INFORMATION ITEM: Learning Communities Overview

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:
Nationally, Learning Communities have served as pedagogical and andragogical interventions with significant impacts on first year student learning, GPAs, and retention and persistence at the postsecondary level (Laufgraben & Shapiro, 2004). This is particularly true of traditionally high attrition risk populations, such as underserved populations, underprepared students, and students without a declared major (Tinto, 2003). Based on both national findings and UNCG’s own experience with learning communities, the Office of Learning Communities (OLC) has begun strategically expanding Learning Community Programs to support student retention and persistence through the enhancement of curricular work that grounds students’ abilities in areas that are of particular concern in national surveys of employers. This includes the ability to connect what they learn in different contexts and subject areas to analyze new and unscripted problems more deeply (integrated learning), the ability to work effectively in diverse teams (collaborative learning), and the ability to apply what they learn to the real world problems and situations (active and applied learning). Improvements in all of these areas of learning have proven nationally to impact student success at the postsecondary level and all of these impacts are amplified when fostered in an intimate classroom setting with significant faculty/student interaction (Laufgraben & Shapiro, 2004).

In only its first year of existence, the Office of Learning Communities has begun transforming UNCG’s academic landscape through the recruitment of increasing numbers of faculty (at varying ranks), along with students and University staff to participate in an ambitious growth of the Learning Community Program. As outlined by UNCG’s 2009-2014 Strategic Plan (initiative 3.3), the OLC has acted strategically and vigorously to develop new learning communities and living-learning communities for incoming first year students that feature integrated learning between courses. In Fall 2012, the OLC enrolled just under 900 first time in college (FTIC) students within a Learning Community, Living-Learning Community or Residential College, surpassing the determined enrollment benchmark set by the Strategic Plan Implementation Committee in 2010. Additionally, the average fall-to-fall retention rate for the dramatically increased fall 2011 FTIC Learning Community, Living-Learning Community and Residential College cohort was 80%, showing that retention targets are being met even as the program expands to serve more students.
Currently, the OLC is working closely with academic departments and the Faculty Teaching and Learning Commons to develop strong faculty partnerships while creating a close network of co-curricular-based partnerships to further build the Learning Community program. This includes organizing teams of faculty and staff to collaborate on designing new learning community proposals, developing new administrative support practices, and implementing faculty and staff professional development programs in support of learning community pedagogy and andragogy. The OLC has been heavily involved in publicizing UNGC’s accomplishments at national conferences and encouraging cross-disciplinary/interdisciplinary project-based learning initiatives on campus and beyond. Additionally, the OLC is collaborating with other schools in the UNC system to launch a statewide learning community listserv and mini-conference.

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