

## Using Learning Communities to Develop Basic Skills

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Across the country, colleges and universities are facing the challenge of serving increasing numbers of students with basic academic skill deficiencies. The issue is so widespread that over the past two decades many community colleges have come to include developmental education in math, reading, and writing as part of their institutional mission.

Serving these individuals is a high priority and a continual challenge for those of us who struggle to find effective ways to help people succeed in postsecondary education. While academic difficulties provide a major challenge, individuals with developmental needs often face many other barriers to educational success. Financial, social, and emotional barriers often prove to be as difficult to overcome as academic ones.

During the past five years, one strategy that has flourished at Omaha's Metropolitan College (MCC) is the Academic Improvement (AIM) for Success Program. AIM is a learning community program offered specifically for students with severe developmental needs. It is designed to help students improve basic skills, develop sound learning strategies, and set realistic goals prior to beginning college-level coursework. While many learning communities are designed for academically prepared students, AIM uses the supportive environment of a learning community to build skills and foster self-confidence in those students who are most at risk. The support of faculty, counselors, and classmates, along with an integrated curriculum, make AIM an ideal place for students who are unsure of their abilities to succeed in an academic environment.

MCC has an open admission policy but strongly encourages students to take advantage of COMPASS and ASSET placement testing. Currently, over 50 percent of MCC students taking the exams need basic skills development in at least one area. For this reason, the college has a strong commitment to provide accessible developmental education on all three of its campuses. MCC is now finishing its second year of a five-year Title III grant focused solely on strengthening its developmental education offerings collegewide.

### What AIM Offers Students

AIM offers students many advantages:

- A block schedule that requires students to enroll as a cohort in reading, writing, math, and personal and career development courses during a one-quarter program.
- A campus-based team of professionals consisting of a counselor, faculty members, and tutors who provide a strong system of academic and counseling support
- Diagnostic testing
- Interdisciplinary approaches to teaching and learning
- Career exploration as well as cultural and extracurricular activities
- Access to learning center and tutoring services

Campus teams meet weekly to discuss lesson plans and individual student needs. This schedule allows for immediate counselor intervention when problems arise, provides faculty with time to build lessons around a common theme, and encourages a feeling of pride to develop among team members when students are successful and barriers are broken.

The cohesiveness of the team and the students is an essential element, and students, faculty members, and counselors all must possess several specific qualities for the program to be successful. To enhance chances for success, students need skills above the ABE/GED level, time to commit to the program, and the motivational drive to handle three courses that require them to attend classes, complete homework, and balance other areas of their lives successfully. Faculty and staff must be flexible and willing to share everything from teaching strategies to overlapping class time. Students, faculty, and staff must all agree to support each other in the learning environment.

### Retention and Completion Rates

Reported benefits and advantages of the program include increased collaboration between faculty and student services personnel and improved class attendance, completion, and retention rates. Because AIM helps students connect with the institution, they are more likely to seek help when they need it and to enroll in subsequent courses. Course completion rates average 84 percent and retention rates are also impressive: 87 percent after one quarter and 63 percent after a year, compared with 44 percent for non-AIM developmental students.

Many former AIM students have gone on to earn associate's degrees at MCC. Others have taken advantage of the college's strong articulation agreements with other postsecondary institutions and have pursued bachelor's degrees.

AIM's reputation has also led to program growth, with enrollment increasing from 13 students in one learning community in Fall 1998 to 71 students in five communities in Fall 2001. Rather than view AIM as a remedial program, students now see it as a way to gain the foundation skills they will need in college-level courses.

### Future Plans

Plans include implementing a second level of AIM programming this winter that will allow students to receive additional support for two quarters. This will give students the chance to take a course within a program area of their choice along with the next level of developmental courses in math and English.

Paired courses will also be offered starting in Winter 2003 with English and reading, science and college success strategies, and other paired course options being planned. This way, students who may not be able to handle the time commitment or academic rigor of three classes can still participate in a learning experience offering the same high level of counselor support, peer involvement, and faculty collaboration.

Providing a friendly, nurturing atmosphere helps students become comfortable with the learning process and gain the skills and self-confidence they will need throughout their educational journey. By applying the power of a learning community to the needs of developmental education students, colleges can creatively advance a critical component of their comprehensive mission.

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