

Project Summary: Title III Grant, Strengthening Institutions Program Innovations in Learning

Faculty: Susan Cunningham, Cecile Davila, Darren Bardell

Project Title: “I Don’t Know Much About History”

Project Description:

A learning community incorporating English 151A, History 117B, and English 162. The goal of the community was to teach our students how to perform well beyond their perceived limitations by linking several key assignments in a variety of creative ways.

This project was successful and we accomplished most of our Student Learning Outcomes. Our primary goal was for our students to recognize and appreciate the interdisciplinary nature of knowledge, specifically, the connection between critically analyzing primary source documents (critical reading skills) and forming historical interpretation based on this analysis (critical writing skills). We described this outcome in our proposal as follows: “The students will learn to organize, write, and edit college level essays of various lengths;” and “develop individual interpretations of historical events.”

The English professors were primarily responsible for developing or “teaching” these skills, and they did this effectively but we all had the opportunity to assess outcomes and see how these outcomes integrated the content of all of our courses. For example, students researched and composed papers on topics, events, or people only briefly covered in my large section history course. As a result, they scored much better on chapter tests and the midterm and final exams as they had a more detailed and nuanced understanding of historical cause/effect relationships. This was particularly evident on their final exam in-class essay. I asked a question about the causes and consequences of the Vietnam War and the successes and failures American Cold War strategy. Our learning community students went into far more historical detail (facts) and provided better in-depth analysis (interpretation) of causes, effects and significance. They also provided better historical context and awareness of broader historical trends affecting U.S. history and governmental decision-making leading up to the turbulent events of the 1960s.

The student evaluations confirmed the success of our efforts. Almost all the students said that they improved their writing and critical thinking skills by taking these classes together in a learning community and that exploring historical topics in-depth in the English classes enhanced their understanding of U.S. History.

There were a few challenges as well. Approximately 20% of the class failed the history class mainly for lack of participation or engagement with the LC. This number is significantly low when compared with my [Darren’s] large section but does indicate that learning communities do not solve all problems associated with student motivation. Absenteeism, tardiness, and missing work were problems in the English classes as well and resulted in several students earning D’s. Susan, Darren, and Cecile worked together last semester and noticed a significant difference between LCs. Last semester’s group was far more talkative and social as peers. They formed study groups to prepare for exams and simply “bonded” as a class much better. Darren has discussed this with Dean Mikelyn Stacey and believe that next semester’s LCs must have the opportunity to form

social connections early in the semester so we are planning two social activities within the first month so faculty and students can interact in a more casual and social environment.

Suggestions:

1. Planned Assignments: All the faculty worked together last semester so we had a set number of assignments with very specific (and complimentary) subjects and themes. This is key to a successful LC and instructors simply will not have the time to put this together on the fly so this must be in place before the semester begins.

2. Regular Communications: We met once a month and as needed throughout the term. This allowed us to flag problems early and to continually synchronize our lessons, assignments, and lectures. Faculty taking part in these LCs in the future must plan on regular meetings either virtually or in person.

3. Social activates early in the semester so the students and faculty can form a tighter and more casual bond.

Sincerely,

Darren L. Bardell

Susan Cunningham

Cecile Davila