



# Foreword

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First-year seminars and learning communities have followed a similar historical trajectory, tracing their origins to the late 19th and early 20th centuries and their initial prominence to calls for educational reform in the 1980s. The first courses designed to address the transition issues of new college students were offered around the turn of the 20th century at Boston University, the University of Michigan, and Oberlin College (Hunter & Linder, 2005). As colleges began to enroll an increasingly diverse and unevenly prepared population in the late 1970s and early 1980s, they sought ways to ensure students remained enrolled and succeeded. First-year seminars provided an ideal vehicle for meeting these goals.

While first-year seminars evolved from a desire to make sure new students were fit for the university, learning communities emerged from a different ethos, seeking to make sure the university was fit for the student. Current learning community models emerged in the 1980s and 1990s but trace their origins to educational reforms efforts of the 1920s and the 1960s focusing on the integration of classroom learning and real-world experiences and the social nature of learning (Goodsell Love, 1999). Like first-year seminars, learning communities helped students succeed academically and remain enrolled, yet they also responded to the educational crisis of the 1980s by making learning more relevant, offering opportunities to synthesize a fragmented curriculum, and actively engaging students in the construction of knowledge.

More recently, the recognition of first-year seminars and learning communities as high-impact educational practices—that is, educationally effective initiatives linked to increased student engagement and retention—has led to a renewed interest in these structures. Moreover, there is evidence the parallel trajectories of learning communities and first-year seminars are intersecting and merging on many campuses.

A 2012 study of student success practices at four-year institutions (Barefoot, Griffin, & Koch) found that 87% of respondents provided some type of transition seminar for their students. Of those, 96% offered a first-year seminar. Learning communities are less common—just over half of the institutions responding include these among their curricular initiatives—but most of them (90%)

provided these opportunities to first-year students. Of those offering first-year learning communities, 58% reported that a seminar was one of the courses in the learning community. It is not surprising that institutions choose to embed first-year seminars in learning communities given that the reported goals for these two initiatives bear striking resemblances to one another. Both are invested in helping students make connections to faculty and other students, improving academic performance, and increasing persistence and graduation (Barefoot et. al, 2012).

A more recent study examining student success initiatives in two-year colleges (Koch, Griffin, & Barefoot, 2014) suggested a strong, if somewhat smaller, presence for such practices at these institutions. Of those responding, 80% offered a first-year seminar and 23.3% a learning community. For institutions providing a learning community, the first-year seminar was reported as an embedded course by 33% of respondents.

This book is designed to explore the merger of these two high-impact practices. In particular, it is designed to offer some insight into how institutions connect them and the impact of those combined structures on student learning and success. In this regard, the volume is an important contribution to the high-impact practice literature. Yet, much work remains. We assume that the merger of first-year seminars and learning communities would have a synergistic effect for students, but this has not been born out consistently in the literature. Moreover, the results have not always been positive. We need additional research to determine what works, for which students, and why.

Answering such questions is complicated by the wide variation existing in learning communities and first-year seminars. For example, Visher and colleagues (2012) identified four components of learning communities (i.e., course linkages and student cohorts, faculty collaboration, curricular integration, and student support) that ranged along a continuum from basic to advanced. At a minimum, their model suggests a dozen different possibilities for learning community structures. Similarly, research by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition over the past 25 years suggests that first-year seminars are not of a single type; rather, a seminar may fit any one of five basic definitions or a hybrid containing elements of one or more of those five. That same line of inquiry suggests that campuses frequently offer more than one type of seminar to their first-year students. Such diversity points to the challenge of mounting multi-institutional studies examining the impact of combined first-year seminar and learning community programs and may explain why such studies have been rare up to this point.

Given the diversity of these programs and the seemingly endless possibilities for combining them, well-designed single-institution studies may seem the best way forward in the short term. The present volume offers examples of assessed institutional initiatives. While the outcomes described may be limited by institutional context and program design, they do provide insight into how we might gauge the effectiveness of these interventions and what we could expect on our own campuses.

One other limitation of institutional studies to date—and of much research on first-year seminars and learning communities in general—is that they have tended to look at a narrow range of outcomes, especially those connected to academic performance and retention. The literature advocating for the inclusion of high-impact practices in the curriculum cites a range of other potential outcomes, including knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and integrative and applied learning (Schneider, 2008). The cases provided here offer examples of how institutions are moving beyond traditional student success metrics to explore a broader range of outcomes.

As noted at the outset, learning communities and first-year seminars have followed similar trajectories—sometimes set on parallel tracks and other times intersecting for the benefit of the college students they are designed to serve. Similarly, the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition and the Washington Center for Improving Undergraduate Education have operated for many years on parallel but complementary tracks. Each organization has sought to provide resources, professional development opportunities, and support to educators engaged in the work of facilitating student learning and success. We are pleased to be able to come together around two educational practices—first-year seminars and learning communities, respectively—that have been a central focus of our efforts for many years. We hope this collaboration provides readers with the practical strategies necessary to create successful mergers of first-year seminars and learning communities on their own campuses. As always, we welcome your feedback on this volume.

## References

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