An Assessment of the Learning Community of TRS 105 and CRJ 101
Fall 2002

BACKGROUND

The discussions about the formation of this learning community started in September of 2001. This pair of academic courses seemed to be a natural fit due to the quantity of quality of writing needed for CRJ 101. Excellent and concise writing skills are a sine qua non for success in the field of law and criminal justice. The Department of Law and Criminal Justice has four (4) CABs (Community Advisory Boards). There are CABs for the general department, Court Reporter, Paralegal and Public Administration. A recurrent theme from the advisory boards members is the necessity of solid writing skills for MCC graduates. In addition, the faculty in this department have noted that the writing skills for new students seems to be declining. The final approvals from the necessary department chairs and deans were completed in December of 2001.

CRJ 101 is an introductory course in the Law and Criminal Justice Department of MCC. It is a required course for ALL students in that department. TRS 105 (Fundamentals of Writing) is a course in the Transitional Studies Department at MCC. Students are placed in TRS 105 by Accuplacer, a standardized college placement test. These students are in need of extra help in writing before going into ENG 101 (College Composition). TRS 105 focuses on essay writing and the process of formal writing needed in college subjects.

IMPLEMENTATION

The Learning Community formally started in September of 2002. The two courses were scheduled back to back in the same classroom on the Tuesday-Thursday format. There were initially 20 students enrolled which changed to 19 students during the first week of classes. That incident will be explained in more detail later in this report. Both professors participated in the following activities:

1. Both colleagues assessed the writing requirements in CRJ 101 and agreed that they needed to be strengthened. Accordingly, were increased by 40% to include all four types of essays (narrative, expository, descriptive and persuasive essays). These changes were implemented in the Learning Community section of CRJ 101 as well as in Professor Feasel’s other two sections of CRJ 101.

2. Both colleagues shared and read the materials from the two courses including College Writing Skills, materials distributed in TRS 105, Introduction to Law and Criminal Justice, No Heroes, No Villains and the Courts of New York.

3. All writing assignments for both courses were planned ahead and mutually agreed upon by both professors and were career focused.

4. A calendar of assignments and due dates was established and distributed to the Learning Community students the first day of class.

5. Weekly meetings (and sometimes more frequent as needed) were held to discuss class progress, adjust the schedule of assignments due, and assess student progress.
6. A field trip was held to visit the Public Safety Training Facility to tour the facility, meet the staff and experience the various training components at this state of the art facility. Staff there reinforced the importance of writing for career success.

ASSESSMENT

There were 19 CRJ students in the Learning Community. There was another CRJ student in the SPT 141 and TRS 105 Learning Community that we have included in our statistics because he was also in another CRJ 101 section with Professor Feasel. The TRS 105 instructor aided him with both his SPT 141 and CRJ 101 assignments. For these statistics, the number of students is 20.

Two students stopped attending college by the end of September. One student has recently moved out of his parent’s home and was working several jobs to support himself. College did not fit into his new schedule. The second who stopped attending was placed in TRS 105 after scoring very low on Accuplacer (Refer To Admissions category). He attended so few classes that we were unable to ascertain if he was misplaced or what issues he had.

It should be noted here that 50% of the final grade in CRJ 101 with Professor Feasel was based on the writing of 5 essays. Of the whole Learning Community group, 80% were able to achieve a grade of “C” or better in both courses. We choose the grade of “C” as a success rate because a grade of “C” is required in CRJ 101 to take more CRJ courses (above CRJ 103), and this same grade is required in TRS 105 to be recommended to go onto English 101. Also, an overall average of C (GPA 2.0) is required for graduation at MCC. It should be noted that while we at MCC regard a grade of “C” as a normal benchmark, that is not the same in high schools. Presently a grade of 55% (out of 100%) is now regarded as passing on Regents Exams required for graduation from high school while a 55% at MCC is an “F”. Students must also achieve an overall GPA of 2.0 to graduate at MCC.

We then requested Institutional Research for success rates to be used in this assessment. In Fall of 2001, students who took both TRS 105 and CRJ 101 concurrently had a success rate of 52.6%. All of those were in “stand alone” sections of TRS 105 and CRJ 101, and none were in a Learning Community. Hence this Learning Community had a 27.4 better success rate than a similar cohort not in a Learning Community.

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<tr>
<th>LEARNING COMMUNITY (Fall 2002)</th>
<th>STAND ALONE COURSES (Fall 2001)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Success Rate</td>
<td>C or Better</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80%</td>
<td>52.6%</td>
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We then did a comparison of the performance of the Learning Community section of CRJ 101 with the other two sections of CRJ 101 taught by Professor Feasel. The cohort was similar in that they had the same instructor, same course, same instructional materials, same tests, same writing assignments and same grading standards. The two non learning community, however, had almost all of their students in English 101 as they demonstrated higher writing skills on the Accuplacer. In that sense, they were more academically prepared than the Learning Community group. The two benchmarks employed were the success rate (grade of “C” or higher) and the percentage of students who turned in all 5 writing assignments. The Learning Community CRJ 101 had a success rate of 80% and 80% turned in all 5 assignments. The non learning community CRJ sections had a success rate of 68.7%. The Learning Community CRJ 101 had only 20% of its members not submit all 5
writing assignments while the two non learning community sections had 43.3% not submit all 5 writing assignments. The chart on the next page summarizes these figures:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>CRJ 101 Learning Community</th>
<th>CRJ 101 Stand Alone Sections</th>
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<tr>
<td>80% success rate</td>
<td>68.7% success rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20% non submission rate</td>
<td>43.3% non submission rate</td>
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</tbody>
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One of the stated goals of this Learning Community was “to level the playing field for under prepared students.” The Learning Community group out performed the other two sections by substantial margins, and this stated goal was accomplished.

**FACULTY PREPARATION**

Both faculty members spent many hours both before and during this semester planning, implementing and evaluating the learning community. We are pleased that MCC recognizes this extra time as necessary and granted us released time. Here are some of the activities that were accomplished:

1. Both faculty members co-planned all writing assignments in both courses to include content from CRJ 101 and writing strategies from TRS 105.

2. All written assignments had coordinated and uniform grading standards, formats and deadlines.

3. Both professors exchanged all course materials and studied them to become familiar with the content and procedures of both courses. These materials from the two courses included *College Writing Skills*, materials distributed in TRS 105, *Introduction to Law and Criminal Justice*, *No Heroes, No Villains* and the *Courts of New York*.

4. We conferred weekly about individual student needs and progress.

5. We constantly reevaluated our pedagogical approaches and methods based on student outcomes and progress. We made necessary adjustments as needed.

6. Writing standards were discussed in both classes and, at times, both professors were present and mutually reinforced the skills needed in both courses.

7. Professor Nolan's assistance with skills beyond those typically found in TRS 105 was noteworthy. His work with students on data interpretation was first rate.

8. Various new strategies are being developed for Spring 2002.
It should be noted here that we could not completely balance both the test group and the control group due to the small number of students presently involved in the Learning Communities at MCC. The commonalities of the two groups were that they both had demonstrated a need for additional writing instruction before moving into college level writing, they were all enrolled in the same college, same campus, same academic year and were taking the same courses. This limitation having been stated openly, however, we found that our results were very similar to large universities that had completed empirical studies on the effectiveness of Learning Communities. This external verification supports our conclusion that Learning Communities do indeed help students to learn and succeed in college.

CONCLUSIONS

We were both pleased to see that some patterns emerged from our learning community. These patterns were measurable, consistent, significant and non contradictory. These patterns demonstrated that retention and success improved for the Learning Community students when compared to a similar cohort of students not in a Learning Community (Fall 2001). We look forward to the start of a new semester and a new group of students in our learning community. Special thanks go to Barbara Connolly, Dean of Academic Services at DCC and Gary Thompson, chair of the Law and Criminal Justice Department. Special recognition and thanks must go to Janet Glocker, Vice President of Academic Affairs at MCC for encouraging innovation and recognizing the need for faculty planning time to implement these new initiatives.