Learning Communities: UWM and Beyond

Retention Steering Committee

November 6, 2014
What is a First-Year Seminar?
A course designed to “assist students in their academic and social development and in their transition to college. A seminar, by definition, is a small discussion-based course in which students and their instructors exchange ideas and information. In most cases, there is a strong emphasis on creating community in the classroom.” (Hunter & Linder, 2005, pp. 275-276).

First-Year Seminars as a High Impact Practice
“Many schools now build into the curriculum first-year seminars or other programs that bring small groups of students together with faculty or staff on a regular basis. The highest-quality first-year experiences place a strong emphasis on critical inquiry, frequent writing, information literacy, collaborative learning, and other skills that develop students’ intellectual and practical competencies. First-year seminars can also involve students with cutting-edge questions in scholarship and with faculty members’ own research.” (https://www.aacu.org/leap/hips)

Learning Communities as a High Impact Practice
“The key goals for learning communities are to encourage integration of learning across courses and to involve students with ‘big questions’ that matter beyond the classroom. Students take two or more linked courses as a group and work closely with one another and with their professors. Many learning communities explore a common topic and/or common readings through the lenses of different disciplines. Some deliberately link ‘liberal arts’ and ‘professional courses’; others feature service learning.” (https://www.aacu.org/leap/hips)
Objective
It is the goal of the Learning Communities (LC) to develop a learning environment that combines effective instructional methods, co-curricular learning and events and High Impact Practices to lead to academic success and stronger connections to campus for first semester students.

Definition of a UWM Learning Community
• Enroll only first-time, first-year students.
• Employ high impact practices, including a team approach with mentors, instructors and possibly advisors connecting with the course and student community.
• Establish and assess common curricular and co-curricular learning outcomes.
• Create an academic environment that fosters a successful transition into college life.
• Each LC is supported by both a faculty instructor and a Peer Mentor, who regularly attends the class to promote campus resources, events, and involvement.
Marketing  Once a course has been deemed a LC, it will be marketed to incoming first year students at New Student Orientation with the recommendation that all students enroll in at least one LC. Due to the rich diversity of the UWM students, it is the goal to offer a variety of LC options.

Types of LCs:

•   **First Year Seminars**- They are smaller in size and broader in scope and intended to enhance student skills (inquiry and analysis, critical and creative thinking, oral and written communication) and engage you in reflection about the process of learning at the college level.

•   **Intro to Profession**- A course all students in a specific major or school/college are required to take their first semester. It may introduce student to the discipline as well as the school/college expectations.

•   **First Year Impact Section**- A first year only section or lab that is part of a larger lecture class.

•   **Paired Course**- Two different courses with the same students and shared content.

•   **Other**- Current examples include Study Skills, Career Exploration, Financial Literacy, and Information Literacy.

•   **Living Learning Communities**- Students take one or more courses together and live in a residence hall together. A separate process occurs for LLCs. For more information, see [www.llc.uwm.edu](http://www.llc.uwm.edu).
# Fall 2014 Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Communities Fall 2014</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mentors Assigned to LCs</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of LC Classes Being Supported</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of Unassigned LC Classes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-Year Seminar (FYS)</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>First-Year Impact Section (FYIS)</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intro to the Profession (IP)</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Living-Learning Community (LLC)</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living-Learning Community (LLC)/First-Year Seminars (FYS)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living-Learning Community (LLC)/First-Year Impact Sections (FYIS)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transition Course (EP)</td>
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<tr>
<td>First-Year Seminar (FYS)/Intro to the Profession (IP)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cancelled LCs</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>New Courses in the Learning Community (LC) Program</td>
<td>4</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Total # of Individual Students in LCs**: 1717
Strengths of Current LC Model

• Diverse array of courses for a diverse student population
• Positive impacts on retention and academic success
• Little financial resources utilized
• Connections with faculty, staff and peers
• Peer mentoring aspect
• Faculty/Instructor buy-In
• Smaller class sizes*
• Discussion-based courses*
• Address both curricular & co-curricular outcomes*
• Others?
Challenges of Current LC Model

- Lack of consistency in student experience (class size, learning outcomes, faculty buy-in)
- “Low-hanging fruit” has been picked
- Lack of centralized faculty leadership of LC movement
- Lack of centralized coordination/ample resources
- Student interest in enrollment
- Tension between academic and transition areas of courses
- Challenging to foster out of class community in LCs
- Students are allowed to enroll in more than one LC
- No clustered or paired courses currently offered
- Not serving the students most in need of the experience
- Appropriate utilization of mentors in LCs
- Others?
“Themed Learning Communities (TLCs) engage students, faculty, librarians, advisors, and others in a community of learners that explore interdisciplinary connections, both in and out of the classroom, which foster enriching learning experiences.” (http://tlc.iupui.edu)

- Students entering IUPUI with less than 17 credits are required to enroll in an FYS (TLC)
- Each FYS is led by an instructional team: faculty member, advisor, student mentor and librarian
- TLC participants are encouraged to learn outside the classroom, and have attended cultural and athletic events
- Students involved in IUPUI TLCs have reported higher GPAs and are more likely to be retained
First Year Learning in Communities (LinC) program is an 8-week, 1 credit course

- Courses provide: individualized instruction (faculty & peer instruction), help for students to become civically engaged, as well as development of test taking, critical thinking and time management skills.
- Goals: Assisting students in their transition to college; Helping students identify majors and careers; Introducing students to opportunities for campus and community involvement

- Success 101: Success course and weekly success coaching

- 21 Theme Houses: (Faculty Mentors, no courses)
What are Freshman Learning Communities?

- 25 students enrolled together in the same courses for fall semester
- Courses centered around a field of interest
- Introduction to the university and its resources
- 4-5 core curriculum courses that fulfill degree requirements
- Overview of success strategies and necessary academic skills

Why should you be excited to join an FLC?

- Smooth transition from high school to university life and culture
- Immediate connection to other students, faculty, campus and Atlanta communities
- Higher success rates in GPA, retention and time it takes to graduate
- Wide variety of schedules to choose from

http://www.gsu.edu/success/FLCs.html
Obstacles to achieving 100% Goal

• Budget model
• School/college Buy-In/Value placed on teaching first-year students
• Number of offerings
• Lack of centralized resources/faculty leadership
• Need more time to market to students (NSO too late)
• Space issues with courses in the Residence Halls
• Technology to assure that students register for only one?
• Others?
Strategies for Achieving 100%

- **Strategy 1:** Residence halls could house all first-year students in Learning Communities/Theme Houses.
  - Pros: Most impactful practice. Addresses 75% of the population.
  - Cons: Does not address commuter students. Resources/administrative needs in Residence Life. Finding enough courses to meet student interest.
• **Strategy 2: Getting students interested in LCs in high school, so they see this as a reason why they are coming to UWM, rather than something they have to do at UWM.**

  – Pros: Assists with recruitment of students.
  – Cons: Human resources to do outreach to high schools. Possible inefficient workload.
• *Strategy 3: Academic advisors as front-line promoters of Learning Communities and as administrative partners.*
  
  – *Pros:* Shared responsibility between academic and student affairs. Allows academic advisors to sit at the table with instructional faculty and others to design and support student learning and development experiences in LCs.
  
• **Strategy 4: Create a new centralized course that all first-year students complete.**
Strategies for Achieving 100%

• **Strategy 5: Require schools/colleges to provide enough LCs for their first-year students.**
  
  – **Pros:** Allows for school/college freedom in content. Faculty buy-in
  
  – **Cons:** Consistency in student experience. Possible negative outcomes of it being a “mandate”. Requires high top-level buy-in.
Strategies for Achieving 100%

• Other Strategies?
• Georgia State University Freshman Learning Communities [http://www.gsu.edu/success/FLCs.html](http://www.gsu.edu/success/FLCs.html)

• Illinois State University First Year LinC [http://ucollege.illinoisstate.edu/courses/linc/](http://ucollege.illinoisstate.edu/courses/linc/)

• Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis Themed Learning Communities [http://tlc.iupui.edu/](http://tlc.iupui.edu/)


• University of Baltimore Learning Communities [http://www.ubalt.edu/academics/undergraduate/learning-communities/](http://www.ubalt.edu/academics/undergraduate/learning-communities/)