



# THE TOOLBOX

A Teaching and Learning Resource for Instructors

## THE PROMISE OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN A REIMAGINED UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCE

### Editor Note

As American higher education engages in a far-reaching reexamination of itself, learning communities stand out as an education delivery model ready to address present and future challenges and opportunities. The following article lays out the operating principles of learning communities as an alternative to standard practices in undergraduate education. The next issue of The Toolbox will feature examples of learning community practices based on these principles, which are in use at a variety of institutions.

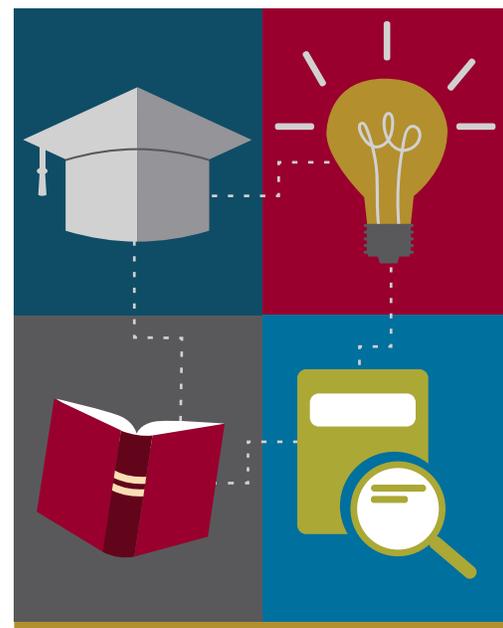
The fundamental purpose of learning communities is to provide integrated learning experiences to a cohort of students who live together in themed housing or are enrolled in a cluster of courses with each other. They are designed to maximize intellectual engagement, provide social and individual support, and create bonds among the students and also their institutional community. Some of the inherent benefits of learning communities include:

- » **Providing a coherent, interdisciplinary space for intellectual engagement.** Learning communities—in the form of course clusters, team-taught courses, living-learning communities, and residential colleges—create

Mimi Benjamin, Richie Gebauer,  
Jeff Godowski, Janine Graziano,  
Jean M. Henscheid,  
Jody Jessup-Anger, Jillian Kinzie,  
Karen Kurotsuchi Inkelas,  
Shannon Lundeen,  
Julia Metzker, & Rita Sperry

National Learning Communities  
Collaborative<sup>1</sup>

Contact: [henschei@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:henschei@mailbox.sc.edu)



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There is immense power when a group of people with similar interests gets together to work toward the same goals.

”

— Idowu Koyenikan,  
Organizational consultant and  
author

<sup>1</sup> The National Learning Communities Collaborative is an informal group of learning community practitioners and researchers representing organizations whose efforts are directly related or contribute to advocacy, research, and scholarship within learning community theory and practice. This cohort has been engaging in ongoing dialogue to explore the current state and future direction of learning communities.

a space for students to examine and integrate the themes or concepts they are learning in and outside of the classroom with support from faculty, staff, and peers (Gabelnick et al., 1990). Learning communities have been successfully employed in person (Benjamin, 2015) and online (Blayone et al., 2017), and this integration and intensification of the learning experience is ideally suited to provide a context for students, faculty, and staff to explore and address interdisciplinary challenges or crises. The learning element of learning communities tends focus on students, but learning can occur for all members (i.e., faculty, staff, and students). Bringing these individuals together around a coherent topic, idea, or within a prescribed structure, offers a learning space where each participant recognizes that they belong.

- » **Leveraging relationships among faculty, staff, and students to provide support.** Students need academic, social, and personal support in the best of times, and these needs can be acute in difficult circumstances. Learning communities focus on a specific group of students and connect them to one another and with faculty and staff to offer that support to ensure students are not isolated. These groups could also help faculty and staff who might otherwise feel overwhelmed with the broad institutional aim of supporting student success by giving them a more manageable group on which to focus. Students provide needed support as peers, mentors, tutors, or resident advisors (in living-learning communities).
- » **Connecting students with their institution.** Through collaboration, learning communities can strengthen the connections among participants and increase a student's investment in and sense of belonging to their institution. Because of their identifiable shared purpose, learning community participants can be connected to each other and the institution before, during, and after the school year. Early and continued outreach can help students feel comfortable committing to an institution and remaining in school. This connection sends messages of support and continuity: that learning, and the college experience, will continue with quality and distinction.

### Learning Communities and High-Impact Practices

Learning communities are included in Kuh's (2008) list of high-impact practices (HIPs), and therefore need to be designed with an eye toward what makes these educational practices especially effective. For example, HIPs

- » **Demand considerable time and effort on purposeful tasks**
  - » How are students engaged in studying issues that matter?
  - » What community and social issues are addressed in their learning?
- » **Engage faculty and peers about substantive matters over extended periods of time**
  - » How are educators facilitating opportunities for students to meet with faculty one-on-one or in small groups to explore issues that matter?

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### ONLINE COURSES

#### Infusing Growth Mindset Into Your First-Year Experience

Instructor: *Amy Baldwin*

Nov. 9-Dec. 4, 2020

Registration Deadline: Nov. 3, 2020

### CONFERENCES

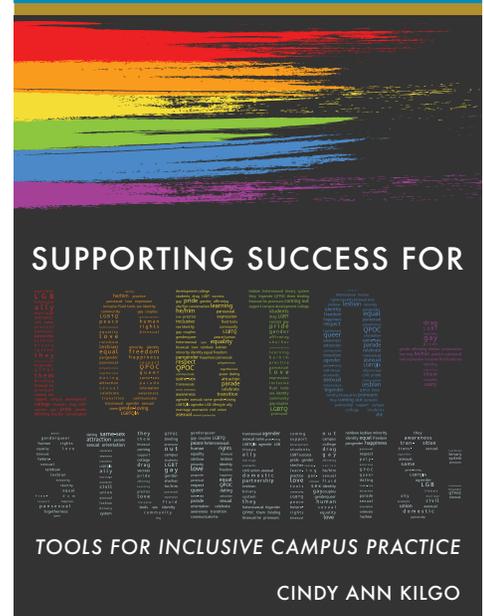
#### 40th Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience

Virtual Conference

Feb. 15-20, 2021

Proposal Window: Oct. 7-28, 2020

## NEW RESOURCE



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# Journal

OF THE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE & STUDENTS IN TRANSITION

A semiannual refereed journal providing current research and scholarship on significant student transitions. The primary purpose of the *Journal* is to disseminate empirical research findings on student transition issues.

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- » Increase the likelihood students will experience diversity through contact with people who are different from themselves
  - » How are the rich identities and experiences that all students carry being lifted up?
  - » What opportunities are provided to engage with differences?
- » Include frequent feedback about performance
  - » How is feedback shared with students?
  - » What opportunities do students have to reflect on and respond to feedback to improve their performance?
  - » What tools can faculty use to facilitate frequent feedback to students?
- » Allow students to see the ways that what they are learning works in different settings
  - » What opportunities do students have to translate learning to new contexts?
  - » How can students put learning into practice in a distance learning environment?
  - » How might they use what they are learning in their community while learning from home?

In these uncertain times one thing is clear: How higher education maneuvers through this pandemic will test our resilience. Learning communities provide a lived example for building the strength and flexibility that is especially necessary right now.

### Author Note

Campuses new to or wishing to retool their learning communities have several places to turn for support. The Learning Communities Association (LCA) and the Residential College Society host virtual events. Individuals who are part of the National Learning Communities Collaborative can help colleagues sort through their ideas and plan. The [Washington Center for Improving Undergraduate Education](#) offers coaching support, and professional mentors from the LCA can support faculty and staff. As we hear from each other, we can collect and share information in our own learning community.

### REFERENCES

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### Submission Guidelines for The Toolbox

For complete guidelines and issue dates, see [www.sc.edu/fye/toolbox/](http://www.sc.edu/fye/toolbox/)

**Audience:** *Toolbox* readers include full-time and adjunct faculty; academic advisors; and administrators focused on faculty development, teaching and learning, academic success, and the first college year.

**Style:** Articles, tables, figures, and references should adhere to standard set forth in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (7th ed.).

**Length:** Original articles should be no longer than 1,500 words. The editor reserves the right to edit submissions for length.

Submit your article online by using our [submission form](#).

#### Please address all questions to:

Brad Garner, *Toolbox* Editor  
 Indiana Wesleyan University  
 1900 West 50th Street  
 Marion, IN 46953  
 Email: [brad.garner@indwes.edu](mailto:brad.garner@indwes.edu)  
 Phone: 765-677-3341

### About The Toolbox

*The Toolbox* is an online professional development newsletter offering innovative, learner-centered strategies for empowering college students to achieve greater success. The newsletter is published six times a year by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina.

The online subscription is free. To register for newsletter alerts and access back issues, please visit [www.sc.edu/fye/toolbox](http://www.sc.edu/fye/toolbox).

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