Quotes:

Because I believed LCs would enhance student learning and help each student transition.

Opportunity to experience something new; to engage with colleagues outside my discipline; to engage with students I may have as seniors at the first year level.

I was invited and learned quickly that it was an enriching experience both/all ways.

For some students, this is a very good experience. It does not fit all, but it does help those needing nurturing.

My section was chosen for the LC. I had no input in the decision, nor did I have any contact with the other professors in the same LC.

I thought it sounded like an exciting way to connect disciplines. It did not work well either time. The other instructors assumed his/her class would remain the same; only my class was to change.

Learning communities has been the most significant program that we have ever implemented for student success. We decided to try LCs to help increase our student retention and to provide a positive environment for student learning and engagement.

QUESTION 12b: What influenced your decision not to participate in LCs?

Major themes (in order of frequency):

- Time
- Department doesn't have LCs/unaware of the program
- Lack of rewards
- No interest/not related to their goals
- Was never asked
- See LCs as unbeneficial
- Other (i.e., new teacher, the job is an assigned one, teach only grads, etc.)

Quotes:

My main emphasis is on quality education for all students, including those that have to live with large lectures and other unfortunate situations. Faculty time and funding should go towards improving the standard learning environment on campus, not into boutique-style efforts.

I'm not sure how to get involved and what kind of commitment is required.

Our proposal wasn't adequately funded to support personnel dedicated to the learning community. Faculty in smaller departments are already over-loaded and can't take on time-intensive additional responsibilities.

I haven't seen LC as relevant to my academic goals.

Don't know much about them – also extra commitment to something that doesn't seem to affect salary or P/T.

I would not be rewarded to do so. My charge is to publish and obtain extramural funds.

I teach four small (90) classes and serve on five committees. I'm not looking for more to do. I have twenty advisees and I am an advisor to two organizations.

QUESTION 14: In your opinion, what are the benefits of LCs?

Major themes (in order of frequency):

- Interaction/support/connections/belonging
- Adjustment/develop attachment to ISU
- Variety of learning strategies/students learn from one another
- Encourage/enhance learning
- Retention of students to school/major
- Work together/team skills
- Faculty-student relations
- Academic success through motivation and active participation
- Unsure
- Faculty benefits (collaborations, inter-disciplinary work, etc.)
- Gives a focus on achievement/academics
- Links many curriculums/links classes within major
- Contributes to education (other)
- Negative reasons/ reactions/no benefits

Quotes:

I would think that hearing others talk about challenges they have faced and how they've met them would be very beneficial. Learning teaching tips from others would also be beneficial. It would also be an opportunity to discuss current challenges and solicit some helpful ideas.

Breaks down disciplinary barriers and gets away from assembly-line style of education.

Students with the same interests or major can interact on a daily basis and stimulate each other's involvement with a subject.

Picks up the slack for individual poor learning habits – didn't students use to do this on their own? More ISU babysitting programs – keep those numbers up.

Student organized, topical study groups are the most beneficial.

If done right, they can create a more cohesive curriculum and connect and enhance student learning.

Because students tend to experience college as one big thing – i.e., they don't separate between work and life as we adults do – a learning community allows personal aspect to work with the learning process. Fosters a sense of group community between students – ours feels like a "class".

Gives students a broader range of experiences and ways of learning.

They sometimes isolate students from wider contacts, foster an insular approach to learning and can stultify the development of other desirable experiences (meeting diverse student populations, etc).

It is a good old model seen as Oxford and Cambridge in the middle ages and provides the same student-to-student and faculty-to-student mentoring relationship.

Since I am not familiar with Iowa State's LC program, I will define the term myself. A learning community is a group of people from different disciplines who come together to learn from one another. In the broadest sense, it would include persons with no academic affiliation. The main benefit is the encouragement of creativity and cross-fertilization of ideas.

They break down the "we vs. them" mentality students have about professors. Engages students in large classes in individual discussions of course content with students and instructors.

Students have an avenue for exchange – a chance to articulate their ideas to one another and thus learn via teaching. They provide a collective sense of understanding of the curriculum and perhaps make the students feel more empowered to alter adapt, or expand the curriculum to better fit their needs.

QUESTION 15: In your opinion, what are the challenges or limitations of LCs?

Major themes (in order of frequency):

- Time (i.e., faculty and staff availability, too much time required for students, etc.)
- Coordinating/scheduling
- Resources (money, faculty and staff staff)
- Diversity of groups (i.e., diverse needs, too much "togetherness," etc.)
- Making the program worthwhile (i.e., more focused, too much bureaucracy, rewards)
- Need expanded offerings (i.e., students with academic difficulty, upper-level LCs)
- Connections with courses
- Rewards

Quotes:

The main problem is that they are difficult to implement in a system that does not reward collaboration.

Students have a tendency to turn in work that is not done by them but by a learning team leader.

Forcing it to be more structured and institutionalized. It needs to be an integral part of the P & T process so that young innovative faculty can afford to be involved. Administration and particularly P & T committees have to be convinced. The next major challenge is to integrate it into the curriculum.

Important courses are blocked by LCs so students who are not in LCs can't register. This is not fair.

Having enough faculty involvement to sustain the programs; enough resources and time to properly and thoroughly assess LCs to see if they accomplish their goals.

They require intense faculty/staff coordination and involvement particularly after hours. How do you manage this and have a life. I've seen many colleagues burn out.

Often there is poor organization or motivation; and goals are not met.

The problem is depth vs. breadth. When so many different people and perspectives are involved, the discussion can be superficial or irrelevant (people talking past each other). However, if a topic is carefully chosen and narrowed (but not to the point of triviality), the exchange can be fruitful.

When they are focused on majors they seem to become little more than help groups to get through a program. I think we lose some of the lifelong learner and embracing diversity goals of the university when we group them constantly with other kids from their major.

They are "band-aids" to the pernicious problems of providing too little personalized instruction and offering too many monstrous-sized courses at this university.

Basic philosophy is not realistic. The method works when there is lots of time to coach and inspire students. Consider the one-room school. It had the same attributes.

QUESTION 16: What are the most important factors that would contribute to your decision to initiate (or continue) your participation in a learning community?

Major themes (in order of frequency):

- Time
- If it's beneficial
- Resources/support
- Tenure/rewards
- Cooperation/collaboration
- Outreach
- Content area
- Good feedback from students
- Diversity

Quotes:

I think departmental, collegiate, and university support, especially as it applies to tenure continuation; as long as pedagogical benefits continue to heavily outweigh administrative and staffing disadvantages.

I would have to be convinced that extra time and energy expenditure was worth it.

I need to feel that the time I commit to it makes a big enough difference to enough students to be worthwhile.

The administration must value it in REAL terms not just in words. The administration says undergraduate education is important but when it comes to tenure and promotion decisions, it counts as a yes/no criterion.

I like working collaboratively with another person(s). It stirs my creativity to bounce ideas off others, especially if they are in another field and have a different background. So, for me, the most important factor would be having available and similarly interested persons with whom to participate with linkage courses.

As I understand it, enrollment in linked courses isn't required, so in a class some students are in the LC and some aren't. That seems counter-productive to me. Were the requirements changed so that the whole class had to be in the LC, I'd love to do it.

Learning communities develop in my classes because I encourage it. I do not see any need to initiate additional communities.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, we were pleased with the response rate on the survey and offer the following summary and recommendations:

Continued Promotion of Learning Communities:

- Approximately 50% of respondents are either "vaguely" or "not at all familiar" with learning communities. This is not surprising given that learning communities are still relatively new at Iowa State. Efforts to share the successes of learning communities should be continued and expanded.

Involving additional faculty members in Learning Communities:

- Since faculty who serve as LC coordinators or course instructors appear to have a stronger propensity for certain curricular and co-curricular learning activities (p. 4), a targeted effort to identify and recruit faculty who have a similar predisposition should be undertaken. Faculty who participate in Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE) and Project LEARN activities may be an appropriate audience.
- Over 20% of respondents indicated participating in at least one Learning Communities Institute, but only 14% of all respondents have been involved as learning community coordinators or course instructors. This may suggest that some individuals have explored the possibility of learning community involvement through the Institute, but then did not get involved. Therefore, it may be beneficial to identify such individuals and actively recruit them for learning community involvement. It may also be important to further explore the subgroup of individuals who attended an Institute but who did not get involved to understand what reasons (if any) exist for non-participation. Focus groups may prove to be a valuable method for illuminating perspectives from this group
- Because of the low level of familiarity with LCs in the Colleges of Liberal Arts and Sciences (92% not at all or vaguely familiar) and Business (76% not at all or vaguely familiar), the LC Advisory Committee should discuss and address this issue, involving college LCs and respective Associate Deans. Additionally, college LCs, along with their respective Associate Deans, should be encouraged to process the information and develop action plans as necessary. Connections between emerging movements with open option students (particularly in the College of LAS) should be explored for possible connections to learning communities and faculty.

Appealing to faculty interests:

- Thirty-one percent of respondents indicate an interest in collaborating with faculty in other disciplines to develop a course based on connections between the disciplines; however, only 21% indicate they are currently participating in this activity. Therefore, developing collaborations between faculty in different disciplines appears to be an area where further development could occur. The development of interdisciplinary LCs ought to be considered to provide opportunities for faculty to engage in meaningful course links.
- Respondents appear to place low importance on residence halls as a way to enhance student learning, and they express little interest in collaborating with residence hall staff. Thirty-nine percent rated "Academic emphasis in residence hall programming" as having "little or no importance" for enhancing student learning. Additionally, 66% indicated "little or no interest" in "collaborating with residence hall staff to enhance students' in- and out-of-class learning" and 63% indicated "little or no interest" in "meeting with students in

residence halls or dining areas.” The residential experience can provide powerful connections for learning and has been an important element of many learning communities. Therefore, sharing and promoting the success stories of residential learning communities may be one way of expanding the awareness about residential opportunities and connections. Additionally, focus groups may provide the avenue for deeper understanding of faculty perceptions of residential learning community experiences.

- Faculty reported having little interest in informal interactions with students, such as having meals on campus, inviting students to their homes, or interacting in the residence halls. We believe these types of co-curricular activities, along with residential living experiences, can help build powerful connections that contribute to student success and have been an important part of many learning communities. Therefore, it may be difficult to engage faculty in learning communities if these “less desirable” activities are perceived to be part of learning community work. Sharing and promoting the importance of co-curricular activities and informal connections with faculty as part of student learning is important and ought to be explored. Additionally, focus groups may provide the avenue for deeper understanding of faculty perceptions of out-of-class interactions.
- ISU faculty appear most interested in engaging in purposeful out-of-class activities rather than purely social activities. Therefore, current LCs should be encouraged to develop purposeful out of class activities to gain more faculty involvement, or to combine social activities (i.e., dinners, etc.) with academic pursuits. For example, a “career dinner” where faculty dine with students but also present career options in the discipline might be appropriate. Faculty mentors who serve a particular purpose for a learning community may be another way of engaging faculty in purposeful out of class activities.

Addressing faculty concerns:

- The high level of concern about the rewards system and relationship of LC involvement to promotion and tenure at Iowa State deserves further exploration. This issue should be discussed and addressed by the LC Advisory Committee, and a plan of action developed. Given the recent emphasis on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) by the CTE, connections with CTE should be explored to address this issue and its connections to learning communities.

APPENDIX A: Survey (attached)