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Dear Doug and Corly,

Thank you both for inviting me to Iowa State in mid-September to help celebrate the tenth year celebration of your Learning Communities Initiative and to look in on the program itself. Thanks also for your wonderful hospitality – lovely meals, good conversation, time in the outdoors. It was a special pleasure to see both Ames and the ISU campus in the late summer – what a beautiful time of year in Iowa, as the fields turn shades of green, yellow, and brown.

You asked me to provide some reflections on what I saw and learned in this visit and on what directions the LC initiative might take in the coming years. I'll divide my comments into (1) what still stands out as distinctive about the ISU Learning Communities program; (2) what needs continuing work; and (3) some thoughts about the future.

Distinctive Work

What continues to stand out for me as distinctive and, indeed, outstanding about the learning community initiative at Iowa State are the ways you have designed this program to work within your organizational infrastructure and culture:

- Learning Communities at Iowa State reflect a strong student affairs/academic affairs partnership, reflected in its leadership structure, advisory committee, learning community teaching teams, and assessment efforts. In my experience, few schools walk their talk with genuine collaboration in the ways that you do.
- The LC initiative involves faculty members, graduate students, student affairs professionals, academic advisors, and undergraduate students as well, and in so doing, expands the notion of who is a “teacher” at the institution.
- The LC initiative supports program development and implementation with a strong RFP/Proposal process that communicates expectations and, at the same time, encourages local flexibility in learning community curricular design and pedagogy; this RFP infrastructure invites many types of LC structures to emerge within the cultures and structures of different colleges.

- ISU LCs have made explicit links to the key units on campus that support successful LC implementation: admissions, registrar, assessment, colleges, the Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching, residence life.
- Significant local research on the LC program and specific offerings within it continues to emerge, thanks to the work of doctoral students in Education Leadership and Policy Studies.
- The LC chairs have an unusual degree of broad access to campus leadership (deans and associate deans, associate provosts, and associate vice presidents).
- The LC program holds a formal, annual gathering, an end-of-year LC institute, that serves as an orientation to LC newcomers as well as a chance to reflect on and celebrate good work.
- The LC program has had years of stable leadership from you two, who are widely and highly regarded within the institution.

While other institutions have adopted some of these “best practices,” no other large institution (in my experience) has developed this unique combination of structural and operational ways to support learning communities. Major innovations cannot be undertaken or institutionalized without structures and practices such as these, so my hat goes off to you for having put all these practices so well in place. Doug and I had some conversation about the fact that ISU appears in the current *U.S. News and World Report* list of leading institutions in the learning community arena; there is no question in my mind that ISU squarely belongs on this list -- both because of the reach of the LC program and because of the robust interdependent structures that support it.

As for the individual learning community offerings themselves, I am less able to offer a comprehensive evaluation, but in my three visits to ISU over the past four years, I have been privileged to meet a number of faculty and staff members who describe their own “best practices” in learning community programs: e.g.,

- making the commitment to building a strong student community;
- creating intentional occasions for students, staff, and faculty to get to know one another in informal social situations;
- creating sequenced opportunities for students to become familiar with the major or to explore career choices;
- practicing active learning strategies, especially through experiential learning, collaborative learning, or problem- or project-centered learning;
- involving students in service-learning experiences that have explicit connections to the themes of the learning community program;
- engaging students in integrative learning experiences or integrative assignments;
- and, in some communities, creating fully integrated learning activities and assignments.

...just to name a few. All these practices resonate with your ongoing commitments to the "Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education," as well as the NSSE benchmarks.

Continuous Improvement

As you continue to support existing learning community offerings, I am wondering what kind of reflective opportunities or small incentive programs you might create to enable these programs (and their associated staff, faculty, and student mentors) to set higher bars for student learning and teaching-team collaboration so that the above-mentioned "best practices" become a norm in as many learning community offerings as possible. I must confess that I do not have easy answers about ways to go about setting up this process, but I think it important to undertake. As

colleagues of ours in higher education reform in the United Kingdom are fond of pointing out, to initiate any kind of innovation requires people and institutions to “un-freeze” a bit, to allow the innovation in, to permit it to take hold. But all too easily, the innovation itself, while getting established, becomes “frozen” in its own way. So the question becomes, “How can the innovation become a place for new learning, for new experimentation, for moving to new levels of effectiveness?” Developing strategies for asking and answering these questions might be something your advisory committee can take on.

Some arenas for continued development or continued innovation are the following:

- 1) **Reformulation or tweaking of curricular models.** During my visit, I observed that even though many LC coordinators already know one another, when they were listening to different LCs being described to me, they were interested in being reminded of precisely which classes in a given LC were included and what kind of integrative components were in place (in terms of the size and type of orientation class, field trips, service learning, and so forth). So, I am wondering if there is a matrix that would present a comparative typology of ISU learning communities, which colleges or departments might use as they think about expanding existing LC structures or inventing new ones – with the explicit purpose of increasing student learning or developing key skills early in students’ careers. Could a workshop at the annual LC institute invite LC teaching teams to use such a typology to revisit their respective models and consider improvements?
- 2) **Dissemination of assessment strategies:** LC Coordinators described some assessment activities they now employ, but many expressed a desire for additional help in designing assessments that would provide more useful information about what students are getting from their LC experience. Along with the luncheon discussions of teaching tips, I wonder if you might add discussions about formative assessment strategies such as Classroom Assessment Techniques and types of student self-assessment – along with the more summative assessment strategies that are available.
- 3) **Continued development of peer mentor training?** I put the question-mark here because I am not sure I have enough data to offer a confident opinion. Still, my reading of Mimi’s dissertation combined with speaking with mentors Charles and Megan indicate that at least some mentors would value more direction and ideas regarding activities they might undertake with their mentees. Perhaps your LC advisory committee and longstanding LC program supervisors/team leaders could brainstorm some strategies for stronger horizontal training of mentors (across all the LCs) as well as more focused vertical training and “checking in” with peer mentors (by their supervisors) during the semester.
- 4) **Development of new ways to add “value” to the residential component of the LCs.** This suggestion, put forward by Kurt Earnest, is important to keep asking. I wonder if there is already evidence of LC programs in which faculty members offer high-challenge, high-engagement assignments that literally require students to work collaboratively in out-of-class settings. Richard Light’s research¹ indicates that for many students, complex, meaty out-of-class assignments are often the most memorable part of their learning...and in residential colleges, this work often takes place in residence halls. This might be a good question to explore in future residential LC conferences – how academic practices in LCs and the

¹ Light, R. *Making the Most of College: Student Speak their Minds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.

residence hall component can combine in the service of more “value added” for student engagement and learning.

- 5) **Ongoing consultation and collaboration with the Associate Deans.** The Associate Deans are an important source of support and feedback for the learning community initiative as well as for other emerging curriculum and faculty development initiatives. I hope that you and they might commit to regular meetings both to share news, provide feedback, and generate ideas for new initiatives.

Community College Connections

It was a pleasure to meet faculty and administrators from your nearby community colleges who have emerging interests in learning community development, and to see that the College of Agriculture is making the effort to reach out to these institutions. It’s been my experience that learning community programs succeed on an individual campus when there is an intersection of the following three elements: (1) a clearly identified student need or curricular need; (2) faculty interest and energy to create learning communities to address that need; and (3) administrative support with the logistics of putting learning community classes in place. In addition to LCs on those campuses that serve students, there could be some interesting synergies with ISU, with on-line classes or interactive TV link-ups for ISU course-offerings as a way of motivating students towards transfer...but it has been my experience that these collaborations grow out of individual faculty energy and are often challenging to sustain over time. I would simply encourage you to stay in touch with LC development at the involved colleges and to keep putting forth the question, "How can our mutual work support transfer students?"

Thoughts for the Future

The above suggestions represent modest improvements that you probably can implement with existing resources. I realize you have already done some work in this regard: Doug has mentioned that you have "seeded" some working meetings and retreats of small groups of faculty and staff. As you consider reaching for even more improvements in the learning community initiative, some areas of focus might include:

- New LC development: expansion of LC offerings within those colleges that offer relatively few LCs now and development of sophomore or junior LCs that reflect key entry points to study in a major;
- Reconfiguration of current LC offerings to reach a greater degree of educational effectiveness, which might include strengthening student engagement and learning in classes taken in the Freshman Year. The work being undertaken by the First-Year Experience Committee in the College of LAS is important and promising. In recent years, several large institutions around the country (e.g., IUPUI and Michigan State and a number of others supported by Carol Twigg’s Pew-funded project on course redesign²) have been re-engineering large-enrollment “gateway” classes to foster active learning and greater challenge and engagement. You could also glean promising ideas through contacts with leaders of these projects or with large institutions identified as notable through the NSSE “DEEP” study. In addition, conferences that showcase promising approaches include the

² More information about the course redesign project can be found at <http://www.center.rpi.edu/PewGrant.html>

First Year Experience conferences and AACU's topical conferences on integrated learning might offer other strategies. Please let me know if I can point you to specific contacts. These suggestions would enable individuals to learn what other universities are attempting with course improvement and to consider what faculty/curriculum development projects seem the most adaptable.

- Introduction of specific pedagogies (such as cooperative learning, problem-based learning, or service-learning) in these large classes, or to a targeted cluster of LC programs with the specific intention of building "horizontal" competence in skills such as critical and creative thinking, team-work skills, integration of knowledge, and self-reflection. The latest issue of peerReview focuses on integrative learning.

The LC initiative itself has already begun to function as a "skunk works" for curriculum and pedagogical improvement as well as a site for student development and student leadership development. I sense that you are already undertaking this kind of "improvement work" on a modest scale with the funding and staffing you now have. However, I think a larger institution-wide vision and proposal is warranted, to make an even more visible commitment to the improvement of undergraduate student learning. Such a vision could be propelled forward with a five-year plan and a set of interlocking strategies for strengthening both student learning and achievement in targeted classes and LC programs. This would obviously require substantial resources to create an infrastructure for incentives, rewards and recognition, and evaluation. Yet this kind of vision, building on your decade of learning community innovation, might attract major donors and alumni support. Think what more you could stimulate with a major, visible initiative and a substantial incentive fund.

It is my sense that the two of you have unique access to the leadership of both individual colleges and the university in general, while at the same time, you have unique roles as "system linkers" and "system breakers" at the same time. So, I would urge you to keep putting out the biggest, most imaginative ideas that you can, toward moving the LC initiative to even more ambitious levels of aspiration and effectiveness. You have a unique opportunity now, with this, the 10-year anniversary of the program, with the widespread recognition of its value to the university, and with the sentiment I heard from many different LC coordinators and leaders: "We have made a good start; now we need to move this work to a new level and invest in it in new ways." You have a great deal of social capital, the trust and respect from different sectors of the campus, and a sense of aspiration on the part of many of your colleagues.

In my three days in Ames, I was consistently impressed with the high level of interest in making learning communities an even stronger feature of the Iowa State University identity and practice. There is a remarkable sense of engagement with the LC idea from so many sectors of the institution, and a genuine interest in continuing to strengthen the initiative overall. I think you are well poised to move the LC initiative ahead! I hope that you will, and that you will send me a headline or two of news along the way.

Sincerely,

Jean MacGregor
Senior Scholar