

The Management Learning Community: A Lesson in Innovation

Sandra N. Hurd and Steve St. Onge

The School of Management Learning Community, the first implemented at SU, is a residential community that links two three-credit courses and a one-credit learning community seminar.

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

It began as two theme floors (one for men and one for women) in Brewster Hall, a 470-bed coeducational (by alternating floor) residence hall facility. The School of Management theme floors were founded in 1996 with faculty and student support. In 1998, when Syracuse University decided to develop residential learning communities, the School of Management Learning Community (MLC) was born as one of two pilot residential learning communities and moved to Boland Hall, a slightly smaller facility with more appropriate academic space. The MLC has evolved significantly since that first year. With steadily increasing demand, the program has more than doubled in size. The instructional group, comprised of faculty in the School of Management, the writing program, and staff in the Office of Residence Life, has solidified into a team. The connections among the linked courses have become clearer with each iteration while the boundaries between living and learning have become more and more blurred. There is still work to be done, of course, but we can now confidently call the MLC a successful innovation.

LEARNING COMMUNITY DESCRIPTION

The School of Management Learning Community combines three linked first-semester academic classes with a significant residential component. All students in the MLC coregister for three classes: the freshman management gateway course (3 credits), the freshman writing course (3 credits), and a learning community seminar (1 credit). In addition to these classes, there is a series of writing workshops developed for learning community students but open to any freshman in the School of Management. All classes and workshops meet in the residence halls, and enrollment in each cohort is limited to 20 students in order to meet writing program enrollment guidelines. We started out with one cohort the first year, and expanded it to two and then three to meet demand. The number of sections of the learning community that can be offered is constrained, however, by the additional faculty resources needed to staff sections of 20 rather than the usual 25, and it is likely that we have reached maximum capacity at 60 students. The same management faculty member teaches all three sections of the management class; the same writing instructor teaches all three of the writing sections. Two residence life professionals co-teach the three sections of the learning community seminar. While the students continue to live together for the whole year, they are not enrolled in linked classes during the second semester.

The 60 students who enroll in the MLC live on one of three floors (two male, one female) in Boland Hall. Each floor has a resident advisor (RA), a paraprofessional staff member who is also an upper-class management student. The RAs assist the residents with their transition into the university and provide them with educational programs and opportunities. The RAs also work in collaboration with the learning community instructional team to complement in-class experiences with out-of-class experiences consistent with the educational mission of both the MLC and the Office of Residence Life.

One of the continuing challenges of the MLC is the size of the community, both in absolute numbers as well as numbers of men and women, in relationship to the available residence hall space. Historically, and in contrast to learning communities in general, significantly more men than women (75/25) have requested the MLC, in spite of the fact that the gender split in the School of Management is closer to 55/45. The only residence hall on campus that can accommodate the MLC's academic and community space needs is single gender by floor. As a result, we use parts of floors for learning community students. The rest of the residents on each floor are randomly assigned from the entire university pool of incoming

work in building community as well as developing and delivering programming. In the first year, we used one men's floor and one women's floor. As the community grew, the number of spaces for non-community residents decreased, resulting in a sense of isolation for those students who were not part of the community. Shifting to three floors has created more balance and made it easier for the RA to manage the two groups of students.

HOW WE GOT IT TOGETHER AND KEEP IT TOGETHER

Critical to the success of the development process was involving people who were very positive about and committed to the experience of working collaboratively with others. The initial development group consisted of senior management, education, and writing faculty and a senior residence life professional. The high level of commitment by each individual involved, however, although it sustained us, did not guarantee a smooth process.

We had been persuaded by a review of the literature that it was important to have a theme for our learning community. The theme that emerged in our preliminary discussions was diversity—a topic that seemed, on its face, as if it could be easily connected to the management (managing diversity, both in terms of employees and customers), writing (multiple perspectives and diverse audiences), and residential life (living with people who are not like you) curricula. Although we acknowledged and understood at the outset that we had different spins on the concept of diversity, we did not completely understand either the depth of those differences or how tangled up in the multiple meanings we would get when we tried to meld these different understandings into a coherent curricular whole. The result was a series of strained conversations that led, not surprisingly, to equally strained connections that we didn't understand well and were virtually incomprehensible to the students. After the first year, we abandoned our self-imposed requirement of a theme and worked instead on capitalizing on the connections that emerged naturally from the content of the three curricula.

Going into our early discussions, we also failed to understand the impact on our working relationship of our Office of Residence Life partner's deeply felt but unarticulated perception that she was in a position of less power than the faculty partners. It took several meetings of talking past each other before we all understood the extent to which our communication struggles were the result of the faculty members not understanding her need to convince us of the important contributions residence life professionals could bring to the learning community. Once we all realized what was getting in the way, we

could have the conversation about whether or not the faculty needed convincing. Following that conversation, the layer of powerlessness fell away, and we could work together comfortably. These issues did not, however, go away forever.

The development team's membership changed after the first year. The education faculty member was no longer part of the process, an additional management professor joined the team, and the two residence life professionals who would be teaching the following year replaced the original residence life representative. This time, though, we were smart enough to talk through and resolve issues around power imbalance and second-class citizenship before we got down to working on the substance of the learning community curriculum.

During the spring planning for the second year of the learning community with our newly constituted team, we found our greatest success when we created a matrix depicting each course and the residential component week-by-week for the academic semester. (See Chapter 5 on using grids as a curriculum development tool.) When we could visualize the MLC in grid form, the connections virtually jumped off the page at us. With all of the instructional team present, we broke down and then reassembled the curriculum week-by-week for each course, creating a weekly residence life curriculum in the process, so that both the in- and out-of-class experiences were coherent and complementary to each other. This work carried through into the summer as the connections among the courses were made more specific and opening weekend and ropes course activities were planned. Integral to this part of the planning process were our efforts to incorporate our belief that learning community students could come to see their peers as a valid source of knowledge and understand that they could create knowledge together if we structured appropriate experiences to enhance and celebrate the voice of students in the learning process.

During opening weekend, all instructors in the program make a special effort to be visible on the MLC floors and to talk informally with students as they move into the residence hall. (Several management and writing faculty have even joined the "Goon Squad," the group of over 300 students, administrators, staff, and faculty who help our 2,500 incoming first-year students move in over a two-day period.) The instructional team leaves a welcome letter and gift in each student's room and hosts a welcome dinner intended to start building community among the students as well as between the students and the faculty.

As the academic semester begins, the faculty meets weekly to discuss curricular connections, student development and floor issues, and any specific planning or alterations to the schedule that may be necessary for the coming week. These weekly meetings have been an invaluable part of our process. They have not only proved instrumental in improving the MLC curriculum but also in identifying and helping students with academic or social concerns that might affect their success at the university. We have found the combination of this early warning system and the opportunity to triple-team (involve the management, writing, and residence life instructors), challenge, and support a student who is starting to exhibit inappropriate behavior a most effective intervention.

Two or three weeks into the semester, the faculty and students go on an overnight ropes course experience at a nature center about 50 miles from Syracuse. The experience begins with a series of community building games and activities followed by low ropes challenges designed to enhance teamwork skills. Student may elect to do high ropes, which are individual challenges. After dinner, which is prepared by the students, additional community and team building activities take place. We have found that an overnight away from campus, with carefully designed activities, is a critical element in making the community a cohesive whole.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

All learning communities at Syracuse University are required to have learning objectives. Articulating the learning objectives for the learning community proved surprisingly difficult. Although all faculty and staff participants had an intuitive sense of what we were trying to do, putting that sense into words that everyone agreed upon took a great deal of time and effort. It was not, in fact, until the end of the second year of the learning community that we had a set of learning objectives we believed accurately reflected our aspirations for our students:

The School of Management Learning Community seeks to help students develop academic and personal confidence and success through the following initiatives:

- Building connections with faculty and staff
- Enhancing peer support and building community
- Understanding the interconnectedness of living and learning environments

- Taking responsibility for their own learning
- Promoting effort, involvement, integrity, and citizenship
- Identifying and making appropriate use of resources

The process of talking through our learning objectives, however, was a critical part of the development process for this learning community. It allowed us to reflect on the curriculum and floor activities, see connections more clearly, and understand better what we were trying to achieve. It also graphically demonstrated that academic affairs and student affairs personnel speak different languages and operate in different conceptual frameworks: A significant early obstacle was that the concept of learning objectives operated very differently in the two spheres, and we got tangled up in what were goals, what were outcomes, and what were objectives. Finally, we decided to abandon the definitions used by academic affairs and student affairs and simply articulate what we wanted for the students. Although the learning objectives capture where we are now, it is important to revisit the learning objectives each year as our understanding grows and as different faculty and staff participate in the learning community.

RECRUITING STUDENTS FOR THE LEARNING COMMUNITY

Recruiting students for the pilot year of the MLC was a difficult process. With a product that was in its very earliest stages of creation and no history of success, it was almost impossible to interest prospective students who visited campus in signing up. We had to resort to calling admitted students in May and trying to convince them one by one. We got the learning community filled, but just barely.

After that first year, however, recruiting students was no problem; students in the learning community became our best recruiters. MLC students participate in the fall and spring receptions that the university hosts for prospective students and make themselves available for tours of the residence hall. They also publish their phone numbers and email addresses on the MLC website, inviting prospective students to contact them with questions about the learning community.

Although we now rely primarily on students to do our recruiting for us, information about the MLC is included in information mailed to admitted students as well as in the university's learning community brochure and website. While recruiting students directly remains our focus, it is in fact often parents who show initial interest in having their daughter or son join the

learning community. This is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it does help increase demand for the learning community as well as aid recruitment for the School of Management. On the other hand, students who join the MLC because of parental pressure have sometimes been less than fully contributing members of the community.

ASSESSMENT INITIATIVES

The assessment of the Management Learning Community has been a collaborative effort among learning community faculty and staff, Higher Education faculty and students, and the Center for Support of Teaching and Learning (CSTL). Assessment efforts have evolved over time. In the first year, we attempted simply to describe the program as experienced by students, faculty, and staff. Although we did get some helpful information, these efforts gave us relatively little to go on in terms of trying to improve the experience for the following year. We developed a much more ambitious assessment plan for the second year that included more in-depth qualitative and quantitative measurements of program impact. Students wrote reflective essays, filled out questionnaires, and were asked to participate in focus groups led by students in the Higher Education graduate program whose curriculum focused on learning communities.

At the end of the second year, we discovered, however, that we had over-corrected. The students reported feeling that they were constantly being asked about their experiences, and it felt like being in a fishbowl. For the third and subsequent years, we developed a strategy of embedding the assessment in both their curriculum and their residential experiences so that providing feedback became simply a part of their regular academic and social life. So, for example, a short paper for their learning community seminar asks about their learning and curricular connections in a way that allows us to gauge whether the linkages we have made are sufficiently visible to the students. And a floor program is structured to give us insight into how the students are blending their in-class and out-of-class experiences. Higher Education graduate students gain experience with assessment by helping us analyze the results of these assessment initiatives. In addition, the graduate students have used the learning community as a research site, and one doctoral candidate has researched the intellectual development of the learning community students for his dissertation. Throughout the process, CSTL staff have helped the learning community faculty and staff develop, implement, and coordinate the

various pieces of the assessment plan. They also tracked institutional demographic, retention, and grade point average data for us.

ASSESSMENT RESULTS

Five years of assessment data demonstrate that students, faculty, and staff participating in the Management Learning Community have been positively affected by the experience. Over and over again, the students report that being a part of the MLC eased their transition to college, increased social connectedness, allowed them to develop relationships with faculty and staff, and provided substantial peer and faculty support for their learning. The following quotes, taken from student reflection papers, are representative of what each year's students say about their participation in the MLC.

Being a part of the Management Learning Community has helped me in so many ways. I've developed closer friendships with students in the learning community than with those who are not in the program. Having the same classes with my floor-mates has helped me academically as well. Discussions about how we learn, work, and interact with one another have given others and myself a way to express our feelings about college life.

The Management Learning Community is very close-knit, and it made the transition to college much easier. I got to know everyone right away, and it's really a lot of fun. It's also helped me academically; you can always try to hunt someone down for help from one of your classes, but it's a lot easier when they're right outside your door.

The Learning Community has had a great impact on my learning. It has provided me with the bond of friendship; in addition it has opened me up to new cultures and ways of learning. There is an extremely diverse group of individuals within this community; each one has given me insight about myself and allows me to learn along with them.

The faculty members of the Management Learning Community are a more important factor in my classes than my other teachers. I view the faculty as a means of help and comfort in my first year here at Syracuse University. I feel that I can go to

any one of the faculty members for help in any of my classes, not just management.

When I began classes, it was comforting to see familiar faces in my classes, and have people to walk to class with and talk to. On the first day of class, I looked around in my 8:30 lecture and saw many people just sitting in their seats and staring forward, not talking to anyone. I, on the other hand, talked to my new friends excitedly, as I now felt like part of a group.

I chose to be a part of the learning community because I thought it would provide me with an easier transition into both the academic and social aspects of college life. I was right, but I had no idea exactly how much of an impact my experiences in the MLC would have on me. As I now reflect on the first five weeks of my new academic career, I am very happy with what I see. I have more confidence in my schoolwork than I ever have before.

I learn better when I am comfortable with my classmates. Being a member of the learning community has allowed me to feel comfortable with my peers. Asking questions in class and participating in discussions helps me to learn because I do well with verbal teaching. If I did not know the other students in my classes, I would be much more reluctant to offer my insight and ask questions to better my own understanding of the class material.

Assessment data indicate that MLC students spend more out-of-class time than their non-learning community peers on academics and are more satisfied with their college experience. In addition, proportionately more of them become resident advisors, management peer facilitators, and leaders in the management school and the university. Grade point averages for students in the learning community sections of courses are higher than for students in non-learning community sections of these same courses. Retention rates are also higher.

The enthusiasm and satisfaction of the students are mirrored by the faculty and staff participants. They point specifically to involvement with and impact on students and building collaborative partnerships around student learning as being the most satisfying aspects of their learning community work.

CAVEATS

We would not be presenting a fair, balanced picture of the Management Learning Community experience, however, without sharing a few of the continuing challenges that we face.

A learning community experience is not for all students. We have had, on occasion, a student who prefers a more solitary existence, would rather not work collaboratively, feels that faculty and staff attention is oppressive, and is generally unhappy being part of a learning community. It is possible, if it is very early in the semester, to move a student into non-learning community classes although moving to another residence hall floor is not an option. When, however, the realization doesn't take hold until later in the semester, university add/drop policies preclude making other arrangements and the continuing presence of a very unhappy student can have a negative impact on the rest of the community. We try to head off these problems by being clear about what joining the learning community means. We provide information about what to expect in the MLC, we encourage prospective students to talk to MLC students before deciding whether to participate, and we send a letter over the summer reminding those who have been placed in the MLC about our expectations. When all of this is not sufficient, the faculty and staff find themselves spending a disproportionate amount of time and energy trying to make the best of a bad situation. We haven't yet figured out a solution to this problem.

Additionally, turnover in residence life staff is a fact of life. Staff in the Office of Residence Life at Syracuse are a particularly upwardly mobile group of professionals. Thus, each year we face the possibility of a new residence director (RD), either one who has shifted from one residence hall to another within the university or one who is just starting at Syracuse. This situation presents several challenges. One is the challenge that is always present when introducing a new team member into an existing mix. Another is that the timing of RD appointments, which is driven by national norms, falls quite late in the process of reviewing the assessment data and making adjustments in the learning community for the following year. We need continuity, we want fresh ideas, and we want the RD to feel part of the process. The timing makes reaching all those goals difficult.

Faculty turnover is not an issue that we have yet had to face, but it is not reasonable to expect the faculty teaching in the learning community to take this on as a lifetime commitment. We are always on the lookout for faculty who might be interested in joining the MLC some day. When that day comes, there will be significant transition issues to deal with, from introduc-

ing a new member into the team, to finding ways to allow that person to put her or his own mark on the learning community while still preserving the experience that the students have come to expect.

CONCLUSION

We are fortunate, as one of the pilot learning communities, to have had a chance to make our mistakes and learn from them in a very forgiving environment. We have learned much over the years about how to make a learning community an exceptional experience for students, and it is important to note that much of our learning comes from listening to the lives of our students. It is their experiences, hopes, and dreams that have taught us what we need to know. We are grateful to them as well as the many faculty and staff who have given us feedback, ideas, and help over the past five years.

Sandra N. Hurd is professor of law and public policy in the Whitman School of Management and director of learning communities for academic affairs, and Steve St. Onge is associate director of the Office of Residence Life, both of Syracuse University.