



Learning COMMUNITIES

Creating a Positive “First-Year Experience”

By Sandra Graff

To facilitate creation of a new pilot program at SUNY Orange, aptly named “First-Year Experience/Learning Communities,” participating staff and faculty eagerly crossed course and professional boundaries in hopes that their team approach to teaching and learning will have a greater impact on students than the sum of their individual efforts.

Modeled after Kingsboro Community College’s learning communities and well-grounded in educational theory, this new pilot program has involved more than a year of training, preparation and collaboration across administrative lines between Academic Affairs and Student Services.

So far **Dr. Catherine Chew**, vice president for Academic Affairs, and **Paul Broadie**, vice president for Student Services, are very pleased with the team effort that has taken place with this project. Chew points out, “significant research has demonstrated that learning communities improve retention. The First-Year Experience/Learning Communities gives students study and life skills that will enable them to be successful.”

The program is funded in part by a Carl D. Perkins grant acquired by **Madeline Torres-Diaz** of Student Support Services. The grant’s aim is to link academics with college skills, career goals and support services for entering freshmen who have placed into developmental classes.

Since first-year students often do not see the connections among their courses, they may not immediately realize how skills learned in a writing course might be applied to good effect in other liberal arts courses. Thus, as in Kingsboro’s learning communities, three SUNY Orange courses (Basic Writing Skills 2, Psychology of Adjustment, and College Success Seminar with Career Planning) are linked and scheduled in succession.

A cohort of students attends the linked courses together. Tutors attend classes with students and then meet with them during Freshman Learning Options within the hours scheduled for group study, writing lab or individual tutoring.

A similar joint assignment has been developed in Middletown by **Melissa Browne** (Basic Writing Skills 2) and **Doug Sanders** (Psychology of Adjustment). They have transformed a traditional 12-page semester-long writing assignment into a series of

The learning community works well for me.

I like how most of the classes work together, like Basic Writing Skills and Psychology, for example. We usually see and work with the same people on the assignments.

Jovanny Aviles

Learning Communities student

In Newburgh, a journal assignment given to students serves as a shining example of how instructors plan joint assignments. When students submit their journals, Psychology of Adjustment instructor **Bob Bender** grades them for content and then gives them to Basic Writing Skills 2 instructor **Pat Sculley** to grade for organization and sentence skills. Newburgh student Crystal Kurz notes that her “journal overlaps for two classes, English and Psychology” and that she likes “the set up and the group of teachers who work well together.”

Another shared assignment involves the summary and the academic paragraph, powerful tools for learning and student expression. In Newburgh, as students learn about stress in their psychology course, they learn to summarize an article about stress and write an academic paragraph in response to the article in their writing course.

summaries and personal reflection paragraphs, assigned in manageable pieces throughout the semester. The link extends to Freshman Learning Options sessions, where student study groups summarize their textbook material to prepare for tests in the psychology class.

This teamwork also continues to the College Success Seminar with Career Planning—taught by **Maria Blon** in Middletown and **Jennifer Clayton** in Newburgh—where students learn relevant study skills, such as time management, and continue discussion and personal reflection on topics from the psychology and writing courses. In Blon’s course, students are using psychology topics to complete individual projects for their course portfolios.

One important benefit of learning communities that faculty, tutors and students noticed immediately is the way



Organizing and launching the College's debut "First-Year Experience/Learning Communities" project required considerable input and teamwork from many departments on campus. Among those who lent their time and energy to the project were, from left: Professor Maria Blon, Math; Mary Ann Van Benschoten, Library; Peggy Wasnieski, Learning Assistance Services; Joyce Depew, Records and Registration; Maureen Flaherty, Advising and Counseling; Anthony Scalia, Advising and Counseling; Eileen Burke, Learning Assistance Services; and Paul Eldridge, student tutor.

students have bonded and participated more actively in their classes. The process began when instructors and students came together at the program orientation, where students received tips on practical study skills concepts, were oriented to the College's online technological systems for students and faculty (Banner and Portal), and were taught effective utilization of Library resources.

Middletown student Kristin Neil appreciated "having the same people in each class because all of us have a bond now and study together." According to Browne, there wasn't "that usual shyness during the first couple of weeks when nobody wants to speak, so students are more engaged."

Newburgh student Jessica Trejos immediately became "used to the other

students and pretty comfortable with the teachers and tutor."

Another benefit of teamwork, observed by tutors **Kathy Castore** in Newburgh and **Paul Eldridge** in Middletown, is that students are very motivated to participate in the study sessions, as well as to work on writing skills. **Eileen Burke**, coordinator of Learning Assistance Services, has observed as the semester progressed something very constructive taking place with students in the Freshman Learning Options program: students are taking more responsibility for what happens in their study groups.

Sanders was pleased with the response he received when he checked in with his students on whether they had begun work on the next segment of their psychology writing projects.

One student responded that he was scheduled to write the second phase of this project over the weekend because it was in his planner.

"It is good that instructors with different perspectives and approaches have jumped out of our silos to work together in the learning communities for a common goal," Sanders says.

It is everyone's hope that what is learned from this pilot will improve planning and implementation of additional learning communities in Fall 2008, and beyond, to include more courses and involve more faculty members. ■

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