

Learning Community Partnerships: Building Collaborations on Campus and Beyond

Sharon Ladenson

Michigan State University, USA

Cheryl Caesar

Michigan State University, USA

Sara D. Miller

Michigan State University, USA

Benjamin Oberdick

Michigan State University, USA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Learning community programs play a critical role in developing and nurturing productive campus and community collaborations. Through reviewing the literature and reflecting on their own experiences, the authors illustrate how cross-disciplinary learning community partnerships have shaped collaborative initiatives among librarians and department faculty to advance student education. This case study also explores how learning community partnerships have provided professional development opportunities for educators in areas such as discussion-based teaching, reflective practice, anti-racist pedagogy, and the scholarship of teaching and learning. Benefits, challenges, and lessons learned from cultivating learning community partnerships are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Professional learning communities provide meaningful opportunities to develop synergies and enhance partnerships across campus and beyond. At the Michigan State University Libraries, partnerships and collaborative relationships are specifically included as part of the strategic plan. To this end, the Libraries aim to “strengthen teaching, learning, and curricular partnerships across campus” and “advance pedagogical innovations to increase research and critical thinking skills” (Michigan State University Libraries, n.d.). Librarians at Michigan State are considered faculty, and have traditionally experienced varying levels of opportunity for liaison, collaboration, and partnership with disciplinary faculty and other units across the university. Some departments and disciplines have been more siloed or closed off, while others have had longstanding, thriving partnerships with the Libraries. The large size of the university, with over 200 academic programs, also contributes to the development of silos. Communicating and collaborating across such a vast array of colleges and academic departments presents challenges. Professional learning communities produce an organic way for new partnerships to develop and existing ones to flourish by providing common ground for interaction across disciplines.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As a collaborative initiative, a learning community is shaped by a community-of-practice framework. Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) define a community of practice as a group of people “who share a concern, set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (p.4). Designed as a community of practice focusing on instructional initiatives, a learning community is a cross-disciplinary group of educators who engage in communication about teaching and learning across diverse subject areas. Learning communities provide a strong mechanism for increasing interest in pedagogy, engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning, and fostering civic responsibility (Cox, 2001). As spaces for professional growth and development, learning communities also help to gradually facilitate holistic change within educational organizations (Cox, 2001; Bauer, Brazer, Van Lare, & Smith, 2013). Learning communities can be cohort-based or topic-based. Cohort-based learning communities are composed of members who share common experiences (such as new or senior educators) while topic-based learning communities focus on an area of interest to a broad range of participants (Bazeley, Waller, & Resnis, 2014). Mader and Gibson (2019) encourage librarian participation in learning communities. They note that such participation not only helps to build librarians’ knowledge about pedagogy, but also increases awareness among disciplinary faculty about the distinct expertise and perspectives librarians contribute to ongoing conversations and initiatives in teaching and learning.

Learning communities provide a valuable avenue for librarians to expand their role in educating department faculty about information literacy concepts and in partnering to integrate these concepts into the curriculum. For eight consecutive years, library faculty at Miami University of Ohio developed and facilitated a topic-based information literacy learning community. Focused on improving student research literacy, the learning community attracted wide participation from librarians, disciplinary faculty, and staff (Resnis et al, 2010; Bazeley, Waller, & Resnis, 2014). Participants engaged in collaborative projects which varied annually based on the needs and interests of each group. During the 2008-2009 academic year, members designed and distributed a survey to assess student self-confidence in searching and to

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