

**REPORT:**

**31<sup>st</sup> ANNUAL CURRICULUM PLANNING RETREAT**  
*Washington Center for Improving Undergraduate Education*

April 11-12, 2019  
 North Bend, Washington

**BSU Representatives:** Tyesha Burks, *Assistant Professor of Biology*  
 Matasha Harris, *Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice*  
 Lisa Nardi, *Assistant Director of Scholars Studio*  
 Joseph Regan, *Assistant Professor of Music*  
 Joseph Spears, *Assistant Professor of Sport Management*  
 Monica Turner, *Director of Engaged Learning & Student Support*

**Conference Overview**

**Purpose**

The Curriculum Planning Retreat complemented the Washington Center’s summer institute by providing dedicated time and support for faculty to develop integrated learning experiences. They offered introductory seminars for attendees unfamiliar with Malnarich and Lardner’s heuristic, cross-campus networking opportunities and facilitated discussions.

**Agenda**

Table 1

Summary of Retreat Seminars

<p><b>Nuts and Bolts of Integrative Assignments: How to Get Started</b></p> <p><i>Facilitated by Dr. W. Joye Hardiman, Interim Director of the Washington Center at Evergreen State University</i></p>	<p>This hands-on seminar introduced faculty to the purpose and design of integrative assignments. Hardiman emphasized the importance of integration for preparing students to solve complex problems, providing meaningful learning experiences, and promoting deep learning. Acknowledging that integrative learning often requires faculty to sacrifice breadth of content for depth, Hardiman began by asking participants to consider the three most important skills, ideas, etc. their courses offer. The identified items were used as a lens to help faculty remain focused on the most salient aspects of their curricula while shaping co-curricular activities and assignments. Once learning aspirations were identified, faculty paired up to identify potential points of</p>
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	connection for interdisciplinary learning. Participants left the session with concrete ideas for developing learning community topics and assignments.
<p><b>Team Teaching: Getting Started and Improving over Time</b></p> <p><i>Facilitated by Matt Scammell and Sharon Hall, Skagit Valley College</i></p>	Scammell and Hall introduced participants to the concept of team teaching—a collaborative approach that brings faculty from different disciplines or content areas into the same teaching space. Team teaching minimizes communication issues that occur in traditional learning communities when faculty are unable to meet and collaborate regularly. It also presents a number of challenges, particularly in resource-stressed environments where faculty time is a rare commodity.
<p><b>Designing Assessments for Integrative Learning Outcomes</b></p> <p><i>Facilitated by Jane Harradine, North Seattle College and Laura Soracco, Highline College</i></p>	Harradine and Soracco facilitated a discussion on Huerta and Hansen’s (2013) article, <i>Learning Community Assessment 101: Best Practices</i> . The bulk of the conversation focused on the following assertion: “a narrow focus on retention may obscure an understanding of program processes and effects. Additionally, a myopic focus on specific outcomes such as retention rates and grade point averages may not be sufficient for making substantive improvements based on assessment findings.”

### Retreat Location

The retreat was held at Rainbow Lodge in North Bend, Washington, located in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains. Situated in a heavily forested area, the lodge offered a peaceful and inspiring environment, free of distractions, for participants to reflect, learn, and create.

### Attendees’ Backgrounds

The majority of participants were from two-year public colleges in Washington State, though four-year, private, and out-of-state universities were represented as well. University teams had varying degrees of learning community experience, ranging from no experience to decades of practice. Having offered learning communities for nearly ten years, Bowie State University’s team was positioned in the middle of the continuum.

### Reflections from Bowie State University’s Representatives

Participants met upon returning to campus to discuss their impressions of the retreat. This section captures major themes that emerged from those conversations. With one exception, all participants have taught in Scholars Studio’s learning communities. Thus, the reflections captured below were filtered through the lens of experience.

The terms *interdisciplinary learning*, *integrative learning*, and *learning communities* interchangeably are used interchangeably throughout this report. While there are nuanced differences among the terms, Scholars Studio, Bowie State University's learning community structure, incorporates all three. In other words, when we talk about learning communities at Bowie State University, we are concurrently talking about interdisciplinary engagement and integrative thinking.

### **Integrative Learning and General Education**

Learning communities have the potential to significantly improve students' academic experiences without having to make a large financial investment or completely overhauling curricula. Learning communities may have a particularly strong impact during students' first two years of matriculation when they complete the majority of their general education requirements. Students often do not understand the purpose of general education courses; they consider them boxes to check on their way to the more important work in their disciplines. Asking students to consider "the bigger picture" often fails because most general education courses aren't designed to explicitly help students unearth relevance or make broader connections. Learning communities, on the other hand, are purposefully developed to help students solve problems across disciplines and connect learning to their own lives.

During the Integrative Assignments seminar, faculty paired to find potential interdisciplinary connections. Tyesha Burks and Joe Regan developed a learning community that brought students on a parallel exploration of the evolution of life and music.

Integrating courses helps faculty leverage skills, methods, ideas, inquiries, and thought processes from each discipline. Using the previous example, music majors are often interested in the creative aspects of music to the exclusion of critical thinking. Applying the scientific method to the study of music can help students learn to meticulously analyze music, and in this case, understand the origins and development of songs over time and across cultures and geographic locations. Likewise, biology students benefit from the creative perspective that music offers because developing the right side of the brain can help them become agile thinkers and creative problem solvers.

Joseph Spears and Matasha Harris created a community that explored the relationship between sports and criminal justice, particularly (1) the use of sport as a diversion to keep youth out of the criminal justice system and (2) the connections between athletes and criminal behavior (e.g. hazing, domestic violence, and traumatic brain injuries and aggression). Bringing together sport management and criminal justice not only contextualizes the disciplines, but also helps students expand their thinking about career and research opportunities in both fields.

Moreover, given that the world is becoming increasingly complex, well-honed interdisciplinary thinking is imperative. Performance vocalists, for instance, can make a decent living; however, they are rarely hired to work full time for a single organization. Instead, they piece together work at a variety of venues. To do so, they need business acumen to market themselves and manage daily operations, scientific thinking to methodically improve performance and land gigs, etc. Students who narrowly focus on practicing music at the exclusion of developing other skillsets are strongly disadvantaged.

Beginning interdisciplinary thinking early in students' matriculation helps prepare them for realities of the rapidly changing workforce.

### **Learning "Community"**

As the name implies, an essential aspect of learning communities is *community*. Community is established first among faculty and then extended to students. Building community among faculty is important because it helps faculty think differently, value their colleagues, and understand that their challenges aren't unique. Extending community to students necessitates a degree of vulnerability because it requires faculty to reposition themselves from *expert* to *partner* in the learning process and, just as importantly, remain open to learning from students. Many of our faculty felt that developing communal spaces, similar to the one established at the retreat, would be valuable, as it would provide opportunities for connection and break up the isolated siloes that operate across campus. Faculty also expressed an interest in purposefully developing community in courses taught outside of Scholars Studio.

### **Benefits of Learning Communities**

**Benefits for faculty.** Learning communities create an intentional structure for cross-disciplinary collaboration—a process with the potential to provide faculty with support, feedback, and new perspectives. Moreover, teaching in community helps faculty develop heightened sensitivity to pedagogy and students' needs.

**Benefits for academic departments.** Learning communities have the potential to enhance students' first-year experience within departments by cultivating a sense of belonging, developing strong academic foundations, and contextualizing learning. Dr. Harris noted that the majority of scholars who participated in her learning communities are on track to graduate in four years. She believes there is a noticeable difference between students who participated in Scholars Studio and those who did not. Scholars Studio participants are more likely to speak up, utilize resources, and ask questions. They demonstrate stronger writing and better use of APA formatting. Many of them are also involved in criminal justice organizations. Dr. Harris feels that taking an interdisciplinary perspective with criminal justice is important because the discipline itself is interdisciplinary. Bringing together other classes, including sociology, helps students understand the discipline better and bridge skills.

### **Considerations**

All of the faculty who attended the retreat strongly support expanding learning communities at Bowie State University. The biggest impediment is faculty availability. Tenure track faculty—who stand to gain the most in terms of developing community and receiving pedagogical support—not only carry a high teaching load but also have considerable service commitments. Senior faculty, likewise, carry high teaching loads and are being asked to teach courses with increasing seat counts. The frenetic pace faculty maintain is antithetical to the intentional and reflective process that good teaching and deep learning require.

In fact, as Washington Center facilitators pointed out, “student success is dependent upon faculty success.” In the absence of manageable workloads and fair compensation, faculty will not be able to serve students optimally. The benefits of learning communities are indisputable, but they cannot be sustained without addressing issues related to faculty workload.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the faculty appreciated the opportunity to attend the retreat. They described the experience as *wonderful*, *eye-opening*, *inspiring*, and *motivating*. They valued learning from other institutions and were pleased to know that Bowie State University “is on the cutting edge” of learning community work.