

Defining a Collective Role of Learning Communities: A Response to Program Review

Laurie A. Rodgers

Assistant Director and Coordinator of Learning Communities Projects

Bowling Green State University

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As learning communities increase in number and variety on the Bowling Green State University (BGSU) campus, their role and function within the institution as well as the nature and quality of their interrelationships take on growing importance. An attempt to examine these and other questions was undertaken in a recent collective program review of all eight residential learning communities on the BGSU campus.

Originally founded in 1910 as a teacher's college, Bowling Green State University is a regional, state-assisted, doctoral-research intensive university, with an enrollment of over 20,000 students in 8 distinct colleges. Presently, there are eight residential learning communities (Arts Village, Chapman Community at Kohl, Health Sciences Residential Community, Honors, IMPACT, La Comunidad, La Maison Française, and Partners in Context and Community) at BGSU. Each one exists and is sustained to fulfill the mission or role envisioned by its respective founder.

The overall purpose of program review (at BGSU) is to assess the contributions of RLCs towards BGSU's institutional mission and their effectiveness upon the campus. While some of the RLCs have conducted their own independent program evaluations, this is the first time that all of the RLCs have participated in a collective review.

The process itself begins with a self-study of each individual RLC prepared by the respective director. Each RLC is assessed within the context of its particular mission. One exception is the Honors Program, which recently completed a separate program review and therefore is contributing a self-study on its residential component only. There is also an evaluation of the impact of the collective residential learning community effort. The self-study concluded with a number of questions posed by the LCAC and LC Directors to the external reviewers. It was hoped that the questions would offer guidance throughout the external visit and also solicit a response from the review team:

Three individuals comprised the external review team, which visited the BGSU campus April 10-12, 2005. Their resulting report did not directly address the guiding questions posed but instead identified certain "strengths, weaknesses, and recommendations" that were presented in the form of eight endorsements. These items may be grouped together under the broad headings of Equity and Diversity, Residence Life, and Institutionalization and Assessment.

EQUITY AND DIVERSITY

Recommendation #1:

BGSU should look for ways of creating more equitable arrangements for the learning communities.

Recommendation #6:

There is strong encouragement to recruit minority students. This may be undertaken in various ways including the intentional integration of diverse experiences (e.g. service learning opportunities with disadvantaged or underprivileged groups), study abroad programs, and promotion of Americorps/Teach for America etc.

Response to Recommendations #1 and #6:

The disparity in resources among the RLCs is perhaps more reflective of fundamental differences between the organizations themselves. This recommendation seems to imply that one RLC was established within a context that was identical or similar to that of another which definitely is not the case. Each RLC was instituted at different times by different founders for different purposes. These variations inherently dictate that the needs of and resources among the RLCs would also be dissimilar. Certain factors (e.g. staffing, facilities, course offerings, and size, age, mission, and purpose of the RLC) can and do represent profound differences in funding requirements while organizational domain or location, structure, and hierarchy affect access to fiscal sources.

It is unfair to compare one RLC with another (e.g. La Comunidad to Chapman) since this ignores the very real fact that the more established RLCs have had significantly more time and opportunity to learn from their mistakes and adapt accordingly. Newer communities benefited since they were able to observe and consequently avoid similar errors.

Fiscal security remains an important concern for all of the communities. Therefore, to redistribute resources in the name of greater equity by taking from what are perceived to be the “rich” RLCs and giving to the “poor” RLCs is not a solution. Rather, these discrepancies should be counterbalanced in ways that help communities but not at the expense of others.

RESIDENCE LIFE

Recommendation #5:

Some consideration should be given to modifying some of the residence life arrangements—reprioritizing along some of the following lines:

- Place Honors students in spaces not assigned to IMPACT members to narrow the “gap” of academic expectations between community members.
- Facilitate greater equality and efficient use of resources by placing La Comunidad/smaller RLCs in the “left over” spaces in Kohl Hall so that the entire hall is full of learning communities rather than random placement of non-RLC students.
- Assign an extra RA as a program assistant to the RLC directors, both to lighten their heavy burden, and to build more co-curricular support/collaboration between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs.

Response to Recommendation #5:

Combining RLCs by putting smaller communities in buildings with larger RLCs is not as practical as it might seem on the surface. The openings are most often the result of students making changes in their housing arrangements at random times throughout the academic year (e.g. changing rooms / roommates / residence halls, early withdrawals, and cancellations). Therefore, it is not possible to fully anticipate when or how many such spaces will actually be available.

As for the extra RA, some of the RLCs already have someone who coordinates program activities. For other RLCs, the director and staff share these duties. Nevertheless, this suggestion did elicit interest and may well receive further attention and consideration.

INSTITUTIONALIZATION AND ASSESSMENT

Recommendation #2:

BGSU should strive for a standard rationale for release time, perhaps tied to size of community, duties, and level of support from other sources.

Recommendation #3:

BGSU should develop new leadership so that the best elements are not lost when the current director leaves. This should include creating transitional strategies, archiving RLC histories, and “lessons learned” for each community.

Recommendation #4:

Further institutionalization of learning communities at BGSU must occur. Some consideration should be given to modifying some of the residence life arrangements—reprioritizing along some of the following lines:

- Additional ways to further institutionalize learning communities at BGSU center on the allocation of faculty rewards (e.g. faculty participation is given some weight in annual reviews for salary increases and reappointments); opportunities for faculty to conduct scholarship— untenured, tenure-track, and tenured associate professors might engage in scholarship (of engagement and of teaching) which could then be presented as evidence of scholarly attainment for tenure and promotion consideration.
- Institutional support for such scholarship could include an “in-house” learning communities conference (e.g. Iowa State University’s in-house Learning Communities Institute which it hosts for its faculty each spring).
- BGSU should establish written policies on the replacement of learning communities directors to further institutionalize these programs into the fabric of BGSU.

Recommendation #7:

We recommend that you continue to participate in nationally normed studies (e.g. C.S.E.Q., N.S.S.E.), while conducting your own studies. We also recommend that you try to assess the recruitment and retention value of the programs—particularly of the students (such as students of color and National Merit finalists) who you especially want to attract.

Recommendation #8:

We recommend BGSU focus on key success indicators for each community and for RLCs collectively, as well as investigate the possibility that RLCs are aiding in the recruitment / enrollment / retention of students who would not otherwise attend BGSU.

Some common assessment outcomes that could be compared across learning communities include:

- Retention
- Recruitment
- Learning Outcomes
- Persistence within Major

Response to Recommendations #2, #3, #4, #7, & #8:

The LC Directors and LCAC agree that further institutionalization and continued assessment are vital and intend to pursue these activities. Towards this end, it was proposed that work commence on achieving the following goals for the coming academic year:

Planning for the 2005-2006 Academic Year

A. Policies

- 1. Refinement of guidelines for new RLC proposal procedure*
- 2. Creation of RLC Policy Manual*

B. Information and Organization

- *Development of RLC Database and Archives*

C. RLC Institutionalization and Assessment

- 1. Formally define relationship of RLCs to BGSU*
- 2. Identify common RLC assessment variables*

D. Faculty Recruitment, Incentives, and Professional Development

- 1. RLC Seminars/Conferences, Publications*
- 2. Increased campus awareness of RLCs via marketing promotions*

For more information about the BGSU RLC Program Review Self-Study go online at:

<http://www.bgsu.edu/colleges/as/review/index.html>