

Sabbatical Leave Report
Learning Communities Project for Fall 2014
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This report summarizes the sabbatical project I completed during the Fall 2014 semester. I thank the Board of Trustees for approving my sabbatical and making it possible for me to pursue my project.

Background of Sabbatical Project

Learning communities are an example of a high-impact practice that has gained national attention. At Ventura College, a small group of faculty have begun to teach in this modality over the past five or six years. We sent a team of faculty and administrators to Evergreen College's Summer Learning Community Program and spent a week immersing ourselves in current practices. Upon our return, with the help of my dean Gwendolyn Huddleston, we began offering more pairings of learning communities at the college. We also began collecting data both within the college as well as external surveys comparing our learning communities with other colleges offering learning communities.

One of the key lessons learned from the Evergreen College trip was the importance of integrating basic skills courses into learning communities. As such, I began teaching learning communities with an English instructor, Dr. Eric Martinsen. Over the past two years, I've taught a learning community with him each semester. In collaboration with him, I came up with the idea of creating a year-long sequential learning community.

The English courses we wanted to sequence were English 2 to English 1A. The percentage of students completing this transition is low, so we thought this would be a good place to locate a learning community. Including English 2 (a developmental course) also allows us to focus on this student body. My idea was to combine American Government (POLS V01) with English 2 in the fall semester and Introduction to Politics (POLS V03) with English V01A in the spring semester. Based on past experience, we've noted that at the end of each learning community, many students are very interested in taking another pair of classes together.

Purpose of Sabbatical Project

The purpose of my sabbatical project was to develop a new approach to learning communities similar to a 'freshman experience,' where students have a more in-depth experience their first year in college. To do this I needed to (1) redesign my POLS V01 and POLS V03 courses and (2) integrate these courses with English V02 and English V01B. I was able to achieve both of

these objectives and am looking forward to offering this year-long sequential learning community soon.

Completed Components of Sabbatical Project:

--Redesign American Government Course

To re-design my American Government class to be a good match for English 2 students, I read numerous American Government textbooks and met with multiple publishing companies to inquire about the pedagogy used in various books. I was also interested to see what kind of online supplements were available for various books. After some searching, I decided to change from my traditional text—*The Democratic Debate*, by Miroff, et.al.—to a more accessible book called *American Government: Roots and Reform* by O'Connor, Sabato, and Yanus. The *Democratic Debate* book is quite a bit more theoretical, and difficult to read, than the *American Government: Roots and Reform* text.

Besides the text itself, I also found that the new book I was using, which is a Pearson product, had a lot more to offer in terms of online help with the text. For example, Pearson came up with a product called REVEL, which I can use with the new book I've chosen, that includes a more interactive text specifically designed to get students to read and engage with the material more. Each student is given an interactive etext, which includes lots of clickable maps, videos, exercises, along with a traditional loose-leaf text to bring to class with them. The old textbook I was using, from Cengage, had none of these features.

--Integrate American Government Course with English 2 as a Learning Community

With a new book and better supplements for my American Government class, I next considered how to best integrate this course into a learning community with English 2. I decided to split the class into three parts to align with the traditional three 5-6 page essays that English 2 students write. Each part will be a six week class unit and focus on a different social movement in American history. The first unit focuses on the women's movement. The second part deals with the civil rights movement and the final six weeks will cover the environmental movement. Each of these movements will offer students an opportunity to explore the dynamics of politics more in-depth.

As part of this project, I immersed myself into some of the literature on the women's, civil rights, and environmental movements in American history. I was able to create assignments, find videos, and research links for students.

Finally, English 2 students are required to write a research paper. For this, I decided to give students two options: First, they could explore one of these movements more in-depth by narrowing their topic down to a specific person or event that occurred as part of this social

movement. Students picking the women's movement, for example, might focus on how Alice Paul's use of direct action worked in the context of American politics. Or, secondly, students could compare and contrast two of the three movements they chose. They might examine how different political contexts shaped the opportunities of two different movements, for example.

--Redesign Introduction to Politics Course

Based on what students had done in the American Government class, I wanted to re-design my Introduction to Politics class in a way that built upon this prior experience. I designed the class to cover more of the content from comparative politics and international relations. This course covers the broad range of political science subfields (including American Government) but by focusing more attention on these two sub-areas I could complement what the students learned the first semester in American Government. I did not want to have too much overlap between the two courses.

It was a bit more difficult to find a book to do this so I put a reader together instead. I used McGraw-Hill to create material that students will use instead of a textbook for this course. I then created a series of videos and class units to go along with this reader.

--Integrate POLS V03 with English V01A

As with the prior learning community, I designed this pairing in a way that would match the three essays, one research paper format of English V01B. I decided to break up this class into the following three units: The first unit focused on political philosophy questions, such as what is justice and democracy. The second unit examined comparative governments around the world and the final six weeks looked at international relations. Students will be given a list of topics to choose from for their research paper.

---Value of Sabbatical Project to VCCCD and Ventura College

As a pilot project, a year-long sequential learning community will provide another mode of instruction that should benefit our district as well as the college. There is potential value here in higher retention and success rates, as well as providing a model for many other disciplines of how to use this type of approach.

--Value of Sabbatical Project to Ventura College Students

I believe my project will improve the learning experience of students at Ventura College. The year-long sequencing of two political science courses with two English courses will provide a kind of "freshman experience" for first-year students. We are planning to integrate student services deeply into this learning community so students taking this year-long learning community should succeed in college much better.

--Value of Sabbatical Project to Instructor

Completion of this project has allowed me to integrate new material, new books, new online resources, and new topics into my courses. I believe this sabbatical has enhanced my value as an instructor here at VC!

Thank you again for this opportunity,
Respectfully yours,

Dr. Robert Porter
Professor of Political Science
Ventura College