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Sustaining and Improving Learning Communities (review)

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hazing is concerned” (p. xviii). Read in concert with Lawrence C. Ross Jr.’s (2000) *The Divine Nine: The History of African American Fraternities and Sororities* and Walter M. Kimbrough’s (2003) *Black Greek 101: The Culture, Customs, and Challenges of Black Fraternities and Sororities*, readers will more fully grasp the missions, purposes, and triumphs of BGFs and BGSs. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, readers will have the necessary academic and scholarly tools to begin to formulate practical responses to the realities that confront BGFs and BGSs on today’s college campus.

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## *Sustaining and Improving Learning Communities*

Jodi Levine Laufgraben and  
Nancy S. Shapiro

San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004, 208  
pages, \$32.00 (softcover)

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Learning communities have received a great deal of national attention over the past decade. Experiments in undergraduate education have come and gone, but learning communities

appear to have “staying power.” For some the learning community movement is about deeper learning and enriching education. For others it is a retention program that seems to have potential where others have faltered. Some faculty see the learning community movement as a place for innovation and an opportunity to become immersed in what originally drew them to teaching—close connections with students. Still others, many of them student affairs professionals, have been energized by the opportunity to cross nearly impenetrable institutional boundaries.

Shapiro’s and Laufgraben’s first learning community book, *Creating Learning Communities* (1999), did a nice job of outlining the what, how, and why of learning communities. It was a clearly written practical guide for practitioners—particularly those just getting started. Their follow-up book is equally informative and helpful for beginners, but also provides suggestions to help experienced practitioners expand and improve their programs. It supports theories with a number of examples from specific learning community programs and includes numerous helpful Web sites.

*Sustaining and Improving Learning Communities* is clearly organized into nine chapters. In Chapter 1 the editors give us a brief review of learning community models and justification for this curricular innovation that has been used to transform many undergraduate programs.

In Chapter 2, “A Campus Culture for Sustaining Learning Communities,” author Anne Goodsell Love addresses issues of organizational change. Love also notes the importance of defining and continually revisiting the purpose of learning communities. As the author notes, if learning communities are to be sustained, they must integrate the learning community program

with the mission of the institution.

In Chapter 3, “Planning and Assessing the Curriculum,” Shapiro and Laufgraben lay out practical planning steps and provide a variety of institutional examples. In Chapter 4 Laufgraben is joined by Daniel Tompkins in writing “Pedagogy that Builds Community.” They describe such teaching approaches as active and collaborative learning, group assignments, journals, and the use of technology to encourage discussion beyond the classroom.

In Chapter 5, Shapiro and Laufgraben continue to provide a plethora of practical information related to the chapter title, “Faculty Development.” Sample faculty development workshops, readings, handbooks, and Web sites are offered which are useful whether you are just starting a learning community program or have been involved for years.

Most learning community programs struggle with the issue of assessment. Shapiro and Laufgraben use Chapter 6, “Developing Purposeful and Focused Assessment,” to outline issues that focus on the goal of program improvement. They provide useful examples of institutions (and their Web sites) that use different assessment approaches.

Emily Decker Lardner presents “Approaching Diversity through Learning Communities” in Chapter 7. Lardner uses examples from several schools to highlight practices that connect issues of diversity with learning communities. She notes three central themes: designing learning communities for particular groups of students, using learning communities as sites for curriculum transformation, and developing pedagogical practices that support diverse learners.

David Schoem draws on his years of experience to focus on “Sustaining Living-Learning Programs” in Chapter 8. For many,

the living-learning concept truly focuses on the “whole student” by integrating the students’ academic and co-curricular lives. Schoem highlights a variety of living-learning examples and notes challenges and points of sustainability. He also provides a useful typology of programs with the living-learning label. Finally, he discusses characteristics of successful programs that could serve as discussion points for any campus interested in sustaining and improving its learning community program.

The editors return for the final chapter to discuss “Next Steps.” Shapiro and Laufgraben discuss learning communities as a means of promoting civic engagement and service learning. They also discuss possible connections with K-12 and K-16 partnerships. The authors again remind us that we must make a commitment to continuous improvement of our learning communities.

This book does a good job of identifying critical learning community issues and providing numerous supporting examples from a variety of campuses. The book should appeal to individuals engaged and interested in all aspects of learning communities whether faculty, student affairs staff, or academic administrators. Important issues are clearly outlined. A novice will find it to be a useful practical guide. Those experienced with learning communities will be reminded of key issues and challenged with new ideas to consider for improving their programs. Everyone can benefit from the Web sites and training outlines.

## REFERENCE

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