REFLECTIVE ESSAY

First Year at Mānoa Learning Communities
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The First Year at Mānoa Committee has been working on a number of different initiatives designed to improve the Freshmen Mānoa Experience. One of its most productive initiatives has been the establishment of learning communities. Learning communities are curricular structured environments designed to integrate more fully the work of students and faculty. LCs have expanded rapidly throughout the nation, and the Mānoa campus is one of the leaders in this movement.

Numerous higher education commission reports note institutional development of first-year experiences on campuses nationwide as a key area of progress in improving undergraduate education at research universities. Their findings indicate that many research universities (including UH- Mānoa) now offer freshman programs, including some form of the learning community model, to create a sense of community for first-year students. These reports recommend research universities expand, integrate, and establish these practices so that they become more central to the undergraduate experience. The first learning communities at UHM were established in 1990 in the Colleges of Arts and Sciences. A coalition of faculty and administrators devoted to curricular innovations developed these early learning communities. Key members became involved in 1997 in the FIPSE National Learning Communities Dissemination Project, for which UH Mānoa was one of 21 institutions selected. The project led to the development of the First Year at Mānoa (FYM) committee. FYM assumed the responsibility to assimilate freshmen into their college experience by establishing learning community development, faculty training, and program assessment, in response to the Mānoa Faculty Senate’s call for improvements in the undergraduate experience.

There is overwhelming evidence that student success in college is largely determined by student experiences during the first year. This focus on student learning has spawned the growth of the learning community model. The term “learning community” refers to curricular arrangements that are designed to promote more complementary and connected learning experiences than independent course offerings traditionally do. Learning communities aim to create greater educational and social coherence and involvement for faculty and students. In different ways, and to varying degrees, learning communities emphasize three kinds of connections: between students—shared experiences contribute to student learning and the development of beneficial academic and social relationships; between faculty—engaging a common interest with someone outside of their department or area of expertise enriches faculty experience; and between disciplines—issues are examined and understood through a number of disciplinary perspectives.
In doing these things, learning communities offer a way to respond to problems that plague large research universities, including UHM. These include too few educationally meaningful and socially helpful relationships between students, too few intellectually nurturing relationships among faculty from different disciplines that promise to enrich research and teaching, and infrequent engagement of disciplinary perspectives over shared and significant issues. An attractive feature of learning communities is that they encourage flexibility in design and implementation, are adaptable to individual preferences and specifications, and support pedagogical experimentation.

Learning communities are identified in the UHM Strategic Plan 2002-2010 as an important strategic imperative of an exemplary undergraduate education. The University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa Faculty Senate has recognized the key role learning communities can play in socializing incoming freshman to both the opportunities at and expectations of a research institution. It has directed that learning communities be the primary vehicle for delivering the Foundations and other curriculum of the revised General Education Core. Our five-year assessment of Mānoa learning communities shows success in creating communities of scholars, enhancing recruitment, improving retention, and positively affecting faculty relations with colleagues. Intentionally developed learning communities promote and maximize learning. Assessment at multiple universities, including UH, suggests that well-designed learning communities that emphasize active and collaborative learning can boost student retention, improve grade point averages, and foster student satisfaction and campus involvement.

The Colleges of Arts and Sciences have supported learning community programs for 12 years. The foundational program was, and is, the freshman entry Access to College Education (ACE), modeled after programs proposed by the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education and adopted at other research universities, such as the University of Washington. Further models with varying degrees of integration have been developed, assessed, and fine-tuned. For example, the Rainbow Advantage Program, is a coordinated residential studies model which has served as an experimental laboratory for curricular design; upper division learning communities have also been implemented by the College of Social Sciences; and our current Honors program uses learning communities in several of its entry level requirements.

Over the last several years, learning communities have been designed to address a wide range of student academic interests and needs. Recognizing that the majority of entering freshmen are either undecided regarding their major or plan on completing a Bachelor of Arts within Arts and Sciences, nearly 60% of learning communities feature general education courses that allow students to fulfill requirements while exploring a variety of disciplines at the introductory level. Seven of forty learning communities offered for the Fall 2002 were designed to support students who planned to enter upper division schools and colleges, such as Nursing, Business, and Education, by providing them with prerequisite courses and, often, mentoring from within the discipline. The remaining learning communities offer students with long-term, post-
bacalaureate educational goals courses that introduce them to the fields of medicine and law. Faculty in these learning communities strive to introduce students to basic concepts and research methods within their respective fields.

The success of the First Year at Mānoa LCs is reflected not only in programmatic and curricular development, but also in responses from faculty, students, and the community outside of the University. The perception of the University, from all the above-mentioned standpoints, has been positively impacted by the efforts of the First Year at Mānoa. Since 1999, FYM learning communities have served over 400 freshmen each fall, reaching up to 27% of the entering freshman class. The total number of learning communities available to students number approximately 40 each fall semester.

A full five-year program assessment and evaluation summary including retention data, enrollment data, student perceptions of academic gain, curricular connections, and development of social community has been completed. Faculty noted positive impacts on the disciplines and their relations with colleagues, and an increased sense of being a participant in campus life. Faculty also noted that students were forming communities of their own within the learning community context and that the students seemed to benefit educationally from these communities. Further studies on grade point averages, graduation rates, and student perceptions of learning communities are underway.

Learning community marketing and recruitment have become a standard part of the larger UHM campus recruitment. Representatives of the learning communities note that parents and students at recruitment events demonstrate knowledge of the learning community opportunities on campus and are eager to take part in them. “Word of mouth” marketing in the community seems to be quite positive about learning communities and the support offered to first year students.

Despite the successes of recent years, the learning community efforts at the University of Hawai`i at Mānoa are at a crossroad. They are in danger of stagnating within the structure of one of the less ambitious forms of learning communities or they can realize the potential to be part of a major effort of this campus to create a first rate undergraduate experience. The opportunity to mobilize the campus in the latter direction was embraced by the faculty four years ago when the Faculty Senate first realized how impoverished the undergraduate experience at Mānoa had been and took major steps to address this problem through reformation of the curriculum. An essential element of this reformation has recently been realized with the implementation of the new general education requirements. These requirements acknowledged the importance of the learning communities at Mānoa. The document establishing the new requirements states: “To promote student understanding of connections across fields of inquiry, foundation courses may be offered as components of learning communities...” While most of the recent learning communities have included general education courses within them, more coordination and work with the Senate’s General Education Committee to develop learning communities responsive to the Senate’s intent must be addressed.
The Senate’s statement also makes clear the need to better integrate the student’s educational experiences across disciplines. There is a growing awareness that the compartmentalization of student learning into discrete courses is harmful to the effort to promote critical thinking. Most learning communities programs at Research I Universities do not provide for the integration of the curriculum that will correct this problem. There is strong evidence that the faculty at the University of Hawai`i at Mānoa will support an effort to engage in more collaboration if the proper incentives are provided.

There are several goals identified by FYM, after serious review of what has been accomplished and what hasn’t worked over the last five years, which need to be met if the future of learning communities at the University of Hawai`i at Mānoa is to enrich the undergraduate experience in the ways envisioned by the faculty. Future goals of the Learning Communities initiative include increasing the number and diversity of learning communities so that not only can more students participate in them, but so that students will have a broader range of choices. A reasonable goal would be to have half of all entering freshmen in some form of a learning community and to provide learning community opportunities for new transfer students. Another goal would be to create learning communities in which faculty collaborate in course development and implementation to provide deeper integration of courses for freshmen. This can be accomplished by establishing a Summer Institute for Learning Community Associates who would receive training on collaboration and integration of the curriculum. If these goals are met, we can create a challenging and interesting first year experience for all students.

(Essay based on report from FYM to the UHM Chancellor on the status of LCs at Mānoa.)