Abstract

Learning Communities, Internships and Capstone Projects

Learning communities and capstone experiences are excellent pedagogies to enhance student learning. Learning Communities are known to promote student success through the development of communities of learners as students work together to master the content of thematically linked courses. In addition to enhancing student learning, capstone projects are excellent vehicles for students to demonstrate proficiency in general education competencies and professional literacy skills as well as reflect on college years and prepare for transition. Capstone experiences also provide an authentic opportunity for summative and formative assessment of academic programs and for assessment of the capstone model itself. Although learning communities and capstone experiences are difficult at the community college level because of time and credit constraints, they are worth experimenting with for the many benefits they offer. LaGuardia Community College has a long history and national reputation for offering both to its students. Unfortunately, traditionally internships have not been a part of these models. This article will share the design of a new learning community that includes both an internship experience and a capstone project.

Learning Communities, Internships and Capstone Projects

LaGuardia Community College is located in New York City situated in an area reported to be the most ethnically diverse community in the nation. LaGuardia's students come from 163 countries and speak more than 100 different languages (Institutional Profile, 2008). The College offers two major courses of study: Business and Liberal Arts, with each course of study offering a variety of majors.

LaGuardia also has a long history and a national reputation for its learning communities, especially those offered to support the first year experience for its students. In these First Year Academies, students get started in their majors while completing their basic skills requirements. Each academy has one or more basic skills course, a freshman seminar and an introductory course in the major. These learning communities usually have at least two things in common:

- thematically linked courses that convert otherwise unconnected courses into a connected body of knowledge;

- the development of communities of learners as students work together to master the content of the linked courses.

Research confirms that participating in learning communities offers students the following benefits:

- their perceptions of classes, other students, faculty, campus climate, and their own involvement are generally more positive;

- they earn more credits and have higher grade point averages than traditional students;

- they are significantly more likely to continue in higher education;

- they indicate that group work and peer collaboration is easier and more fun than traditional methods of teaching and learning;

- they spend more time actively involved in learning activities and interacting with other students and faculty about educational matters;

- they value diversity in their communities; and

- they are better able to see broad themes and connections across classes.

(Tinto, V., Goodsell Love, A. 1995; Tinto, V. 2001)

Unfortunately, until recently, another thing that LaGuardia's learning communities had in common was no internships. The College's recent focus on rethinking the capstone experience offered an opportunity to change this

pattern and a new learning community has been developed that not only includes an internship but also includes a capstone project.

This new learning community was originally designed to link three courses: Urban Sociology, the internship and the internship seminar. It was also designed around two major objectives: (i) to meet the critical elements of a capstone experience – to provide students with an opportunity to demonstrate mastery of interdisciplinary skills and knowledge, to demonstrate career preparation and professional development as well as to reflect on the culmination of their college experience and plan next steps (Gardner, J. N., & Van der Veer, G. & Associates, 1998); and (ii) to provide an authentic assessment of student learning (Jensen & Wenzel, 2001).

The capstone project model was selected because it provides an excellent way to gauge student development in core competencies (written and oral communication skills, critical reading and thinking skills, quantitative reasoning skills, research, information and technological literacy skills) and 21st century skills as well, including leadership, ethics, diversity sensitivity, team work, self-management, motivation, and an appreciation for the global and social contexts of knowledge. Before students were enrolled in the new learning community, an opportunity presented itself to create a new course to replace the Urban Sociology course with one that would better meet the goals of the model. The new course is entitled "Applied Community Research", a course that is much better suited to meet the objectives of the learning community for a variety of reasons: (1) the course comes out of the Cooperative Education Department (as does the other 2 courses) and because this is a new model, having the management and accountability for the new model housed in one place is a good idea; (2) the course provides a more fitting structure to introduce students to the applied research methods and tools necessary to develop and complete successful research projects; and (3) responsibility for promoting both the learning community and the capstone project to students can be more efficiently managed by one department.

Though one of the major benefits of the learning community – faculty collaboration across disciplines – is missing in this model, the added benefits far outweigh that missed connection.

The Courses

This new learning community is appropriately called "The Metropolis and The Magnifying Glass". The theme is investigating local community issues to raise awareness or solve practical problems. Three well-suited courses have been selected to meet this end – Applied Community Research, the internship and the internship seminar.

Applied Community Research – Cooperative Education is very proud of this new course. The new course will introduce students to the methods, practices, and outcomes of applied research. The course will also mean a number of things for the Department:

- a three-credit course that is not a career development course and that can also be taken as a stand alone course by students across majors;

- a course designed to meet the urban studies course criteria – urban studies courses are also a requirement for all LaGuardia majors;

- a course designed to meet the criteria of a liberal arts elective – another requirement for most LaGuardia majors; and

- research internships supported by an internal structure specifically designed to teach students how to do them.

All are firsts for the Department;

The internship - the internship is a very nice fit for applied research. The research internship offers students an opportunity to demonstrate proficiency in the skills that make them ready for today's workplaces – proficiency in a traditional core subjects (reading, writing and quantitative reasoning) as well as learning and innovation skills, digital skills and career and life skills (Wagner 2008). It also offers a variant internship model to LaGuardia's many liberal arts students as well as other students interested in strengthening research, writing and presentation skills. During the internship, with guidance from faculty and community partners, students will be responsible for formulating research questions, gathering data, analyzing data and communicating findings to campus, community and conference audiences where appropriate.

The internship seminar – here, in addition to providing students with a forum to reflect on project progress and dilemmas, the seminar time will also be used to reinforce course concepts and to help students strengthen other skills.

This model also profits from LaGuardia's location. Many of the College's community partners are within arm's reach of the campus and are well positioned to take advantage of what this model offers. Some examples include:

- The Fortune Society, a nonprofit organization that promotes successful prisoner reentry

- The Door, an organization that provides health, legal and educational counseling to the city's youth;

- The Harm Reduction Coalition – a nonprofit organization committed to promoting education, interventions and counseling to individuals and communities impacted by HIV and Hepatitis C;

- InMotion – a nonprofit legal organization that advocates for victims of domestic violence; and

- A host of immigration advocacy groups, small theaters, local politicians and community boards.

The proximity of these organizations to LaGuardia's campus will make it easy for students to have first-hand access to the organizational structures and company representatives.

Linking these courses in this way is a win-win situation for students, faculty and the College. Among other things, this learning community will provide students with faculty mentors. For faculty it will provide an opportunity for collaboration on research and scholarship – both primary factors for tenure and promotion decisions. For the College it will provide additional connections with community partners, visibility for the genius of our students, and provide an additional service that we can offer to the communities that we serve.

Characteristics of the Experience

The model is Project based – the design is based on applied research project(s) that will allow students to apply their learning and skill development to real community issues (Gardner, J. N., & Van der Veer, G. & Associates, 1998). Faculty will be responsible for ensuring that projects meet the stated needs of community partners, allow for integration of theories, technology and research and meet previously established rubrics.

The model also has a strong teamwork component – these will be group projects to allow students to strengthen their teamwork, diversity sensitivity and leadership skills.

In addition, the model builds in a strong evaluation component – the project will be evaluated by students, faculty and community partners. This is a rich opportunity for both summative/learner and formative program assessment that could offer immediate insight into what works well and, what does not (Shaeiwitz, 2002).

Final Presentations – students will be required to publicly present research findings to college, community and conference audiences where appropriate. These presentations will allow students to demonstrate both the competencies and skills mentioned above.

ePortfolio – this experience will require students to use the ePortfolio to track project progress and individual contributions to project results. This will also ensure that the ePortfolio, that is often designed to share with family and friends, rather becomes a product for more professional audiences (Steerling-Deere, 2009).

Student Outcomes

Finally, this learning community will offer liberal arts students a different internship opportunity. LaGuardia has many internship opportunities for our various business majors but the variety and rigor of liberal arts internships has always been a challenge. In addition, the College has many new math and science majors all with a strong research focus. This new model will provide an opportunity to serve these majors in new and better ways.

Conclusion

Both capstone experiences and learning communities are more difficult at community colleges because of time and credit constraints. Nonetheless, the combination here is an excellent way to offer students deeper learning experiences while allowing them to demonstrate their knowledge and skill development prior to transition. This learning community/capstone model has many anticipated bonuses:

- creating an opportunity to include internships in the learning community model;

- expanding the variety of internships available to students;

- adopting the project approach to the capstone experience and making use of the internship and the ePortfolio offers a way to make the project more manageable;

- using project participants for assessment is a way to measure learning and project outcomes; and

- using courses that fit neatly into faculty workload models makes the project both cost effective and sustainable.

For students:

- they will be able to demonstrate their competencies and skills in a way that provides a rich self-assessment opportunity;

- they will be more intimately exposed to the diversity the College offers and to faculty and peer mentoring;

- they will also learn to be more critical in their thinking and more inquisitive in their problem solving.

For the College:

- additional opportunities to publicize the good works that we do and to develop or strengthen relationships with community partners; and finally

- an opportunity for a natural coupling of the academic and professional literacy that together prepare our students best for next steps in their lives, whatever those next steps are.

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