



Learning

Communities

*Handbook*

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# Learning Communities: An Overview

*Learning communities*, as defined by Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick (2004), refer to

A variety of curricular approaches that intentionally link or cluster two or more courses, often around an interdisciplinary public issue or problem, and enroll a common cohort of students. They represent an intentional restructuring of students' time, credit, and learning experiences to build community, enhance learning, and foster connections among students and their teachers, and among disciplines. At their best, learning communities practice pedagogies of active engagement and reflection. (p.20)

Learning communities (LCs) involve collaboration, not only across academic departments, but across other institutional resources that serve student needs. The Office of Instruction, the Counseling Department, the Learning Resource Center, the library, and the Office of Student Success all offer services and skills that contribute to the mission of learning communities and to students' experience of higher education.

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**"By stepping outside the tradition of isolated courses and imagining more interdisciplinary approaches, we may gain the flexibility we need to continue to adapt our remarkable institutions to meet the needs of our communities in the next century."**

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By making educational experiences more coherent and meaningful, LCs can foster a greater sense of community among learners, promote greater retention and achievement for students, and revitalize the teaching experience for faculty members. The integrated approach is believed to be more compatible with the way people naturally learn and more relevant to the real world. Learning is raised to a higher level as students see the commonalties in thinking across several subject areas. Critical thinking is strengthened as students are exposed to multiple, and sometimes conflicting, perspectives on the same issues. When individual disciplines are seen in a broad context encompassing many aspects of human society, more ethical decisions are possible.

LCs are an exciting innovation for community college instructors. By stepping outside the tradition of isolated courses and imagining more interdisciplinary approaches, we may gain the flexibility we need to continue to adapt to meet the needs of our communities in the next century.

LCs can be developed for a number of differing purposes. Several content courses can be combined to emphasize a common theme. A history, sociology, and psychology course, for example, could be combined to work with the theme of the "Individual in Society." One or more skills courses, such as English composition or college reading, can be combined with a content course such as freshman biology. In such a course the students do a great deal of reading and writing about the concepts they learn in biology, simultaneously improving their literacy skills and their conceptual understanding of biology. Another possibility would be to integrate several general studies courses for students in a particular occupational program such as engineering to emphasize these students' special interests and needs.

At Crafton Hills College, LCs have been started for all of these purposes and others. These learning communities have taken various forms, reflecting differing degrees and types of integration. Among the simplest are linked activities and linked courses.

## **Linked Activities**

Many faculty members who become interested in LCs first experiment with single activities or projects which link two courses. These experiments amount to cross-class dialogues planned by instructors teaching separate courses with different student populations. For example, a presentation of gang violence is attended by students from psychology, sociology, and economics courses. After the presentation, the students join in a discussion of the topic.

A somewhat more involved linked activity might ask students enrolled in a math course to evaluate process descriptions written by English 101 students for solving math word problems. English students discover whether their writing communicates clearly, while the math students benefit from exposure to a variety of perspectives to help them understand a math process.

Such activities are fairly easy to plan and execute, requiring little if any changes in the normal instructional and administrative procedures on the campus. Only two aspects of collaboration are required: co-planning by instructors teaching different courses and co-learning, and the sharing of a learning activity by students from two or more courses. Nonetheless, linked activities can achieve a lot in terms of building more integration within the curriculum and more camaraderie among faculty. Students begin to understand that learning goals cut across traditional course offerings.

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**"Because students share so much together, a supportive community of learners begins to develop. Students learn by example to expect connections among the courses they take in college and begin to seek a broader framework for their education."**

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## Linked Courses

Instructors who see many connections between two or more courses may decide to plan a semester-long coordination. This effort will involve four elements of collaboration. (Although the courses are taught separately, every effort should be made, through co-planning, to emphasize parallels and reinforce joint concepts and skills. Students are required to co-enroll in all the courses included in the link.

Ideally, instructors will observe each other's classes and begin to experiment with the co-teaching of selected activities. Most learning activities and assignments are still specific to only one of the courses in the link, but the instructors plan one or more joint projects or co-learning activities which involve all courses. Joint assignments, however, are still assessed separately so that separate grades can be assigned to each course.

Because students share so much together, a supportive community of learners begins to develop. Students learn by example to expect connections among the courses they take in college and begin to seek a broader framework for their education. Faculty members are enriched professionally by working so closely with other instructors.

Linked courses require more investment of faculty time in planning both before the semester begins and on an ongoing basis. It is important that faculty members' schedules allow them to attend each other's classes.

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**"I really like the structural support of the learning community and how the classes go together hand-in-hand. It makes the learning experience much easier and less stressful."**

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# Benefits of Learning Communities

## Benefits for Students

- Interact with exceptional faculty
- Become more engaged in learning
- Make connections between different subjects
- Fulfill requirements for major and transfer
- Develop lasting friendships with students with similar interests
- Build a community with students from diverse backgrounds
- Connect with important support services such as counseling and tutoring

## Benefits for Faculty

- Collaborate with faculty from other disciplines
- Interact with students in new ways
- Create more engaging teaching experiences
- Work with counseling faculty and other support services
- Foster a climate of innovation

## What CHC Students Have to Say about Learning Communities

*“Out of all my classes the learning community classes are the best. It is a great experience to make new friends and have an opportunity to make learning easier.”*

*“I learned a lot from learning community classes. Not only do you make new friends, but you have the opportunity to learn a different way!”*

*“I really like the structural support of the learning community and how the classes go together hand-in-hand. It makes the learning experience much easier and less stressful.”*

*“I loved the learning community. As I took other individual courses I felt as though I had a closer unity from this learning community. This idea is a great one.”*

*“What I enjoy the most about being in a learning community is being able to do twice the work in half the effort.”*

*“My time in the learning community has been very positive, making really great friends.”*

*“The learning community is a great experience, especially when it came to seeing my counselor. I did not have to wait in line; I just went straight in. I really liked that upper hand.”*

# How Learning Communities Are Created

## LCs Generated by the LC Steering Committee (LCSC)

LCs can be initiated either by the LC Steering Committee (LCSC), which oversees the CHC LC program, or by faculty interested in working together. Each semester, the LCSC will review student assessment scores, as well as the evaluations of previous LCs, hold discussions with appropriate constituencies, including the Counseling Department and department chairs, and then propose LCs for the upcoming semesters. Initially, the instructors may not be identified.

The deans will put out calls for interested faculty to teach the proposed LCs. The deans will distribute the proposed set of LCs to the department chairs who will first ask full-time faculty to identify which of the LC combinations they are interested in teaching. Following the initial call, the chairs will then search for interested part-time faculty to teach any LCs not yet staffed. Interested faculty will be invited to participate in the LC Retreat to work with other faculty interesting in working on specific LCs.

## Faculty-Generated LCs

Since LCs “represent an intentional restructuring” of scheduling in order to “foster connections among students and teaching, and among discipline” (Smith, Matthews, and Gabelnick, 2004, p. 20), it is only natural that faculty will conceive of interdisciplinary connections of potential value to students. When this happens, interested faculty should follow the steps outlined below. While every LC will be unique, there are some typical steps that most instructors will find useful in working through the initial planning and implementation phases.

## Phase One: Pre-Implementation

### Identifying a Need for Learning Communities

The first step in initiating a learning community is to identify potential areas for integration in your curriculum. Evidence of such potentials can come from a number of sources. Students may comment on the helpful overlaps or troublesome confusions they find among their courses. Faculty may identify weaknesses in their own courses and look for complementary strengths in other courses in the curriculum and within student support services. Faculty and administrators may share a concern for a particular population of students in the college, who may have special curriculum or support needs. When the opportunity for integration is documented, faculty members responsible for the relevant courses and support services can begin a dialogue, exploring the interrelationships among their courses. Even this first step can bring a renewed sense of community to the faculty members involved.

## Trying Small-Scale Linked Course Activities

If instructors want to do more to develop the interrelationships among their courses, they can plan activities which will be shared by students from two or more courses. These activities could include, for example, joint discussion of themes which cut across their courses, reactions by one class of students to works produced by another, joint service learning projects, field trips, or structured interaction with a counselor or other support services. Such activities, even if they are brief, one-time events, allow the faculty to experience more directly the overlaps between their courses. The barriers between isolated courses begin to break down for students, too, as they see the connection between the course they are currently enrolled in and others.

After experimenting with linked activities, instructors may begin to consider how much more effective they could be if they developed a linked course program of courses. This would allow them to co-enroll students and to build course parallels into the entire semester's activities.

## Determining the Feasibility of Linked Courses

There are several questions which need to be answered before undertaking the more ambitious task of linking entire courses. First, will instructors have the time and flexibility in their own schedules to plan and carry out such a task? Especially in a small college, it may be difficult to cover all course offerings if some instructors are committed to learning communities. Second, will students enroll in the linked courses? Will they feel it restricts their schedules? Will they want to enroll in the number of hours your learning community entails?

To answer these questions, discussions should be held with deans, instructional faculty, and counseling faculty. A brief presentation can be made defining linked courses and outlining the potential benefits of the new approach. When their input is actively sought in this way, administrators and faculty can offer invaluable insights about the logistics of accomplishing the goal of integration. In the discussions, the following questions should be raised: (1) How large is the pool of potential students? (2) How many courses can reasonably be linked? (3) What is the most appropriate scheduling of courses? Counseling faculty play a pivotal role in explaining and recommending the linked program, so their involvement in formative discussions is vital.

## Preplanning a Linked-Course Program

When the feasibility of a linked-course program has been established, instructors should meet two semesters before implementation to plan. Before expending too much time and energy, instructors would be wise to complete the *Compatibility Quiz* (p. 3 in the *LC Workbook*). Once any potentially deal-breaking landmines have been addressed, the instructors can continue the planning process by exchanging syllabi so each person can look for correspondences in course competencies and course activities. Then instructors can meet in an informal session during which they "walk" the other instructors through their course, explaining in-class activities and assignments and sharing personal reflections about the joys and problems of their courses. The instructors should work their way through Worksheets 2-5 in *Pre-Semester Collaboration* (pp. 2-10 in *LC Workbook*).

## **Integrating Counseling into LCs**

All CHC LCs—whether developmental, transfer, or STEM-related—are expected to integrate counseling into the cohort. This can happen in one of two ways:

### **Counseling Community Model**

The Counseling Community Model, in which a counselor teaches a course as part of the LC cohort, offers several advantages, including facilitating collaboration between academic instructors and counselors, helping students to use support services, and helping students to grasp academic material. Working together, instructors and counselors can more effectively review students' progress, identify students' needs, and align their course assignments.

The Counseling Course Model works well with underprepared students because it can allow the counselors to help students to develop effective study techniques, strategies for stress management, test-taking skills, time management skills, and other valuable academic behaviors. The counseling courses can also provide students with time to reflect on how well they are doing in other academic courses, as well as facilitating peer tutoring and study groups.

### **Counseling Neighborhood Model**

The Counseling Neighborhood Model, which attaches a counselor to an LC without the counselor actually teaching a class, still strives to provide Career, Academic and Personal Counseling to each student. Ideally, each student will complete the semester with a career focus, a detailed Student Educational Plan (SEP), and a strong sense of self-identity as a college student. Within this model, counseling faculty will strive to support teaching faculty within the LC by collaborating with them during regularly scheduled meetings, attending classes to discuss various topics, and participating in field trips.

Depending on the desires of the participating LC faculty, counselor classroom presentations might address any of the following: curriculum topics, issues of anxiety, educational planning, career exploration, transfer, campus academic support services, tutoring, veteran services, financial aid, and the like.

Faculty proposing an LC need to identify the counseling model most appropriate for their LC and work with the Chair of Counseling to include a counselor in their discussions *before* submitting their proposal.

## **Phase Two: Steps for Creating a Learning Community**

### **Step 1: Talk with Your Dean**

When you have an idea for a learning community, because it will affect the courses you teach, and your teaching schedule, it is critical that you discuss participating in a learning community with

your Dean. Once your Dean has approved that you are able to teach in a learning community, you can move forward by talking with the Learning Communities Coordinator.

## **Step 2: Talk to one of the Learning Community Coordinators**

The Coordinator assists faculty in developing their communities and informs students about the benefits of learning communities. It is therefore important that the Learning Community Coordinator know as soon as possible that you are interested in offering a learning community. If you have a learning community idea but are unsure of which other faculty to include in the community, talk with your Dean or the LC Coordinator. It is important that you recruit faculty who are passionate about what they teach and who would be enthusiastic about starting a learning community.

LC Coordinator Contact Information:

Daniel Bahner, [dbahner@craftonhills.edu](mailto:dbahner@craftonhills.edu), LRC 106

Dr. Keith Wurtz, [kwurtz@craftonhills.edu](mailto:kwurtz@craftonhills.edu), LRC 101

## **Step 3: Submit a Learning Community Proposal (see below)**

In order for an LC to be offered it must first be approved not only by your dean, but also by the LC Coordinator and the LC Coordinating Committee. To ensure time to complete this process, you must contact the LC Coordinator with your intention to offer a community by the following dates. The earlier you let the Coordinator know, the better:

Communities for the following year will be developed by September

## **Step 4: Create a Theme**

Once the faculty have come together, decide on what the theme will be for your learning community. It should be one that encompasses topics covered in all learning community classes. One of the most effective ways to do this, as several of CHC previous LC partners will attest, is by using the LC Heuristic developed the Washington Center for Improving Undergraduate Education, which has guided the national Learning Community initiative for the past decade (see Appendix). Teams will also want to create a catchy title that will appeal to students. Here are some examples of the LCs offered recently at Crafton:

- *Telling Our Stories*
- *Self and Society*
- *Our Bodies, Our Minds*
- *Ghosts of Southern California*

\*Notify one of the Coordinators once a theme and title have been decided.

### **Step 5: Develop Connections**

In order to have an effective learning community, there needs to be a connection among students and faculty across disciplines and student support services. Use Worksheets 2-5 in Section I of the *LC Handbook* (see pp. 2-10 below) to assist you in developing connections in the following areas:

- Student learning outcomes
- Learning activities using active and collaborative learning methods
- Integrative Assignments
- Assessments
- Counselor involvement

### **Step 6: Write a Common Syllabus**

All LCs offered must develop a common syllabus with shared policies, integrated a minimum of one assignment, development of a Student Educational Plan (SEP), and coordinated due dates. The syllabus should also identify the times, hours, and contact information for all Faculty and Counselors participating in the LC. The exercises in the *LC Workbook* in the Appendix below are also meant to assist faculty with this.

### **Step 7: Determine Necessary Resources**

Determine what resources you will need to ensure students' success in the learning community. Money may be available to use for projects or field trips. Contact the LC Coordinator with any funding requests or for assistance with acquiring other resources.

### **Step 8: Advertise!**

All LCs will be listed in the learning community portion of the Class Schedule. In addition, students who attend a New Student Orientation will receive a handout of current LCs and a general LC brochure.

Faculty are further encouraged to advertise their LC in any of the following ways:

- Create a flyer and email it to the Coordinator so link can be put on the learning community web page
- Tell your current students about the LC program
- Work with Office of Institutional Effectiveness, Research, and Planning to send an email to a targeted group of students (for example, send an email to all students currently in ENGL010, telling them about a community that offers ENGL101 the following semester)
- Post flyers across campus and give copies to the Counseling Department

### **Step 9: Submit the *Learning Community Faculty Guidelines* (below)**

As part of the CHC LC program, each LC team assumes a set of responsibilities as explained in the *Learning Community Faculty Guidelines* form below. Copies of this form must be completed by each LC instructor and submitted to the LC Coordinators by the third week of classes.

**Crafton Hills College  
Learning Communities Program**

**Learning Community Proposal**

One per Team

**Semester first offered:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Team Leader:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Learning Community Title/Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**LC team members:**

<b>Instructor</b>	<b>Department</b>	<b>Course</b>	<b>Days/Hours</b>
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1.

2.

3.

**Faculty meeting schedule--Day(s) and Times:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Provide a description of your learning community (no more than 50 words):**

**What central theme will your learning community explore? How is this central theme relevant to students?**

**What model of integrated counseling do you think is best for your LC (see section on Integrating Counseling into LCs)?**

Submit completed electronic form to [Learning Communities Steering Committee](#).  
Thank you for your efforts.

# LC Faculty Guidelines

Faculty participating in LCs are expected to follow a set of guidelines to promote consistence among LCs at Crafton Hills College. It is helpful to clarify these guidelines to promote faculty cooperation and ensure student success. Please read these expectations, ask for any necessary clarifications, sign at the bottom, and return the original to the LC coordinator.

1. Instructors have regularly scheduled meetings during the semester to assess the success of the learning community and students, making changes as necessary.
2. LC Faculty will receive training prior to teaching an LC.
3. All paired faculty will develop a common syllabus that coordinates and integrates the policies and due dates for all courses involved in the learning community.
4. Instructors work collaboratively with counselors and require students to develop a Student Educational Plan (SEP) with Counseling Faculty.
5. LC instructors need to have at least one integrated assignment.
6. All LC instructors will assess their LCs through instruments created and provided by the Office of Institutional Effectiveness, Research, and Planning.
7. LC faculty are strongly encouraged to attend professional development trainings and other events that actively support the development of courses and curriculum.

Instructor 1: I have read and understand these guidelines.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Instructor 2: I have read and understand these guidelines.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Instructor 3: I have read and understand these guidelines.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

# Role of the LC Coordinators

The LC Coordinators have the following responsibilities related to LCs:

- Scheduling LCs (including rooms, days, times)
- Addressing faculty concerns (partnering faculty, overseeing deliverables, approving compensation)
- Assessing Learning Communities for faculty and students
- Development of integrated syllabi
- Development of integrated curriculum
- Development and maintenance of LC web site

## LC Steering Committee (LCSC)

Members of the LC Coordinating Committee, most of whom are experienced LC practitioners, lend assistance to the LC program from their respective areas:

- Daniel Bahner, Co-Coordinator, College Honors Institute
- Debbie Bogh, Project Director, Title V/HSI Grant
- Dr. Robert Brown, Professor, English
- Richard Hogrefe, Dean of Arts and Sciences
- Liz Langenfeld, Professor, English and Reading
- Robert McAtee, Chair, Counseling Department
- Mark Snowwhite, Interim Dean of Math, English, English and Support Services
- Dr. Gary Williams, Professor, Psychology and Co-coordinator, College Honors Institute
- Sherri Wilson, Professor, Math
- Dr. Keith Wurtz, Dean, Institutional Effectiveness, Research & Planning

## Responsibilities of the LCSC

- Ensuring support for LC faculty
- Building professional fellowship among LC faculty
- Scheduling LC faculty gatherings
- Assessing appropriate types of LCs (e.g., 2 vs. 3)
- Coordinating integration of support services