

# Establishing Learning Communities for Incoming Freshmen at EIU.

## Proposal Summary for Quality Initiative Project

- 1. Provide a title and brief description of the Quality Initiative. Explain whether the initiative will begin and be completed during the Quality Initiative period or if it is part of work already in progress or will achieve a key milestone in the work of a longer initiative.**

Title: "Establishing Learning Communities for Incoming Freshmen at EIU." This initiative will create learning communities (LCs) involving incoming freshmen in co-registered courses. The proposed initiative will commence in fall semester 2020 with completion of the pilot during the Quality Initiative period. Although the proposal draws from previous and on-going campus discussion on the positive outcomes of learning communities, EIU has not implemented a comprehensive learning community program to date.

- 2. Explain why the proposed initiative is relevant and significant for the institution.**

As discussed in more detail below, learning communities have multiple positive impacts on universities, including outcomes such as improved retention rates, overall student success, and integration of students in the crucial transition year from high school. The proposed initiative is significant in that it will mirror similar programs at peer institutions and will allow EIU to consider and potentially adopt proven strategies from institutions that have already implemented learning communities on campus.

- 3. Explain the intended impact of the initiative on the institution and its academic quality.**

Research has illustrated that a key outcome of learning communities is an enhanced understanding and integration of course material. Given the collaborative nature of the enterprise, the establishment of learning communities allows for a comprehensive re-examination of curriculum. As a result, we anticipate both short- and long-term outcomes related to the improvement and further integration of curriculum, including potential improvements to our general education program.

- 4. Describe the purposes and goals for the initiative.**

The purpose of initiating learning communities is to help incoming freshmen feel better connected to other students, faculty, and the campus community (Price, 2005). Research on learning communities suggests that learning communities can increase first-year retention, student engagement, and student success (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999). The specific goals of the quality initiative are to:

- increase 1st year retention rates of incoming full-time freshmen,
- raise student grades in co-registered general education courses,
- increase student satisfaction with college experience,
- and establish academic and social networks

Learning communities may be grouped by major, college, honors students, 1<sup>st</sup> generation students, or other possibilities.

- 5. Select up to three main topics that will be addressed by the initiative.**
  - First-Year Programs

- Retention
- Student Success

**6. Describe how the institution will evaluate progress, make adjustments and determine what has been accomplished.**

When registering for courses in their first and second semester, freshmen students assigned to learning communities will sign up for a block of 2-3 introductory level general education courses. Students' grades in these courses will be compared to grades in other sections of the course (if available), or to grades from prior terms in the same courses. Furthermore, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> semester overall GPAs can be compared between students in LCs and those who are not.

Faculty and staff who are directly involved as either instructors or coordinators in the LCs will be interviewed about their experience twice in each semester to gather detailed feedback about challenges they may be experiencing and ways to overcome those challenges.

Students participating in the LCs will receive an email with a link to an online survey at the end of each semester that measures students' perceptions of social support and satisfaction with their college experience including academic support, housing, and faculty mentorship.

At the institutional level, retention rates from Fall to Spring semester and from freshman to sophomore (Fall to Fall) years will be compared to current and prior institutional averages.

Regular interviews with faculty, staff, and students in the first semester of the initiative will position us to adjust as needed prior to opening registration for second semester courses.

**7. Describe the level of support for the initiative by internal or external stakeholders.**

Prior to scaling up LCs to many groups of students, we plan to begin with one or two pilot groups. The dean of the Honors College has thoughtfully considered learning communities for their students.

**8. Identify the groups and individuals that will lead or be directly involved in implementing the initiative (Yale, n.d.).**

- Administration: President, Provost, Deans, and Chairs
- Engaged Faculty
- Students
- Community members or other University members depending on the outreach program that helps build community and learning.
- Marketing
- Assessment
- Housing

**9. List the human, financial, technological and other resources that the institution has committed to this initiative.**

Human resources required to support this initiative include:

- Engaged and dedicated administration and faculty
- Engaged administration and university leaders
- Engaged and dedicated support staff from the college and university
- Freshman students
- Assessment Team
- Marketing Department
- IT Department
- Academic Affairs
- Student Affairs
- Housing
- Library Services

#### Technology

- Classrooms, Computer/Teaching technology, Social Media, Assessment Software, Campus Technology (Yale, n.d.).

#### Financial

A traditional learning community start-up has been shown to cost about \$570.00 per student (“Learning communities”, 2012). Program cost could be shared by the college, departments, and the University. Many resources we already have on campus. Funding or release time would be needed to reimburse faculty who may teach the correlated course work. Funds will also be needed for investing in the project chosen by the college. An additional estimation of an \$8,000-\$10,000 investment would help cover project, promotion, and other costs.

10. Describe the primary activities of the initiative and timeline for implementing them.

Activity	Timeline
Create a leadership team	Fall 2020
Chose the LC Model	Fall 2020
Define Goals and Benefits	Fall 2020
Create Mission, Culture, and Themes	Spring 2021
Budget	Spring 2021
Faculty Recruitment	Spring 2021
Choose classes that will be linked to the program	Spring 2021
Scheduling	Fall 2021
Faculty Development	Fall 2021, Spring 2022, Summer 2022
Marketing	Fall 2021, Spring 2022, Summer 2022
Advisement	Fall 2021, Spring 2022, Summer 2022
Program Delivery	Fall 2022-Spring 2023
Assessment	Summer 2023
Continued Strategic and Annual Planning	Fall 2023
(Yale, n.d.)	

## References

Learning Communities. (2012). Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/college-completion/mdrc-2.pdf>

Lenning, O., & Ebbers, L. (1999). The Powerful Potential of Learning Communities: Improving Education for the Future. *ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report*, 26(6), 163. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED428606>

Price, D. V. (2005). *Learning Communities and Student Success in Postsecondary Education. A background paper.*

Yale, A. (n.d.). The use of learning communities to improve student learning and success: Strategies, tactics, & assessments. [pdf]. Retrieved from <https://www.sru.edu/Documents/offices/enrollment/LearningCommunities.pdf>

Other universities:

<https://www.centerforengagedlearning.org/doing-engaged-learning/learning-communities/>

<https://www.murraystate.edu/campus/ResidentialColleges/index.aspx>

<https://www.webster.edu/learning-communities/>

<https://www.purdue.edu/learningcommunities/>