



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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THE “BIG” UNIVERSITY: BELONGING OR NOT?

A sense of belonging and finding communality are needs that some community college students bring with them when they transfer to the “big” four-year university. Responding to these concerns, faculty, staff, and administrators at our campus and the University of Washington (UW) developed a prototype learning community. The site for this one-quarter (eleven weeks) community college learning community was the university campus, located about three miles from our college. Objectives included: (1) developing an interdisciplinary curriculum which met A.A. degree requirements and transferable credits; (2) acclimating and giving our students access to the same resources and privileges as university students; and (3) evaluating the project’s success. The location, the interdisciplinary curriculum, and the learning community were innovative components of this new teaching/learning model.

The Learning Community

Learning communities are theme-oriented, interdisciplinary, 13- or 18-credit programs. During spring quarter, our 18-credit program connected three instructors with 60 community college students. Instructors linked Biology 100, Introduction to Science, Sociology-Introduction to American Culture, Intercultural Communication, and Composition 101 and 102. Four key questions were relevant to these disciplines: (1) How do biology, sociology, and humanities perceive life and its varied environments? (2) What are the common patterns of social activities in living organisms and their reflections in literature? (3) How did we become the individuals we are? and (4) How do we become sociologically mindful?

After weeks of planning, three instructors began collaborating with administrative and staff support on both campuses. The UW wanted our students to have rich experiences in order to encourage them to transfer to their campus—e.g., our students received ID cards for

library privileges and computer access. The high-technology classroom was located above a large computer lab. UW counselors and administrators answered numerous questions about the transfer process and scheduled individual appointments. Student ambassadors presented the positives and negatives of their personal transfer experiences. The three instructors were provided office space in the same newly renovated building, received classroom technical support, and obtained three additional conference rooms for bi-weekly seminars.

The Curriculum

Within the learning community, students had scheduled days for mini-lectures, interactive problem-solving activities following the lectures, twice-weekly book seminars, weekly writing workshops, media projects and presentations, weekly biology labs and quizzes, and opportunities for utilizing sociological research tools.

Students immersed themselves in selected short stories and seven books. The faculty team designed interdisciplinary writing assignments. In each assignment, students uncovered themes present in the readings and applied sociological and biological theories and concepts to help support their own themes or theses. For example, students supported or refuted the assertion from “Survival of the Prettiest” that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” Seminar response essays, campus observation field notes, film and speaker summaries, as well as research using the scientific method, were among the writing assignments.

The Location

Our students were at the center of the campus. They enjoyed saying that they were attending the university. Students shared that they relished the landscaping and architectural designs, eating at the student center, discovering and using the bountiful library resources, as well as studying the rare plants in the conservatory. Ninety-four percent of the students involved in this project found the learning community and location intellectually stimulating.



Program Survey Outcomes

The UW Office of Education Assessment and our faculty developed a survey (that included multiple-choice, short-answer, and open-ended questions) by which to measure student outcomes. One of the most important questions was: "How did this learning community change your attitude about transferring to a four-year university?" More than 70 percent of the students responded that they were excited about transferring and that the UW was now less intimidating than before. After 11 weeks, our students had acquired an amazing level of confidence—e.g., they knew the right questions to ask and how to navigate the campus to find the answers. Both the UW and Seattle Central Community College benefited from this project as students, faculty, administrators, and staff built communality and designed at least one prototype for student-transfer success.

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