



Learning Communities at Baruch College

Baruch College's program of freshman learning communities has counterparts in a large and growing number of institutions of higher learning across the country. Although these programs vary widely in a number of details, they have in common the underlying principle that learning has a social dimension. A considerable body of research suggests that students learn most effectively in an environment that promotes regular exchanges with others, faculty as well as peers, and the goal of learning communities is to create an environment that encourages such exchanges and eases the transition from high school to college for our incoming freshmen.

The primary objectives of the learning communities program are pedagogical, but it also serves as a general introduction to the environment of higher learning. In this respect, the program performs an important social function by creating a ready-made network for incoming students, who may find the experience of college at least initially foreign or alienating, especially on a large commuter campus like ours. If, however, the students feel that they belong to a supportive community, then they have a better-than-average chance of overcoming difficulties in adjusting to the college environment. The wager is that students who are happy and comfortable in their surroundings will be better able to realize their academic potential. Response from the students themselves has been overwhelmingly positive, and those who have had the benefit of learning communities have posted markedly higher GPAs over the course of their first year at Baruch than students in non-learning community blocs.

Each of Baruch's learning communities is organized around two classes in a freshman scheduling block. Because they have identical rosters of only twenty students, the two professors may create interdisciplinary links between their classes, such as shared themes, readings, or assignments that begin in one class and end in another. They are also asked to plan and organize at least two co-curricular activities (attendance at cultural events on campus, visits to museums, concerts, theater, historical sites—there are many possibilities here).

Each community has a budget for tickets and food (lunches or dinners are a popular component of these activities)

The learning community project began in the fall of 2003 with two pilot communities. Since then, we have had as many as 40 learning communities, with 800 participating freshmen and 80 dedicated faculty. As mandated in the College's Strategic Plan, the learning communities program will continue to grow and become a permanent part of the freshman experience at Baruch College.

Gary Hentzi
Associate Dean, Weissman School of Arts and Sciences

Co-Curricular Activities: The City is the Classroom



Planning Co-Curricular Activities

Co-Curricular activities play an important role in the learning outcomes of a learning community. As you are considering what activities might help you to meet your educational goals, the following **objectives** may be useful:

- Co-curricular activities can be designed to **enhance discussions and assignments** in your classes. For example, films, concerts, plays, museums, guest speakers or tours that bring new insights into the classroom experience are always good choices. Even though the learning communities are interdisciplinary, activities may be more related to one subject area than the other. The follow-up colloquia are excellent opportunities to discuss cross-disciplinary connections or apply insights from both classes.
- Co-curricular activities **provide culturally-enriching experiences** for students, which they might not otherwise have. For example, even though many of Baruch's students come from the New York area, they may not have experienced many of the diverse museums, professional theater, concerts or

historical landmarks around the city. Some of the learning communities have sponsored a “business lunch” at a local restaurant. This experience not only provides social connections but also helps students understand the etiquette associated with a formal meal. A restaurant that offers a new cultural dining experience is a good choice.

- Co-curricular activities are **community-building activities**. Combining academic interests with an opportunity to relax together is a good way to connect students, create new friendships and help build an academic network that will support them throughout their college lives.

Developing an Interdisciplinary Theme

The theme of the learning community:

- May develop out of a common interest of both faculty.
- May be an issue or concept that is common to both disciplines.
- May be an issue or concept that can be examined from two disciplinary perspectives.

From the theme, a series of **core questions** emerge that become the basis of the **learning objectives** for the community. These objectives guide decisions related to class discussions, assignments, readings and activities beyond the classroom.

The Spaces Where You Live: Environmental Ethics, Science, and Philosophy of Place

ENG 2100 College Writing I Prof. Cheryl C. Smith
ENV 1020 Principles of Ecology Prof. Jason Munshi-South

What does it mean to be human *and* a part of nature? How do we understand and define our relationship to the natural world and how important is this relationship, even to city dwellers living in a “concrete jungle” like New York City?

This learning community will help students develop an increasingly rich “sense of place” and come to a fresh understanding of themselves as components of local, regional, and global ecosystems. Early in the semester, we will take trips to local ecosystems (e.g. the salt marshes of Jamaica Bay, the migrating bird habitat in Central Park) and

consider the impact of these locations on the larger urban environment and its inhabitants. Our exploration of these sites will be enhanced by reading some of the most influential thinkers from the American environmentalist tradition, from New England Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau to contemporary writers who approach nature from a variety of perspectives including nature enthusiast, scientist, and philosopher. Documentary films and other media, such as *Grizzly Man* and *Into the Wild*, will supplement readings and classroom discussions. Students will demonstrate their developing sense of the places they live through a semester-long series of writing explorations on issues related to the ethics and ecology of our environment.

Reading Resources on Teaching in a Learning Community:

Learning Communities: New Structures, New Partnerships for Learning
Jodi H. Levine, Editor
National Resource Center for the First Year Experience
University of South Carolina, 1999

Mapping Interdisciplinary Studies
Julie Thompson Klein
The Association of American Colleges and Universities
1999

A New Era in Learning Community Work: Why the Pedagogy of Intentional Integration Matters
Emily Lardner and Gillies Malnarich
Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning
July-August 2008

Learning Communities: Reforming Undergraduate Education
Barbara L. Smith, Jean MacGregor, Roberta S. Matthews, Faith Gabelnick
Jossey-Bass, 2004



Some Guidelines to Keep in Mind:

- Decisions regarding the use of learning community funds should be made by both faculty members in consultation with one another, and at least one or preferably both faculty members must accompany the class on any co-curricular activity. Meaningful follow-up discussion comes out of the mutual, shared experience.
- As always, we are concerned about the safety of students and faculty. If the school is providing funding for a co-curricular activity, it is considered a “school-sanctioned” activity, and the school is liable for any injuries incurred during the activity. Please keep in mind the importance of choosing activities that minimize risk. Skating or paintball, for example, are fine activities for the students to participate in on their own time but NOT as school-sanctioned learning community activities.
- Co-curricular activities are often followed up with a meal or snack. Or the meal may be the focus of an activity, enriching the cultural experience of the students. The budget provided for each class covers food for faculty and students. We rely on faculty to use discretion when planning a trip to a restaurant with students. Lunch or dinner at a restaurant that offers a **prix-fixe option** is a great way to treat the students to a meal within a reasonable price range. Remember that freshmen cannot legally consume alcohol, and be aware that alcohol consumed by faculty will not be reimbursed.
- Plan an activity early in the semester. This reinforces the sense of being a part of a cohesive group of faculty and students.
- Students should be very clear about the expectations related to being a member of a learning community. All activities, while not mandatory, should be presented as an important part of the course syllabus and that there is an understanding that students will participate. If activities are announced early in the semester, students should have ample opportunity to make alternate arrangements for work, etc.



\$\$ Getting Reimbursed

Expenses for **activities that meet the objectives of the learning communities** are reimbursed through the Office of the Associate Dean.

For off-campus expenses (tickets, food, etc.), faculty are asked to cover the payment as necessary and to submit receipts (**original receipts only**) for reimbursement to:

Office of the Associate Dean, NVC 8-265; 646 312-3883

In addition to original receipts, please submit a brief description of the event (2-3 sentences). A form is available in the Office of the Associate Dean.

Reimbursement requests should be submitted to the Associate Dean's office within 90 days from the date on the receipt.

Reimbursements will be sent to your home address. Please supply your home address along with the receipts.

Any questions about the use of these funds or appropriate learning community co-curricular activities should be directed to Sonya Wahab X3890 in the Office of the Associate Dean.

Some Additional Information about Spending

The Baruch Office of Administration and Finance has provided guidelines for learning community funds that should be helpful as you are making plans for your LC's.

- Each LC should plan on spending no more than 50% of the total funds on meals. Receipts for meals must state the names of all attendees and gratuities are limited to 20% of the cost of the meal. Taxes on food will be reimbursed.
- Taxes on supplies, tickets, etc., cannot be reimbursed.
- Gifts are not allowable expenses.



Looking for Ideas?

If you have developed an interdisciplinary theme for your learning community, you will already have a basis for choosing co-curricular activities for your students. Depending on the theme and the learning objectives, each community will have a unique plan for co-curricular activities. Here are some from previous learning communities.



Big Onion Walking Tours of New York Contact: www.bigonion.com

Tenement Museum tour

Contact: www.tenement.org

United Nations tour

Contact: www.un.org/tours



Arrange lunch or dinner at a restaurant that offers a “prix fixe” option. This way, both faculty and students feel comfortable ordering anything from a menu.

Treat students to variety of ethnic restaurants.



The Baruch Performing Arts Center offers an excellent program of music, theater and art. Tickets may be discounted or free for students who are attending as part of a class assignment. This is a great opportunity to introduce your students to a world-class arts center right here on campus.

<http://www.baruch.cuny.edu/bpac/calendar/index.php>



New York Index

www.fieldtrip.com/ny

Ellis Island Tours

www.nps.gov/ellis

Inside CNN Tour

www.museumtix.com

Lincoln Center Tours

www.lincolncenter.org

El Museo del Barrio

www.elmuseo.org



“Ethnic Noshing”: A food/walking tour of the Lower East Side, Chinatown or Little Italy. Number 7 train through Queens.



Arrange study groups in math and order pizza



Walk across the Brooklyn Bridge. Write and discuss paintings, photographs and architectural history of the bridge. Compose poems half-way across. Have pizza at Grimaldi's on the Brooklyn side.



Free dress rehearsal at Metropolitan Opera



Guest speakers in the class, or lectures in the community



Walking tour of lower Manhattan: St Paul's, Trinity Church, Federal Hall, Fraunces Tavern, New York Stock Exchange, South Street Seaport



Any theater, museum, concert, art exhibit



Support the Baruch Bearcat Basketball Team



Nuyorican Poets' Café

Save The Date!



**Freshman Convocation will be held from
9:00 a.m. – 10:15 a.m. Tuesday August 27,
in Mason Hall.**

Learning community faculty are invited to attend the convocation in Mason Hall. As always, it will be crowded and lively!

**Breakout Meetings with Learning Communities
10:30 – 12:00 noon, Location TBA**

After the convocation, each LC will move to designated breakout rooms to meet with professors and the peer mentor. This is a great opportunity to talk about the plans you have made for the fall semester. It's also a good time to talk about the goals of your learning community. Explain your expectations and what your students can expect from you. Be sure they know your office hours.

This is a good time to be prepared for a lively discussion about the common freshman text that the students are asked to read over the summer break. Some suggested discussion questions will be available in advance.