

## **Transformational Learning Opportunities**

### **Learning Communities Subcommittee Report**

#### **I. Definition**

A. A transformational learning opportunity (TLO) affords the student a chance for a significant and positive addition to or change in knowledge, skills, or values. A TLO should help students identify, understand, and, when necessary, breach academic disciplines and their methodologies, engage with important public questions (as of policy, morality, etc.), and offer a new or enhanced set of tools with which students can interrogate and negotiate their place in the world. Research indicates that a TLO is likely to arise primarily when the student is actively engaged.

B. A Learning Community exists when students and teachers work closely, cooperatively, and actively to engage with a field of study that is understood by the students to be relevant beyond the academic exercise. A learning community often encourages students go beyond studying a topic to a more engaged and empowered position as investigator or evaluator, so that they recognize the relevance of the research to other areas of their life, be they other courses or their non-academic life. Learning communities are often formed in linked courses with two or more teachers working together on a common theme or topic (so that the teachers work together and are able to model an academic partnership), or in a single class that challenges students to assist each other in achieving a common academic and personal investigation, while the teacher acts as facilitator. A learning community occurs when students are inspired to become actively engaged in study not as individual students, but as a group, so that the social dynamics facilitate the transfer of the experience outside the boundaries of the class. Student-Faculty interaction that spurs innovative thinking may also constitute a learning community. A learning community becomes a transformational learning opportunity when the students connect the skills, knowledge and values explored in the learning community outside of the discipline or the classroom setting.

#### **II. TLO Sites**

##### **A. Existing institutional sites**

1. Freshman Interest Groups
2. The APP Program
3. The Honors Program
4. Common Boundary Courses
5. Study Abroad
6. International MBA Program
7. Residential FIGs
8. Graduate Cohort Programs (e.g.: Educational Leadership Program)
9. Courses with sustained attention to collaborative learning strategies (e.g.: many Writing Program courses)

##### **B. Most Common Activities that generate TLOs**

1. Off-campus events (field trips)
2. Out-of-class activities (gathering research data)
3. Cooperative learning techniques (jigsaw approach)

4. Coordinated courses
5. Student-directed learning
6. Problem-based learning (faculty and students work together on common, open-ended problem)
7. Activities that link academic learning to real-life environments/problems

III. How to determine activities that count as TLOs (note: TLOs are by their nature not easily standardizable, and so the suggestions in our lists are meant to be suggestions and not a definitive list)

A. Report from the instructor:

1. Require advance plan on how TLO will stimulate significant positive change in students' knowledge, skills, or values
2. Evidence from past TLO activities

B. Reports from the student (faculty should conduct both styles described below)

1. Anonymous, end-of-semester assessments
  - a. "Your instructor hoped that you might experience the following significant positive change in your knowledge, skills, or values. "The following conditions were intended to make such a change possible: "Did you indeed experience such a change? \_\_ strongly agree, \_\_ agree, \_\_disagree, \_\_strongly disagree
  - b. "Please describe the experience."
  - c. "Any suggestions for changes to strengthen the educational experience in this area?"

2. Embedded assessments.

- a. Faculty should build outcome-appropriate assessments that relate to the particular skills that instructors are seeking to teach.
- b. The office supervising TLOs should build a library of possible assessment mechanisms for particular programs that would be available to faculty.

C. TLO descriptions and results (where available) should be solicited from agreeable faculty and made available to other faculty online.

IV. Facilitating greater student involvement in LC TLOs

A. Structural changes

1. Early Registration
2. Special Housing: thematic residential units (e.g.: Environmental Studies dorm)

B. Course-related changes

1. Major/Minor courses: link required methods course in each department (e.g. "Literary Interpretation") to a content-specific upper-level course.
2. Linked FIGS (for Freshmen): link composition courses to introductory classes in all departments
3. Team Teaching: two faculty teaching one three-credit course
4. Integrated Learning Communities: ILCs are team-taught course efforts for greater than the normal amount of credit (typically, three faculty teaching nine credit hours on an interdisciplinary topic to a large class)
5. Summer Language Institute

## V. Facilitating greater faculty involvement in LC TLOs

### A. Existing incentives

1. Stipend (currently \$1500 for FIGs)
2. Preferential room assignments
3. Small budgets for social events and for course enrichment

### B. New incentives

1. Release time: establish a system for designating "Learning Community Fellows." These faculty members would receive one course release the semester before they are to offer a TLO in order to plan and prepare for the TLO. They would be obligated to offer that TLO in one semester for each of the following three years.
2. Tenure credit: the university should incorporate language into the faculty handbook that credits faculty who lead TLOs in their promotion and tenure reviews.
3. Increase venues through which faculty can discuss TLOs
4. Make available funding for faculty to participate in conferences on the subject of learning communities and TLOs.
5. Ensure the full stipend of \$1500 is available each of the three years when a faculty member leads a TLO.

### C. Departmental incentives: institutional commitment to increased "staffing schedules"

1. Make up budget deficits for departments. Budgets are based in part on SCH taught and a 27-person FIG provides less SCH than a 75 person lecture
2. Make available resources to create more sections to alleviate concern that replacing a large lecture with a small section will shut some students out of spots
3. Departments can juggle caps to retain the same number of spots within a given year: for example, if a class is normally taught at 75, it could be capped at 27 in fall and 125 in spring.

### D. Facilitator: Individual charged with developing the TLO program.

#### 1. Facilitator location:

- a. Dean of Studies?
- b. Within Provost's office?
- c. Within OFE?

#### 2. Facilitator responsibilities:

- a. Develop a yearly report on practices and support necessary to foster excellence in learning.
- b. Assess assessment ideas.
- c. Arrange an annual meeting with the President to indicate institutional support for the program, to ensure visibility for its suggestions, and to raise its status in order to attract faculty.
- d. Find ways to increase faculty-student interaction outside the classroom, particularly for entering juniors.
- e. Find ways to render the existing learning communities more effective and to develop new ones where appropriate.

#### 3. Facilitator compensation:

- a. Course relief
- b. Stipend
- c. Administrative support through OFE?