



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). These activities may provide topics for discussion in two meetings (known as "colloquia") held outside of class time, or faculty may use the two colloquia for other kinds of exercises, according to their discretion. Each community has a budget for tickets and food (lunches or dinners are a popular component of these activities) as well as a peer mentor, who is usually a veteran of the program. The peer mentor plays a leading role in the Freshman Seminar (labeled FRO1000 on the students' schedules), a series of meetings designed to assist students transitioning into Baruch. Together the two professors and the peer mentor assigned to the community are responsible for communicating regularly and keeping everyone in the loop about activities, colloquia, and any other news that affects the community over the course of the semester.

The learning communities project began in the fall of 2003 with only two pilot communities. As we move toward fall 2008, we have grown to 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 and play 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.

What do you want to do with your learning community? Develop a Plan.

Meet early with your teaching partner:

- Develop a theme around your common interests and the concepts that connect both courses.
- Develop a semester plan around the theme. Include collaborative and experiential activities that grow out of the theme.
- Plan at least two co-curricular activities that meet the goals of the learning community. Decide which activities will need funding. How much do you plan to spend?
- Request tickets in advance if possible.
- Include the co-curricular activities in your syllabi so that students understand that the activities are a part of the course. They should make arrangements for jobs and other responsibilities.
- Plan at least one group activity early in the semester (September).

What are some possible themes that weave together concepts or learning goals from each of the two courses?

From that theme, what are some related discussions or assignments that link these disciplines for your students?

Can the theme be developed further to bring students and faculty together in a collaborative project or group activity?

- Collaborative writing project that can be published at the end of the semester
- Group research project to develop a deeper understanding of interdisciplinary course content
- A Service Learning project that relates to content of one or both classes

What events, tours, plays, concerts, performances in the city relate to the theme of your learning community?

What opportunities can be created to encourage students to connect to each other and to faculty; for example, having a meal together before or after an event?

Some Guidelines to Keep in Mind:

- As faculty, you will be planning the activities that you would like your students to experience. If schedules permit, your peer mentor should plan to attend along with your class. The peer mentor can also help with contacting the students but is not responsible for activity planning. As always, be sure to keep the peer mentor informed of what's on the agenda.
- 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.

Some New Information about Spending

This year the Baruch Office of Administration and Finance has provided guidelines for these funds that should be helpful as you are making plans for your LC's.

Based on a budget of \$2000:

- 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. can not be reimbursed. (1)

- Student activities are an integral part of the Learning Communities experience and are allowable expenses. Expenditures for these activities may include tickets to a Broadway show, museums, etc. (2)
- Reimbursement requests should be submitted to the Associate Dean's office within 90 days from the date on the receipt.
- Gifts are not allowable expenses.

(1) Since the college is a tax-exempt organization, we can help you with your advance ticket purchases. If your LC plan includes a concert or a play for which tickets can be ordered and paid for in advance, the Associate Dean's office may be able to **make the purchase for you**. This relieves faculty of using a personal credit card and waiting for reimbursement.

(2) If you have a plan or group project for your learning community that involves a cost exceeding \$2000, please provide details to the Associate Dean's office before August 15, 2008. All plans will be considered.

\$\$ Getting Reimbursed



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

On-campus food orders can be arranged **in advance** by contacting Ria Mewengkang:

Office of the Associate Dean 8-265.
 Mariani_mewengkang@baruch.cuny.edu
 646-312-3883

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

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.

Reimbursements will be sent to your home address. Please supply your home address and a social security number along with the receipts.

Any questions about the use of these funds or appropriate learning community co-curricular activities should be directed to Barbara Wells X3897 in the Office of the Dean.

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.



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.



The Baruch Performing Arts Center offers an excellent program of music, theater and art. Tickets are free for students who are attending as part of a class assignment. This is a great opportunity to introduce your students to a FREE resource right on campus. Call BPAC staff for information and to make arrangements. (646) 312-4089



New York Index

www.fieldtrip.com/ny

Ellis Island Tours

www.nps.gov/ellis

Inside CNNTour

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 and Little Italy*

Save The Dates!



Monday August 25 Freshman Kickoff and Convocation

Freshman Convocation will be held from 9:00 a.m. – 10:15 a.m. Monday August 25 , 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, and your policy on making appointments. Students and faculty are asked to be prepared for discussion about the Freshman Text. Some suggested questions will be available in advance.

All freshmen will have two days of kickoff activities on the 25th and 26th.

Check-In for Lunch and Conversation

This is an opportunity to share some Best Practices from your learning communities! Come for lunch. Invitations will be sent in advance of these events.

Tuesday, September 23,	12:30 – 2:00 pm	VC 14-250
Tuesday, November 3,	12:30 – 2:00 pm	VC 14-250

RSVP to Barbara_Wells@baruch.cuny.edu

