

# **An Integrated Approach to Assessing Learning Communities: An Overview of the De Anza Model**

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**Abstract**

This paper provides an overview of the Learning Communities program assessment process used by De Anza College. De Anza College has been offering Learning Communities for over 10 years and has had an integrated assessment approach for more than 5 years. The strength of the approach is the use of multiple forms of assessment each term to inform program operations. The paper outlines the approach and includes example results to demonstrate the practices. While previous articles have discussed various forms of assessments for learning communities, this article outlines an integrated model of program assessment that leads to a continuous feedback loop for key program outcomes.

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## **An Integrated Approach to Assessing Learning Communities: An Overview of the De Anza Model**

We are very fortunate in the field of learning community pedagogy to benefit from the first major review of research and assessment by Taylor, Moore, MacGregor and Lindblad (2003). The authors conclude that the work in learning community research and assessment shows a great deal of potential; however, some improvements are still needed. In this paper, we hope to make a contribution to addressing some of the needs that have been identified.

Most studies clearly demonstrate the effectiveness of learning communities; however, much of assessment work has focused on more easily quantifiable indicators, such as success (grades) and retention. Like many other programs, we measure success and retention but we also include persistence. In addition, we have measured success, retention and persistence over a period of seven years. This helps address the need for more longitudinal studies which are designed to measure the effect of the learning community experience over time. (Tinto talks about longitudinal, not Taylor et al.)

Taylor et al. go on to say that much research has been done on student satisfaction; however, the field needs more research on the nature, quality and degree of student learning. We have attempted to explore these aspects by asking probing questions on student surveys. Although this is a form of self-reporting assessment, we credit our students with an understanding of their own learning process and the results.

Another identified need is for learning community programs to more specifically describe their pedagogy, curriculum and assessment methods. In addition, many assessment and research studies have shown learning community programs to be successful, but have not indicated the reasons why they are successful. We believe we can attribute our success to our integrated assessment program that begins at the conception of a learning community. We will describe our program in detail.

More research is needed on how learning community programs affect faculty. We have done some research in this area in the form of end-of-term interviews and a faculty focus group. Not surprisingly, the results show very positive effects, although we need to increase our efforts in this area.

William Moore (2003) has pointed out that multiple modes and measures produce deeper and more accurate analysis. This paper shows how we have included qualitative and quantitative research via retention, success and persistence data, student surveys, and student and faculty focus groups. In addition, we have incorporated formative assessments, also recommended by Moore, by means of Small Group Instructional Diagnosis and Classroom Assessment Techniques. Finally, Moore suggests faculty be involved in the assessment process in order for them to feel ownership and be engaged in the results. We will explain how our faculty are included in the assessment process from the time they sign our Faculty Guidelines document which outlines their roles.

## De Anza College Profile

De Anza is located in Cupertino, about 50 miles south of San Francisco, next to San Jose, in the heart of Silicon Valley. When the college was built in 1967 it was surrounded by orchards of walnuts, prunes, apricots and cherries—now those orchards are filled with Apple... Computer, that is. And Tandem, Hewlett Packard, Sun, Adobe, Intel and many more high tech companies. We're a large suburban campus of 25,000 + students, all of whom commute, taught by a faculty of 350 full time and 600 part time teachers. Our student body is very diverse—no one ethnic group is a majority. The traditionally underrepresented groups are now the majority, and Asians and Latinos, both native and foreign born, are the most numerous of those groups. Our students are also very diverse in academic preparation: the college is very proud of its high transfer rate yet 80% of entering freshmen who take the placement tests place at pre-collegiate level in English Reading and/or Math.

## The De Anza LinC Program

We have had and still have a variety of “linked” courses—learning communities that link two General Education classes or two pre-collegiate level classes (such as reading and writing). For quite a while we bought into the university model of two distinct groups of students—those who can do college level work and those who are at a pre-collegiate level. When we took a hard look at the realities of our institution and our students, we saw that in reality these two groups were, more often than not, one and the same, i.e., students who had placed in pre-collegiate level reading, writing or math were the same students who were enrolled in General Education classes. From that awareness we began to develop the learning community model we're talking about today. – a model that has strengthened institutional awareness of this reality and is solidly grounded in our Educational Master Plan which focuses on providing students access to college level work and promotes their continued success.

The LinC program at De Anza features interdisciplinary learning communities which restructure institutional curricula so that existing courses are linked or clustered around common themes or questions. Typically in learning communities, two, three, or four classes share the same cohort of students. Learning communities are designed collaboratively by faculty and many are team-taught.

Learning communities by their very nature stress the interrelationships between ideas and fields of study in settings, which promote collaboration and collegiality. The fundamental purposes of learning communities are, therefore, to increase coherence in and between subject matters, to reverse the intellectual fragmentation which many disciplines tend to promote, and to encourage interaction between faculty and students, among students themselves, and among faculty team members.

We have found that such communities allow us to focus on successful strategies for improving the learning and collaborative capabilities of students, as well as for increasing their retention and success in the classroom. Through participation in these communities, students have deepened their intellectual engagement with subject matter content while also improving

skills development. As learning communities facilitate the student discovery process in interdisciplinary settings, the rich opportunities for faculty development and revitalization cannot be underestimated.

The De Anza learning communities program has been designed to insure student success, increase student comfort in the learning process, and assist the intellectual development of students by

- increasing the interaction between all members of the teaching and learning situation;
- emphasizing the study of connections between disciplines and ideas;
- improving the likelihood that multiple perspectives will be respected and examined;
- increasing faculty awareness of a variety of teaching styles and approaches;
- encouraging students to be more responsible for their own learning and that of their peers.

The LinC Program is directed by a faculty coordinator and a 7-member advisory group composed of faculty, counselors and the staff development director. The coordinator facilitates the scheduling and implementation of learning communities and collaborates with faculty to insure the success of each learning community endeavor. Faculty interested in teaching in the program attend training workshops, consult with the coordinator and advisory group members, and submit a written proposal which includes integrated course content and assignments along with plans for including student services interventions and designated formative and summative assessment instruments. A counselor is assigned as a member of each learning community team to provide study skills support, academic advising and personal counseling.

The development and selection of a Learning Community begins with a review of enrollment data for the courses under consideration. Co-enrollment trends are examined for potential Learning Community groupings to determine the potential demand for the Learning Community. If the data suggests that enrollment demand for the Learning Community is sufficient, development of the Learning Community will move into the curriculum stage.

Students can elect to enroll in a learning community at any point in their academic career. *Foundational learning communities* link pre-collegiate level classes in writing, reading, ESL, math, and study skills. *Gateway learning communities* link pre-collegiate level writing and math classes to general education transfer-level classes: *i.e.*, writing and U.S. History; ESL and U.S. History; intermediate algebra and Introduction to Visual Arts; writing, reading, Sociology, and world wide web searching; reading, writing, and Oral Communication. *General education learning communities* link two or more transfer- level classes: *i.e.*, English Composition and Introduction to Visual Arts, English Composition and Human Sexuality, English Composition and American Government, Philosophy and Anthropology, Psychology and Oral Communication, Statistics and Business.

Over the course of an academic year, LinC offers 25-30 different learning communities. Approximately 40 faculty and counselors and 750-1000 students participate in the program annually. Over the last seven years LinC enrollment has totaled nearly 5,000 students in about 250 sections. For the 25 terms from 2000F-2007S, there were 2,635 students enrolled in at least one LinC sections and 25,132 students in NonLinC related sections. Both LinC and NonLinC

students are similar in terms of Gender (slightly higher percentage of female students), Initial Goal (65% transfer or degree oriented), and where they live (more than 40% from lower income neighborhoods). The two groups differ in terms of Age (LinC students are younger), and Ethnicity (LinC students are more likely to be Asian (Vietnamese)).

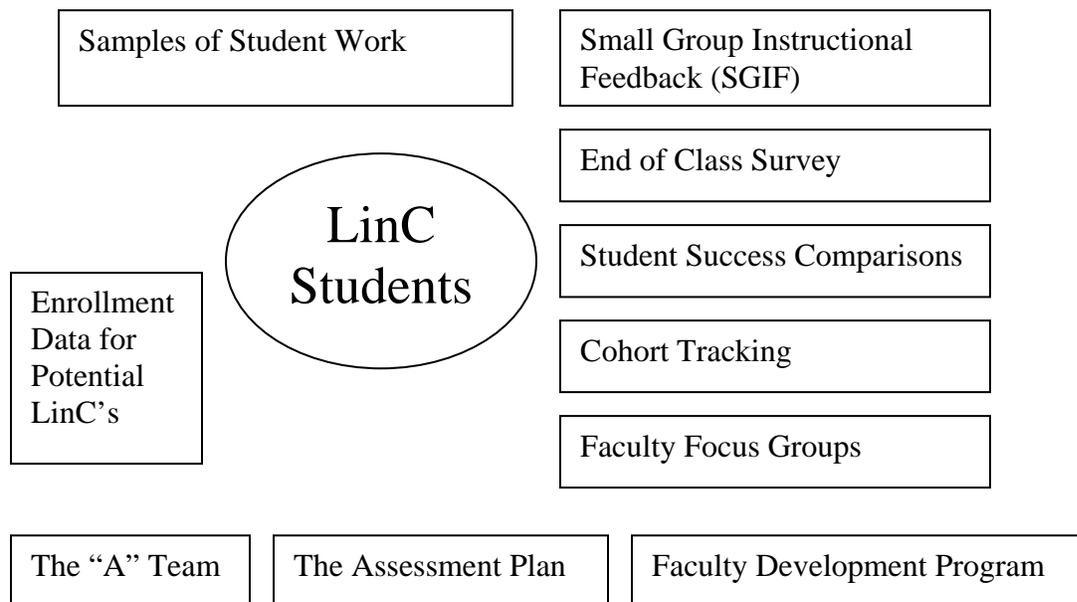
Learning communities carry from 7-16 quarter units and comprise either a portion or the complete academic load for a student. Writing assignments vary depending on the level and nature of the learning community. Students may write journal entries, outlines, essays and research papers. These works may be expository, persuasive, analytical or creative depending on the focus of the particular learning community. Learning community pedagogy relies heavily on collaborative, experiential and active learning. These pedagogies engage students in activities in which they define and formulate issues, conduct research and analyze information, and present conclusions in original written and oral formats.

The De Anza College Integrated Assessment Model

The De Anza College Assessment Model includes six forms of program assessments, including SGIF’s, End of Class Surveys, Student Success Comparisons, Cohort Tracking and Faculty Focus Groups (see Figure 1). The assessments are outlined in the Assessment Plan, discussed in an ongoing faculty development program and monitored quarterly by the A Team. This section outlines each of the program assessments and includes recent results as examples.

Figure 1

The De Anza College Integrated Assessment Model



## Faculty Development Program

An important feature of De Anza's learning community work is the extensive, ongoing faculty development program undertaken in collaboration with the Office of Staff and Organizational Development. Expectations and guidelines for designing, implementing, and assessing learning community curriculum are explicit; faculty members who want to teach in a learning community are supported by workshops and in-service professional development. Faculty are also introduced to the LinC Program's use of Small Group Instructional Feedback (SGIF) where staff routinely administer SGIFs in the fourth and tenth week of the quarter so students can collectively reflect on what is and is not working in their learning community. An analysis of student feedback is used to identify areas where faculty, collectively, need more training. The college provides budgetary support for conference travel, release time, workshops and a retreat off campus every quarter for faculty and staff in the LinC Program and anyone else who is interested.

## Overview of the Assessment Plan

The Assessment Plan provides the framework for the activities which take place each quarter. The approach is based on a few key ideas:

1. Keep it simple
2. View from different directions
3. Qualitative assessment informs quantitative assessment
4. Focus on student learning and most assessment goals can be met

The plan includes quantitative data (numbers), voices of students and faculty (focus groups) and product (samples of student work). These elements are "triangulated" by looking for common themes. The assumption is that this approach will enhance the potential of any one assessment practice. The plan includes a schedule of activities during the quarter by week.

At De Anza College, the quarters are 11 weeks of instruction followed by a finals week. Early in the quarter, the Institutional Researcher can run a Student Profile. Throughout the quarter, faculty members are required to perform Classroom Assessment Techniques. In the 4<sup>th</sup> week, trained facilitators conduct Small Group Instructional Feedback. Recruitment for student focus groups starts in the 5<sup>th</sup> week, and the focuses groups meet in the 8<sup>th</sup> week. In the 9<sup>th</sup> week, students take an online student survey. After the quarter, the Institutional Researcher compiles data on student profiles, success, retention, and in later quarter can also obtain data on persistence. Occasionally, a Faculty survey is conducted. (This is perhaps the weakest aspect of our assessment, since it is not done a regular basis.) The goals of our assessment are to prove and improve (is this a Tinto quote?). Further, qualitative assessment informs quantitative assessment (Marcy?).

## The "A" (Assessment) Team

In Fall 2001, the De Anza College Learning Communities steering committee applied to send a team to the National Learning Communities Project Institute on Learning Communities. The application was based on forming an Assessment Plan for the College's Learning Community Program. The team was selected for the Institute scheduled for June 2002.

The 8-member team contained representatives from student services, staff development, instruction and administration. The work done during this time formed the basis of our Assessment Plan and the team members formed our Assessment Team (A-Team). It was also determined that the special A-Team should meet at least once a quarter to review and update the plan, and collect and summarize information. The College's Institutional Researcher was later added to the team.

### Faculty Focus Groups

Each quarter, faculty who had taught a Learning Community are invited to attend a faculty focus group. The focus group is facilitated by staff development staff and usually last 1 to 2 hours. Typically 6-10 faculty members will participate each quarter. Faculty members are asked to comment about student work, their teaching, and support services.

Commenting about improvements in students' intellectual development or social interaction, faculty say might say "students write better because they read better", "the social part was terrific", "their papers are deeper and more meaningful and more interesting", "they tend to be more comfortable, more outspoken, more confident about their understanding of the world".

Concerning benefits to students, faculty often say "they get so much support", "I'm able to see my students change and shift during the learning community", "they put in more effort, they invest themselves, they are happier. They get more confidence so they work harder", "they have a sense of confidence from the learning community that they did not have before"

Faculty have commented on the benefits they received from teaching a learning community: "I think it actually gives us much more time, and we just get all creative, and we want to do everything", "I love having a partner", "I felt we had more time". Sometimes the feedback is less positive: "I felt like I have less time in the classroom with the students", or "The hardest part got [my co-teacher] and is staying committed to LinC when we have so many things going on".

To-date faculty have felt that the counseling component needed work: "counseling is the only area that needs improvement", "the counseling component ended up being basically non-existent". These comments are also supported by student survey data.

Faculty also have made suggestions for how the LinC program could help them: "there is generally an institutional lack of support for pedagogical training in some ways", "there is a disconnect between the creativity times we have and the actual mechanisms of getting classes up". Suggestions included getting service credit for teaching in a learning community, stronger institutional support, getting both classes scheduled in the same classroom.

Information from the faculty focus groups is used to make changes for the program as well as in the development of individual learning communities. The information is also compared with the results of student focus groups and end of class survey results. The

discussion and data allows the program to make quick changes to the program when things are not working.

### Student Success Comparisons

Student success comparisons are completed on a quarterly basis. The comparisons use course grades as a proxy measure of student learning. Student course success includes end-of-term grade comparisons of those students enrolled in the 4<sup>th</sup> week of classes. For the end-of-term grade comparisons, only those students still enrolled in the section at the end of the drop-add period (“census day”) are included.

Students completing the course are broken into 3 groups:

- 1) Pass, grades of A, B, C or P
- 2) Did Not Pass, grades of D, F, I or NP
- 3) Withdrew, grade of W assigned when a student initiates a drop after the 3<sup>rd</sup> week.

While a D grade is considered passing at most colleges, typically a C grade or higher is necessary to move to the next course in the sequence.

LinC sections include a “D” at the end of the section number included in the student information system. Each LinC section is grouped according to its learning community and is then compared to all of sections of the same class. For example, if a LinC includes ESL5 and HIST17A, the comparison will be to the average for all other ESL5 and HIST17A sections offered that term. When compared to students in the same Non-LinC classes, LinC students had a course success rate almost 10 percentage points higher over the seven year period. This translates into a higher course GPA with the difference statistically significant.

While the course success comparisons do not control for potential student self selection bias, in many of the LinC sections the students are required to take a placement exam prior to entrance. This is a requirement for the LART, EWRT and ESL courses which make up the majority of LinC enrollments. The fact that students are placed at a certain level suggests that academic ability is most likely similar between LinC and other sections. At this point there is no method to control for student motivation between the groups.

As noted above instructors were recruited to teach in the LinC program and therefore might be considered to be more talented and or motivated instructors. This potential instructor bias is mitigated by the fact that the program has achieved consistent results over a several year period across numerous (HOW MANY?!) instructors. Given the potential student and instructor biases, the success comparisons are viewed as one component of an integrated program assessment.

## Cohort Tracking

As noted above (CHECK!!) Learning Communities made up of Writing and Reading courses (LART) have made up about 40% of the enrollments since 2000. There are two levels of LART courses at the basic skills or remedial level. The goal of the courses is to move students to college level English. To move from LART 100 to college level English, LinC students must pass the same portfolio assessment as other students.

Each year a cohort of new LART students are tracked for 15 quarters to determine their persistence to the next course(s). This information is reviewed by program staff and typically presented to the college community in the form of the annual State of the College report. LART students consistently persist to and perform better in college level English than other students.

The data from external studies lead credibility to this data. According to a study done by Syracuse University, LinC students had a higher college persistence rate when compared to other students. They found that “learning communities have significantly higher rates of persistence than do the comparison group students. Among two-year colleges the difference is 5.2% (61.8% versus 56.6%)” p 37 and “participation in a learning community proves to be independently associated with persistence even after controlling for student attributes and differential patterns of engagement.” P40 (Catherine Engstrom and Vincent Tinto. Pathways to Student Success: The Impact of Learning Communities on the Success of Academically Under-Prepared College Students. Final Report Prepared for the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. January 31, 2007.)

## End of Class Survey

For the last several quarters and end of class survey has been conducted in LinC classes. This survey was moved on-line two years ago. The survey is meant to collect information on the program and not individual instructors. While there is not comparison data, the trends allow programs staff to monitor improvements in key program objectives. For example, scores on questions regarding counseling support have often come up lower than expected. Program staff have used this information to fine tune the integration of student services and instructional activities.

Sample questions and responses include:

In this learning community, how often have you:

	<i>Often or Very Often</i>
Connected and integrated ideas, concepts or skills from the different classes in the learning community when discussing material and doing assignments.	66%
Looked at new ways to synthesize, connect or organize information, ideas and experiences.	64%
Worked with classmates during class.	88%
Worked on assignments or discussed material with	41%

classmates outside or class.	
Discussed ideas from the readings, lectures or discussions with non-classmates outside of class.	35%

What benefits have you gotten by your experience in this learning community?

	<i>Much or Very Much</i>
My thinking is more analytical and critical (questioning).	59%
I work more effectively with others.	59%
I learn more effectively.	61%
I have more confidence in my academic abilities.	59%
I am better at using counseling, academic and other student services.	32%
I am more successful because I have gotten the support I need.	57%

### Small Group Instructional Feedback

Like the faculty focus groups, student focus groups (called SGIFs) are conducted each quarter. Typically about 20 students from at least three learning communities are asked to participate. The groups are facilitated by the staff development office and usually last 1 to 2 hours, typically during lunch. The SGIF's allow program staff to quickly learn what worked well that quarter and what was not as effective.

A typical SGIF might result in the follow types of responses:

#### **Theme 1: Improved focus, ability to stay on task, more enjoyment and energy on homework.**

“It helps me focus more on the text and overall material for the class. It helps me stay on task and I understand the material way more clearly.”

“It’s a better feeling just coming into class and getting more work done. You stay more focused on it just because of the people in there.”

“Because of the relationship with you classmates, you always stay on top of it.”

#### **Theme 2: Social interaction, interdependence, networking.**

Working with other people in the learning community “makes me more proactive in the class.”

“We get to work on the problems in our groups, and we get to talk to our peers so it’s easier.”

“We follow up with each other....If someone’s not there, we’ll call and say ‘Are you okay?’ It’s nice to know if you missed some things there’s someone else who has the notes or knows the material.”

### **Theme 3: Gained confidence and comfort.**

“It makes it easier, less stress on your shoulders to actually work with other people in the same classes that have to deal with the same work.”

“If I just take these classes [not in a learning community] that’s maybe too much for me. But the learning community makes it easy to get comfortable.”

“The fact that it’s a learning community, we’re in the same class two hours a day with the same people, and you become much more comfortable with the people around you....It keeps you focused and it’s easier to ask for help....You’re more comfortable with the professors. You’re more comfortable with the work.”

### **Theme 4: Connection to, caring of, support of teachers.**

“When you’re in that close contact with your teachers...it makes you come to class because they’re so on top of you, which is nice. It’s different because most college professors are like ‘It’s your life. You don’t come, I don’t care.’”

“With a learning community, the teachers know who you are....You feel more involved in the class, not just another student.”

“This is the first time I’ve actually been kinda close to a teacher....From day one, they show they care.”

“It blew me out of the water as far as what teachers are about.”

### **Theme 5: Improved learning.**

“These two classes themselves, Business and Math, it’s nice to have another perspective, another viewpoint saying statistics does work into real life. It’s not just out in intellectual space. It makes it more interesting. It make it more comprehensible.”

“With statistics, you can actually see how it works. Then take the *Wall Street Journal*. We have to read it. And you can see there are statistical aspects in almost every article you read. So, it helps you understand the material everyday.”

“The two classes share the material, so I think it’s very helpful, especially for ESL student. We struggling with the language, so we need a little bit more time to understand....It’s very helpful to cover one subject but we use it in two classes in a different way. I think it’s really, really helpful.”

**Theme 6: Carryover into other classes and life after learning community.**

“This next quarter I probably won’t have a lot of group projects, like we’ve been having [in the learning community], but in the back of my head, I’m sure I’m just going to remember the way it was [in the learning community] and utilize that experience in courses later on. Hopefully, I’ll gain something out of it and do a lot better.”

*This focus group participant is referring to the integrated schedule for the courses in the learning community.* “I become more organized. I try to start one or two days earlier than usual....I’m so last minute person. This quarter I cannot do that. Once I started spending time on my assignments, they definitely improved a lot. That’s one thing I can say.”

Long-term findings of Small Group Instructional Feedback include:

- Student / student interaction
  - many opportunities for discussion and sharing of opinions
  - supportive peer relationships in and out of class -- often lead to friendships
  - students learn from each other and teach each other
  - students thrive in an environment that is interactive and collaborative
- Student / teacher interaction
  - teachers respect student opinions, encourage independent thought, value student feedback
  - teachers accessible, available, generous with time
  - personalized attention and feedback from teachers, much 1-on-1
  - teachers demonstrate genuine caring, concern, interest in student success
  - teachers provide models of “student-hood” by participation in each other’s classes
- Individual student
  - development of communication skills
  - sense of purpose in study
  - able to see improvement in skills
  - increase in self-esteem and confidence
  - decrease in anxiety & better ability to handle stress
  - understand learning community structure, goals, purpose
- Curriculum
  - increased understanding of content
  - courses complement and reinforce ideas
  - shared materials/assignments help students approach material with more and depth
  - students feel better able to analyze and write with greater understanding
  - better understanding and appreciation of connections and interrelationships

- more insight/sense of connection/good preparation for future work (analytical reading)
- Additional findings
  - a cohort within a cohort doesn't work for students nor teacher
  - one teacher carrying the responsibility for linking doesn't create effective LC
  - organization and planning are of paramount importance to creating one carefully designed syllabus including consideration of:
    - time management
    - expectations and outcomes
    - schedule of assignments
  - effective instruction includes a repertoire of methodologies that teacher can use to respond with flexibility to changing student learning needs/styles
  - students want and will demand more control of their own learning –honor student participation and independent thinking to ensure quality discussion
  - integrate, integrate, integrate around a theme to help students learn to make connections
    - discipline content
    - real-life applications
    - metacognition

### Student Focus Groups

Marcos Cicerone, September 2, 2008

As part of the ongoing assessment of learning communities, the LinC program conducts a series of focus groups with participation of students from both pre-collegiate levels and general education level learning communities. Feedback from these sessions reveals several major common themes:

- a) a tangible sense of community, social interaction, interdependence and teamwork
- b) improved quality of learning
- c) development of self-confidence and strengthened academic and personal skills
- d) application of learning to personal life.

Students' initial reaction to being part of a learning community is a very strong sense of feeling connected to classmates and to their teachers. They report making new friends, becoming involved with other students and feeling welcomed, supported and encouraged by their peers.

*“Being in a new country I didn't know what to do with school...,I like the idea of making new friends [and} you get to know people really easily”*

For many students the learning community is their first experience of college and they point out that they are the first and only ones in their family and peer group to continue their education

beyond high school. They arrive somewhat fearful and insecure and for these students especially the strong sense of community becomes a major factor in their successful transition to college.

*“Getting to know other people especially since we are first quarter students is really good...it help the transition to college...I feel more like I fit in.”*

Not surprisingly, students comment that the collaborative pedagogy and group work has a significant impact on their approach to learning. Students report spending more time on task, working together outside of class, and participating actively in other group situations.

*“...students are very involved with students...after class we send emails to each other and stuff like that. And we talk outside of class and like I care about how they’re doing and [they] care about how I’m doing”*

*“what I learned..is that you have to get out there and you have to talk to people and form working groups, study groups...It’s more fun to learn with others”*

They are also keenly aware of the value of cooperation and group learning.

*“I like the aspect of working together with other groups and sharing information and getting projects done together....community means that you’re part of something and your fellow students aren’t working against you. They’re not competing, they’re there to help you.*

*“In a community...you’re helping others and others are helping you...you need to work together to finish our projects. And doing that perhaps we need to believe in each other and trust each other and contribute to the work, so nobody can be lazy”*

In addition to an awareness and appreciation of the social context of learning, students perceive an improvement in the quality of their learning. Students report that they are more inquisitive, more open to multiple perceptions and interpretations of an issue, and more likely to question their own assumptions as well as those others, including the teacher.

*“Everybody really participates and puts something in. And the community I think it kind of helped me open my mind to everyone’s perceptions and ideas and see what works and what doesn’t...I became more open to other people’s opinions...I would say being in the learning community makes me more open to new things.”*

*“[we] get in there and ask questions and we would like question everything that we learned or what we understood”*

As a result of this process, students have identified a difference in the nature of their learning, mentioning synergy of ideas, connections, active engagement and a deeper understanding of the material.

*“One of the things I noticed is that you really do get into a deep grasp with the subject to the point where you can actually use it...when you are through with the class you will not only be able to fill in the blanks, you will be able to think about it. Conversations outside of the class of school...are deeper and more intellectual.”*

Students repeatedly comment about the effect of their learning community experience on themselves outside the classroom. For many students, their experience has provided an opportunity for great personal growth, for exploring options and discovering their own voice.

*“I’m learning how to, like, come at things that I have faced in life on a common daily basis. I’m approaching them in a new angle and examining them [from] different perspectives...I knew I was going to be a more critical thinker. I’m now even thinking about becoming a vegetarian. It has nothing to do with what we are doing [in class].*

*“[The learning community] has made me more outspoken. I’m that introvert that doesn’t talk very much to other people. It kind of has brought me out of that little shell. It’s helped me with my children in their study habits ...[and] it’s taught me how to study..[and] get more things done outside of school[and] be more assertive.”*

*“I’m just getting more assertive and trying to tackle many personal issues and just opening up to new experiences.”*

*“Because there were so many different discussions, I got to refine my ability to actually have people listen. Because there is arguing a point and thee is arguing a point in a way that another person will be open to listen...I phrase things so they would not go behind their ideology shield and they would actually listen to the points I was trying to get across. I think that’s helped me—just to be able to refine being able to reach people. “*

*“We are the loud mouths from our class, [but] I did see a lot of the quieter people come up with an opinion and form their own opinions in a way that I’m sure that they had not before.”*

In a similar vein, students enthusiastically explain in great detail how they now apply their learning community experience to their personal life outside of class, whether in politics, community work, the environment, business or interpersonal relationships.

*“I talk about philosophy with my friends and I try to apply it more in today’s life...I can apply what I’ve learning in philosophy like asking them questions about why they believe what they believe. Sort of relate it back to what I learned”.*

*“I’ve actually found a couple of different ways of applying this information. I use a version of [our speech outline format] for writing letters to people now because I am a third owner in property and we rent it out to tenants...I write letters in a problem/solution format...so it’s changed that aspect of communication...and interactions with some of the people around me as well. I feel like I’ve benefited from it.”*

*“I actually tried it [active listing and paraphrasing] on my 16 year old...[and] she responded so well. And using it on her and you learn about people –what their pattern is...how they get out of situations... .now I understand why they do what they do and work around that...Those “I” messages...it’s all about communicating how you feel and that it’s OK you feel that way.”*

*“Group work makes you more understanding and accepting to other people’s opinions who really don’t agree with you. So when you get away from school in your work life, you’ll of course disagree with other people in your career and it makes you more capable to accept others’ opinions. And that’s a very healthy thing.”*

### Summary

The integrated model of Learning Communities program assessment in use at De Anza College has led directly to program enhancements over the years. For example, the negative results in terms of student success, surveys, and focus groups typically show up in “real time” when instructors do not follow the Learning Communities philosophy and approach. In these cases (and there have been a few) action is taken during the quarter by program staff to help improve the situation. In the rare case when this does not work, instructors are not invited back.

The power of the approach used at De Anza College is in the multiple forms of assessment used. The program is data driven – both quantitative and qualitative – from the start. Enrollment data is used to assess whether a proposed LinC is likely to generate adequate enrollment; course success and persistence data is used to track student performance; student and faculty focus groups and end of class surveys are used to track key program outcomes. The integrated approach allows a fuller, richer view of the program based on information collected from multiple perspectives.