Using learning communities to develop graduate attributes

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THE ANU LEARNING COMMUNITY PROGRAMME

Since 2007, the ANU has developed an institution-wide learning community model in which students engage in learning experiences that:
- complement and integrate academic life with other aspects of life and learning,
- provide opportunities for students to apply their knowledge to 'real-world' projects,
- encourage interdisciplinary, collaborative projects and
- are supportive of the academic and professional development of students.

It is well established that a student’s involvement with peers, faculty and other staff in the university community is vital to their academic success. Such outcomes have prompted universities, particularly in the US, to develop learning communities designed to promote active student involvement with learning. There are many definitions of a learning community (LC); at the ANU an LC is a group of people who share a common interest (or theme), who meet regularly and collaborate to learn more about that interest. Learning communities were first established at Bruce Hall prior to 2004 and are now available across campus.

The overall objectives of the ANU Learning Community Program include:
- developing links between academic departments and residential colleges,
- providing learning environments and projects such as those described above,
- supporting key groups or programs of strategic importance to the ANU, and
- enhancing students’ experience of university, including wider student involvement for those students who are not resident on campus.

LEARNING COMMUNITY THEMES AND ACTIVITIES

There are currently over a dozen learning communities, including
- Arts
- Aid & Development
- Languages & Culture
- History
- Rhetoric
- Contemporary Europe
- ‘SIDECHARS’
- Music
- Asia-Pacific
- Research Scholars
- Sustainability

They provide a schedule of events on campus for groups of 15 to 500 people. The program engages both residential and non-residential students through collaboration with teaching staff, the ANU Students’ Association and relevant student clubs.

Learning communities intend to provide complementary learning experiences rather than replicate the lecture and tutorial system of the academic programs. There is interest in recognizing learning and development in LC activities as part of a graduate attributes statement. There is also greater recognition of the nature and the benefits of the learning experiences that residential colleges provide to students.

LEARNING COMMUNITY PROJECTS: CASE STUDIES

Publications, including The ANU Undergraduate Research Journal were established to:
- challenge and extend undergraduate students’ research education in a supportive environment
- guide students’ self-directed learning about the process of preparing work for publication
- encourage undergraduate student learning through personal interactions with postgraduate students and academic staff in informal academic settings
- assist in the preparation of reflective, analytical and questioning graduates
- establish a readily available benchmark of exceptional undergraduate student work

Cross-sections, the Bruce Hall Academic Journal: http://epress.anu.edu.au/cs04_citation.html

Discussion Forums, Symposia, Debates, ‘ANUSA Fun Days’:
- organized by student teams with guidance from staff
- generally interdisciplinary and investigate a variety of facets of an issue
- provide key project management experience
- open to the wider ANU community and often the wider Canberra community

STUDENTS’ RESPONSES TO LEARNING COMMUNITIES

I am a member of two ANU learning communities (APLC and Development Learning Community). Through both I have had the opportunity to develop my leadership skills through planning and running an expo, a forum, and other events. As a member of these two learning communities (and through events organised by other learning communities which I have attended), I have had the opportunity to meet new people from within the university and the local community, and to learn and explore things relating to my studies and interests from a more interdisciplinary perspective.

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SOME QUESTIONS
1. Who most benefits from learning communities and how do they benefit?
2. Assessment/Course credit for learning community activities – will it help or hinder?
3. Will learning communities be useful at other tertiary institutions?