

Universal Design for Instruction Learning Communities Fact Sheet



What is a Learning Community?

The concept of learning communities has existed in higher education for over 70 years. Learning communities were originally developed for building connections among students to promote a positive learning environment. Over time, the notion of a learning community has evolved to include many different models. As Smith (2001) observed, “Learning communities are a broad structural innovation that can address a variety of issues from student retention to curriculum coherence, from faculty vitality to building a greater sense of community within our colleges” (p. 1). Common elements of learning communities include the participation of a small group of 8-10 members with a commitment to a shared purpose. This mutual focus results in a group identity and cohesiveness that encourages collaboration, support, and the exchange of ideas among diverse participants (Kellogg, 1999). Goals for faculty learning communities typically include:

- increasing faculty interest in undergraduate teaching and learning;
- nourishing the scholarship of teaching and its application to student learning;
- increasing faculty collaboration across disciplines;
- broadening the evaluation of teaching and the assessment of learning; and
- creating an awareness of the complexity of teaching and learning (Miami University, 2003).

What is a Universal Design for Instruction Learning Community?

Through funding from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, the Center on Postsecondary Education and Disability at the University of Connecticut is extending its seminal work on the construct and principles of Universal Design for Instruction (UDI) by establishing Learning Communities at five to seven diverse universities and colleges. Collaborative partnerships will be developed between the UDI Project and selected universities and colleges to form learning communities with a focus on exploring and implementing UDI. Each partner campus will establish a UDI Learning Community of faculty and administrators who are committed to enhancing instruction for diverse learners. UDI Learning Community members will identify campus-based interests and areas of need that will be the focus of the UDI Learning Community activities. UDI Project staff will be available to provide technical assistance and support for UDI Learning Community activities, as requested by the group.

How are UDI Learning Communities established?

UDI Learning Communities are a collaborative undertaking between the UDI Project and your campus. Campuses selected to participate must have a commitment to enhancing instruction for diverse learners and the support of relevant college administrators (e.g., dean/vice president of academic affairs). A Partnership Agreement delineating mutual expectations and responsibilities must be completed and signed by the campus administrator and the UDI Project Co-Directors prior to the establishment of a UDI Learning Community in order to assure campus-based support for activities.

Faculty and administrators selected to participate as members of UDI Learning Communities should have a strong commitment to diverse learners and the scholarship of teaching. Potential participants may be identified in a variety of ways, including self-selection, peer nomination, solicitation through an application process, or individual invitation.

What are the expectations of a UDI Learning Community?

The power of a learning community lies in its ability to support faculty in pursuing their own questions and goals to enhance instruction. UDI Learning Communities have the autonomy to identify areas of interest, determine individual and/or group goals, and to develop their own plan for group structure, interaction, and workload. It is expected that each UDI Learning Community will:

- *Develop an Action Plan* consisting of individual and/or group goals for implementing UDI. Action plans may include such activities as 1) identifying one component of a course that will serve as a target area for implementing UDI such as designing evaluation strategies that are more inclusive of diverse learners, 2) working with a faculty partner to collaborate on enhancing inclusive approaches to the delivery of instruction such as innovative uses of technology, or 3) teaming with students with disabilities in order to promote formative feedback to refine creative and inclusive teaching strategies. Development of the Action Plan may be done collaboratively with UDI Project staff if such support is desired by the Learning Community.
- *Develop a communication and/or meeting schedule* that is agreeable to the Learning Community. In order to accommodate busy schedules, UDI Learning Communities are encouraged to establish a communication structure that facilitates group interaction. This may occur in a variety of ways such as 2-3 meetings of the entire group per semester, frequent conversations through an electronic listserv, collaboration among subgroups of participants, and so forth.
- *Make a two-year commitment* to exist as a Learning Community that is focused on implementation of UDI.
- *Identify instructional products or strategies* that will be submitted by individual faculty or the group for possible publication on the UDI Project web site, www.facultyware.uconn.edu.
- *Provide feedback to the UDI Project on technical assistance and training materials.*

What support can the UDI Learning Community expect from UDI Project personnel?

The role of UDI Project personnel is to provide technical assistance and support to the UDI Learning Communities as needs arise. Modest honoraria will be available through the project to support Learning Community activities. The following types of technical assistance will be available:

- Support in formulating the UDI Learning Community (e.g., identifying potential categories of members; describing approaches for selecting members, etc.).
- Orientation regarding UDI via hard-copy and on-line resources such as the UDI Orientation Manual, case studies, etc.

- Assistance in developing a Learning Community action plan of objectives and indicators (e.g., specific products or methods) of UDI.
- Support in the action plan implementation (e.g., gathering relevant information and resources).
- Support in determining outcomes of UDI implementation (e.g., student feedback regarding an instructional practice; faculty feedback on the benefits and challenges of an instructional practice/product based on UDI).
- Assistance in analyzing and synthesizing outcome data.
- Information dissemination including research and resources pertaining to inclusive instructional strategies and methods, disability information, relevant web sites, etc.
- Technical support in the process of submitting instructional products for the project web site, www.facultyware.uconn.edu.

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References:

Kellogg, K. (1999). Learning communities. *ERIC Digest* #ED430512. Retrieved February 20, 2003 from <http://www.ericfacility.net/ericdigests/ed430512.html>.

Miami University (2003). *Faculty learning communities*. Retrieved February 21, 2003 from <http://www.units.muohio.edu/celt/communities.shtml>.

Smith, B.L. (2001). The challenge of learning communities as a growing national movement. *Peer Review*, 3(4). Retrieved February 11, 2003 from <http://www.aacu.org/peerreview/pr-fa01/pr-fa01feature1.cfm>.