

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY LEARNING COMMUNITIES BEST PRACTICES

Assessment

- Tell your story: How could you describe the impact of your learning community? What changes are you making to improve your learning community and why? How might students' experiences be different if the learning community didn't exist? What are our hopes for our students? Does our learning community meet the identified needs of our students?*
- Name your top questions: What are the problems facing the learning community? Does the leadership team review the overall program and its goals?*
- Write up the mission and program outcomes of the learning community
- Think about how to incorporate meaning and purpose
- Talk about assessment practices and feedback on students' work, involvement, class participation
- Send a survey to past students about advice and create a resource or include in a student panel
- Schedule student exit interviews
- Conduct focus groups to gain depth of insight into students' experiences*
- Survey students mid-semester to make improvements as the semester continues
- Make space to use the assessment information you gather by scheduling time twice a year to discuss the results*

*content provided by Dr. Kevin Saunders, Director of Institutional Research and Assessment, Drake University

Career connections

- Engage 1st year students in discussions about short-term and long-term personal, academic, and career goals during one-on-one meetings with peer mentor, early in the semester
- Provide structure and organize activities for understanding career opportunities
- Have a professional guest speaker present at seminar class
- Focus on resumes and internship development for LC students
- Facilitate a resume writing night
- Discuss job opportunities in campus and in Ames community for students who may need to work during school
- Plan a field trip that incorporates business tours and cultural events
- Invite industry mentors to help students feel more connected to the discipline
- Provide time for mock interviews

Community-Building

- Send an introductory letter to incoming students during the summer
- Create a community scavenger hunt at the beginning of the school year to help incoming class learn about the CyRide bus system and Ames community

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- Have an activity or event within the first two weeks of class, outside of class time, to break the ice (picnic, get together)
- Get to know all members of your learning community by name early and know some of their interests as well
- Take a photo of the large group together and share with the group to enable easier identification of the students
- Encourage Intramural teams and competitions between LC's
- Organize one-on-one meetings, and/or focus groups, to find out what types of activities are most interesting to students
- Build "Chat room" time into class syllabus to enable students to discuss topics of interest (ex. "In my first 3 weeks of school so far, I ..."); some topics are pre-determined while others are to be suggested by the students
- Engage in a "Verbal tweet" where students each have 30 seconds to share a piece of information among large circle groups
- Use Facebook groups to ask questions about the learning community; some LCs use group LC page while others divide into smaller sections developed by peer mentors
- Use blogs for mentors and coordinators to communicate with students about upcoming activities, questions and concerns
- Invite upper classmen to serve on Q&A panels
- Arrange "Tuesday night dinners" in the residence halls where students can use their own meal plans so there is low/no cost
- Create buttons for members of the LC that can be attached to backpacks to allow students to identify fellow students on campus
- Engage in free/inexpensive on-campus activities like programming through the Student Activities Center, the Workspace, Reiman Gardens, bowling in the MU and ISU After Dark
- Encourage greater participation by hand-delivering invitations to events, send postcards, Twitter, and email notices, use post-it note reminders on doors in residence halls, and send phone calls, texts, and Facebook reminders
- Hand-out "study bags", treats plus handwritten note of encouragement, for students

Curricular Connections

- Incorporate a seminar class that serves as the anchor for the learning community
- Encourage students to think about their careers and select their own field trip activity rather than 'over planning' for them
- Seek daily evaluations from students (what worked, what didn't, etc.)
- Attend a professional conference with the students
- Collaborate with another learning community, utilize a common reading book and complete a related service-learning project together

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- Involve first-year students in leadership roles as committee chairpersons for planning service-learning experiences
- Tour facilities on and off campus
- Discuss email etiquette
- Engage industry mentorship
- Visit the studio courses and attend reviews for the students
- Assign student reflections/portfolios to assist students to move beyond technical knowledge acquisition
- Start a business together!

Faculty

- Schedule regular monthly luncheons where students and faculty introduce themselves, share something about their background including hometown or hobbies, as well as general and career interests
- Involve faculty through creation of key assignments in other classes to be included in the portfolios
- Have department faculty talk to learning teams about research
- Arrange speakers to visit with the learning community, including teachers of clustered courses and industry professionals
- Create a faculty panel composed of faculty who teach the larger lecture classes so students will be less intimidated when enrolling in those classes
- Invite the college dean to talk to the students

Peer Mentors

- Ask mentors to deliver “welcome to campus” bags
- Have contact with your peer mentor weekly and make sure you clearly identify expectations
- Ask peer mentors to plan and present seminars
- Use peer mentors as classroom facilitators
- Use a peer mentor coordinator
- Link the mentor/mentee activities to a required course/hour each week and give mentors’ time to work with students w/in class every other week
- Hold an end-of-year retreat with current and newly-hired mentors to discuss program outcomes and plans for next year
- Engage peer mentors in the development of assessment surveys and discussion of results
- Have peer mentors organize mingle opportunities for the students
- Give peer mentors 5-10 minutes of class time to chat with students about how class is going and listening to feedback
- Ask mentors to create journals with pages dedicated to individual student details such as a questionnaire that the students complete about their likes and dislikes
- Best practices in peer mentor supervision:

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- Begin hiring process early, involve current mentors in the new mentor hiring process, confirm fall hires prior to spring break and provide transition training with current and new mentors in April
- Discuss FERPA guidelines, sign confidentiality agreements, and share details about weekly and monthly expectations
- Meet with the mentors weekly to discuss how things are going
- Evaluate mentors around week six of each semester and provide timely feedback to make changes as needed
- Provide an end-of-semester evaluation