



In the First Year Learning Community, "Performing Portland," students explore art, history and literature through the performing arts.

Learning Communities

REAL WORLD EXPERIENCES
ENHANCING EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES.

BY MELODY BURTON

There is a slight mist in the air as the sunset bathes Portland in shades of rose and violet. The reflections of bridges flicker across the Willamette River as the glittering lights of downtown skyscrapers begin to dot the skyline.

A group of people wander through a pod of food carts, perusing menus. The rich smells of basil, cumin, lemongrass, and vinegar-laced BBQ sauce all mingle together as each person brings their chosen meal to eat at a group of benches. Stories are shared about famous family recipes as diners experience exotic new flavors. Questions about where food was pur-

chased lead into discussions about the ethics of food sourcing, the struggle of eating well in the midst of poverty, and thoughts on how what we eat in Portland affects communities around the globe.

Not far away, another group walks along the west side of the Standard Insurance Center on their way to see a play. Noticing a round, bronze sculpture lovingly called, “the onion ring,” they stop to learn more about this public art piece. Getting closer, they discover the artist, Hilda Morris, was once considered Oregon’s greatest sculptor. Ring of Time, the work’s official title, is a twisting

circle, epitomizing the love of natural forms that defined much of Morris’ work. Reportedly inspired by the Mobius strip, the sculpture sparks deep conversations that encompass ideas of art, inspiration, science, and how we understand the world around us.

While these scenarios may not recall your own memories of college classrooms, they embody the interactive environment that nourishes success for the majority of students today. Welcome to the new Learning Communities at Warner Pacific College.



Learning Communities are a cohort based learning strategy that provides a rich support system to facilitate the transition into college life.

Bending Tradition

The idea of what a college experience should look like is beginning to shift. Lecture halls filled with note-taking students, poring over thick textbooks while listening to a lone professor may work for some, but many of today's college students are seeking a more interactive learning environment. Traditionally, students spend most of their classroom time extracting knowledge from second hand sources like text books and professors. Learning happens on a set schedule, with calculus from 2:00 pm – 2:50 pm and ethics from 3:00 pm – 3:50 pm.

For students who excel in this traditional model, college is often a simple step up to the next level. The work may be a bit more complex but the learning strategy remains the same; listen, take notes, study, test your knowledge. However, as Warner Pacific seeks to welcome students from diverse backgrounds, more interactive learning strategies provide needed support for academic success.

A meaningful relationship between faculty members and students has been a hallmark of a Warner Pacific education for decades. That is why when professors expressed a desire for new methods to better meet the needs of non-traditional learners, the executive leadership of the College quickly sought ways to empower faculty to think creatively. "Finding innovative ways to teach students from diverse backgrounds is a core component of our strategic plan," said President Andrea Cook. In discussions with students, faculty, and staff surrounding the "Design for Urban Higher Education," a clear path was developed. The evolution of Learning Communities, a cohort based learning model, was designed to provide a rich support system to all students, facilitating a smooth transition into college life.

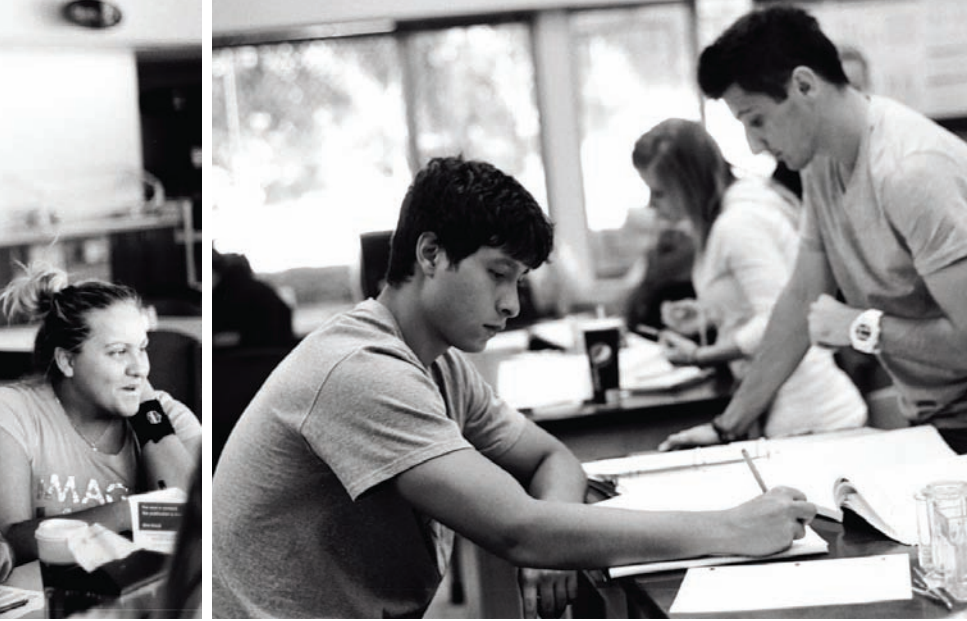
The first show of support came soon after, in April 2012, when Warner Pacific was awarded the largest grant in the recent history of the College from the M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust. Funded with the intent of launching Learning Communities, the grant reflects a vote of confidence from the Trust and the initial funding necessary to implement this new strategy.

Drawing from the Past

"What we're doing with Learning Communities is not a new concept," says Dr. Timothy Peterson, Executive Director of Teaching and Learning at Warner Pacific. Dr. Peterson and his colleagues Ruth Knott, Director of Adult Teaching and Learning, and Jessie Thompson, Director of Learning Communities, form the core of the newly created Center for Teaching and Learning at the College. Peterson continues, "Through Learning Communities, the Center for Teaching and Learning is building on programs already occurring through the ADP [Adult Degree Program] cohort model and FYE [First Year Experiences]."

In the ADP, "cohorts," or small groups of students, meet weekly while attending class together, forging relationships that last a lifetime. These learning teams provide a supportive community for academic exploration and real-world experiences that prepare students to succeed after graduating. "Working in teams is how business is done in the world," explains Knott. "Because of our cohort model, degrees earned through the ADP have added value as students gain skills in project management, collaboration, and conflict resolution."

The philosophies of Learning Communities have been equally successful in the Traditional Degree Program as witnessed through FYE. Designed to create a peer support network for incoming



(left to right) Ruth Knott, Director of Adult Teaching and Learning; Dr. Timothy Peterson, Executive Director of Teaching and Learning & Professor of Urban Studies; Jessie Thompson, Director of Learning Communities. To find out more about Learning Communities at Warner Pacific College, visit www.warnerpacific.edu/learningcommunities.

students, FYE is divided into 12-person classes, each of which is taught by a full-time faculty member or administrator and two upper-class student mentors who are able to help new students transition successfully to the social and academic culture on campus. “In FYE, I found acceptance and community like I never thought I would,” said Danté Baca, ’12. “It opened my eyes to an amazing sense of place and purpose.”

Seeing first-hand how these models were successfully encouraging students to persist in their academic pursuits, the Center for Teaching and Learning serves as a unique venue in which the College’s ADP and Traditional Degree Program are able to come together through larger discussions on best practices, benchmarks, and ways in which faculty can work creatively to ensure that each student is getting the most out of their college experience.

Learning Communities have been shown to increase retention and improve the overall academic performance of diverse students by building meaningful community around an academic pursuit in curricular and co-curricular settings.

In the City

In addition to providing support for students and faculty, Learning Communities also help the institution better reflect its urban identity. “In order to engage the city, First Year Learning Communities are designing new courses that connect students through an issue or topic relevant to Portland,” explains Thompson. “Using the city as a classroom, curiosity is cultivated through question-based curriculum with faculty, co-curricular educators, and peers.” These learning activities extend outside the traditional curricular settings, focusing on issues of transitioning to college, social support, study skills, and community-building. Students will be in at

least one other class together in the same semester and in a class linked thematically across semesters, weaving a strong network of support. Warner Pacific’s mission statement is the framework of this model as students explore four themes: Christ-centered, urban, liberal arts, diversity.

Listening for the Future

“During Welcome Week, I heard Jess Bielman explain that ‘Christlikeness involves always inviting more to the table,’” recalls Thompson. “In our context, that means we’re called to continually be opening our classrooms to new students, new ideas, and new ways of teaching and learning.” The whole team agrees that feedback is fundamentally important as the Center for Teaching and Learning becomes more established. “Everyone wonders where the Center for Teaching and Learning is,” says Knott, smiling. “We aren’t a brick and mortar location, at least not yet. But that flexibility allows us to interact with the College in many different ways. Just like the Learning Communities themselves, the Center for Teaching and Learning is not a place you go, it’s an experience we’re having together.”

“What we’re doing here is more than just trying out new teaching methods,” reflects Peterson. “By embracing Learning Communities, Warner Pacific is seeking to redefine what it means to have the city serve as a text and context for learning, living, and service. People tend to associate negative characteristics with the term ‘urban.’ But here we are, saying that urban is a word rich with positive energy and potential; our city is a place where meaningful collaborations spark the creative thinking that can significantly impact our lives, our future, and our world.” ■