DISSERTATION

# UNDERSTANDING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF DR. EMILY LARDNER: LESSONS FOR THE ADOPTION AND PRACTICE OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Submitted by

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# ABSTRACT

## UNDERSTANDING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF DR. EMILY LARDNER: LESSONS FOR THE ADOPTION AND PRACTICE OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The purpose of this biographical narrative study was to understand the experiences of Dr. Emily Lardner, who served as director of the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education from 1996-2017. Utilizing a narrative approach, the research puzzle engaged with in this study was guided by exploring the question, "What can we learn from Dr. Emily Lardner's lived experiences as they relate to learning communities adoption and practice in higher education settings?" Dr. Lardner's description of her life story, transcribed from interviews conducted over the course of four months, forms a narrative highlighting her development as an individual and an academic. The analysis of this narrative reveals the importance of collaborations, creative thinking, and innovation to foster development, adoption, and diffusion in learning communities across the United States. The narrative inquiry became a dialectic knowing, emphasizing learning moments for both Lardner and the researcher. Dr. Lardner's lived experiences provide insights into the individual identities and environmental factors that created opportunities to transition the Washington Center's focus over 20 years—and still influence learning communities today. Researchers are encouraged to explore integrated learning as a conceptual framework for examining learning communities. Furthermore, researchers can re-center their scholarship to give voice to individual practitioners and students.

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# DEDICATION

To my parents and my siblings, for 5 years of waiting for this day to come.

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In a recent survey, the top three priorities identified by college and university presidents, chancellors, and provosts included increasing enrollment (74%), investing in students' success initiatives (72%), and controlling costs (53%) (Mezarik, 2019). Over 50% of survey respondents indicated that the demands of their roles included collaborating on shared goals, utilizing data to identify solutions to problems, and managing budgets (Mezarik, 2019). These challenges are supported by projected decreased higher education enrollments starting in the mid-2020s. The economic downturn in 2008 led to changes in the pattern of birth rates in the United States that are similar to the impact of the Great Depression on birth rates in the 1930s (Cherlin et al., 2013; Grawe, 2018). The effect of the economic downturn is likely to result in a shrinking population from which colleges and universities can recruit (Grawe, 2018). A decrease in the population of college-going students is likely to increase competition for eligible students, leading institutional leaders to consider how to best leverage resources to appeal to a potentially different audience than is currently attending their institutions and to improve students' success.

To improve students' retention and graduation rates, institutions have developed new programs and initiatives from admission through graduation. These initiatives include pre-matriculation transition programs, first-year seminars, undergraduate research, and other activities that are known as high impact practices (Kuh, 2008). High impact practices are intentionally designed practices that promote deep learning by promoting students' engagement. These high impact practices activities have been studied for their effect on not only students' persistence and graduation, but also on the ability to assist students in learning skills such as oral

and written communication, engaging with others from diverse backgrounds, and integrating content in and out of the classroom (Greenfield et al., 2013).

Two identified high impact practices, learning communities and living-learning communities, are promising practices to increase college students' success. Learning communities provide students the opportunity to integrate students' learning across and through academic coursework. Living-learning communities integrate concepts of students' learning and growth and bring them into residential environments on college campuses. Both learning communities and living-learning practices, along with their benefits and a critique of their impact, are discussed more completely in the literature review.

Despite a long history of learning communities and living-learning communities within higher education in the United States, the mere presence of evidence suggesting these high impact practices are important in students' success has not led to a universal diffusion of these innovations in colleges and universities in the United States. Organizational change is still a factor in how institutions develop, grow, and sustain high impact practices. While students' success has been central to recent movements in higher education, "our effort has been almost exclusively at the institutional level of the students, rather than the rigorous examination of the institutional policies, practices, and attempts at organizational change to improve student access outcomes" (Bastedo, 2012, p. 13).

Institutional leaders must be as creative in addressing organizational structures as they are with addressing students' retention and success if they want to adapt to challenges presented. This study provided a narrative inquiry exploring the lived experiences of one national leader in learning communities, Dr. Emily Lardner, who has over 20 years of experience in the adoption and practice of learning communities.

## Background

Higher education in the United States began as a system that educated White men from wealthy families on residential campuses. The nature of its existence helped to replicate a system of privilege and inequity in class and race (Cabrera et al., 2017). Campuses integrated student living and learning spaces that were adapted from the Oxford and Cambridge models in England (Fink & Inkelas, 2015). Over time, colleges and universities evolved to adopt a Germanic model, which focuses more heavily on faculty research (Rudolph, 1962). With the population growth post-World War II, new institutions were created, including more community colleges and co-educational institutions (Cohen & Kisker, 2010).

In the current climate of higher education in the United States, where students have more choices than ever before to decide the type of institution they wish to attend, college and university leaders are tasked with determining how to not only attract students to the institution but help them persist to graduation. It is imperative that institutional leaders develop programs and initiatives that not only meet their institutional mission and vision, but also ensure that students learn and grow in ways that help prepare them for active citizenship upon graduation. Rising costs of attendance, declining state support for higher education, and an increase in accountability (Kuk et al., 2010) are contributing factors for the development of institutional practices to increase student persistence and demonstrate higher education as a societal good. As challenges emerge, higher education institutions are moved to consider changes to structures in and out of the classroom as solutions, including innovative educational practices.

## Statement of Problem

The field of higher education offers research and insights regarding the implementation of learning communities and living-learning communities. Inkelas et al. (2018) provided higher

education practitioners a framework for the development and implementation of living-learning communities. The authors highlighted the role of institutional champions in the successful adoption of living-learning communities; however, scholars examining learning communities and living-learning communities have focused primarily on the outcomes associated with students or programming and less on the lived experiences of students, staff, and faculty as they relate to the diffusion of these practices. This study attempts to address a gap in the literature on learning communities by understanding the lived experience of an individual who served in the director role of a national center focused on learning communities research and practice. Additionally, this study examines how this individual observed and facilitated the diffusion of learning communities practice in the United States.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this biographical narrative study was to understand the experiences of Dr. Emily Lardner, who served as director of the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education from 1996-2017. In this capacity, Dr. Lardner was responsible for collaboration with faculty, staff, and administrators nationally to help them design and implement strategies to improve the success of students. The Washington Center serves as a national leader in learning communities research and practice, hosting institutions and national conferences.

Dr. Lardner was uniquely positioned to share a story of how learning communities practice diffused over two decades in the United States and the particular role that she and the Washington Center played in this diffusion related to changes that were occurring in higher education institutions through national policies and legislative action. This study complements

existing research on diffusion of innovations by focusing on understanding adoption through the lens of an organizational leader within innovative practice.

## Research Question

Clandinin and Connelly suggested, that "rather than thinking about framing a research question with a precise definition or expectation of an answer, narrative inquirers frame a research puzzle that carries with it 'a sense of a search, a 're-search,' a searching again" (2000, p. 124). The research puzzle, therefore, that I sought to engage with in this study was guided by exploring the question, "What can we learn from Dr. Emily Lardner's lived experiences as they relate to learning communities adoption and practice in higher education settings in the United States?"

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this qualitative narrative inquiry is Rogers' (2003) diffusion of innovations theory. The diffusion of innovations theory has been utilized as a framework for understanding change in a variety of organizational contexts, including business, technology, and higher education, often in relation to state and system-level policies and their implementation on campuses. Diffusion addresses change as it takes place over time and within social structures (Rogers, 2003). This theory was selected because it helps to understand the role of individuals and organizations as they progress through innovation and it acknowledges the ways an innovation is adopted (or not) over time. I provide more in-depth discussion of diffusion of innovations in chapter two.

## Significance of the Research Study

This research centers the experiences of Dr. Lardner and the diffusion of learning communities practice over two decades. This type of research is not prevalent in learning

communities or in high impact practice literature. This research is a study of Dr. Lardner's experiences, and helps to understand her professional life as lived. This research sought to answer what we can learn from the lived experiences of Dr. Emily Lardner as it relates to the adoption and practice of learning communities in higher education settings.

As a biographical narrative, the study centers on recounting and restructuring lived experiences of Dr. Lardner, as told by Dr. Lardner. Narrative inquiry is focused not only on the experience of individuals, but examination of those experiences within a larger timeline of change (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Because of the Washington Center's role as a national leader in learning communities research, and Dr. Lardner's oversight for the Center's operations, she can provide a meta-view of how learning communities practice changed within higher education institutions in the United States from 1996-2017.

## Researcher's Perspective

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stated "it is critical to be able to articulate a relationship between one's personal interests and sense of significance and larger social concerns expressed in the works and lives of others" (p. 122). To that end, it is important to recognize the perspectives and experiences that I bring to this study and what led me to pursue this specific research topic.

As a first-generation college student, I attended an institution where I was enrolled in courses with others who received the same scholarship I also received. In my first semester of college, I took three classes with this cohort of peers. These courses were part of the general education curriculum requirements at the institution but had been developed specifically by the faculty members to meet the needs of our scholarship and to integrate content across the diverse courses. Because three of my six classes were taken with the same 24 students, I got to know

them during my first semester and built friendships that existed outside the classroom. Additionally, because these three classes were small in size, my faculty got to know me personally over the semester and helped me feel more comfortable as a college student.

At the time, I would not have thought about the structure of my classes as a learning community or a high impact practice (I did not even know what those terms meant), but that is what they were. The structure of this cohort of courses helped me to see the connections between a literature course and a history class and assisted me in developing a sense of belonging at the institution. My scholarship included cohort courses for the first three years of undergraduate education, so over time, I built lasting and lifelong friendships with many of my classmates.

My involvement with learning communities and living-learning communities continued during graduate school. I had an opportunity to work in a residential college, alongside a faculty member who taught in the arts and nanotechnology. The two of us developed programming, supervised staff and residents, and built relationships with other faculty at the institution. Living and working in the same community as a faculty member provided me the opportunity to understand the ways that faculty can be integrated in a living environment with students, a foundation which proved invaluable in my later work in living-learning communities. This individual often shared with me that colleagues did not understand why they would choose to live in a college residence hall, when they did not have to. We talked about why sometimes you do things because they are for the betterment of others, rather than because they are expected.

When I transitioned to work at an institution in New York City (NYC), I had further opportunity to work alongside faculty members in six distinct living-learning communities. In this institutional context, the learning integration was not only across the courses students took, but also integrated with the opportunities available in NYC. Faculty worked in tandem with me

to think of ways to help residents explore the city and expand their knowledge beyond what was being learned in the classroom. These experiences further helped me integrate in-and-out-of-class contexts as a means of deepening the college experience.

I was provided the opportunity to work at institutions leading the implementation of high impact practices as a part of a larger state system. These efforts were prompted in part by the publication of *High-impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Are Important* (Kuh, 2008). As a state system, each campus made commitments to expand or create the types of experiences that had been demonstrated to show advancements in students' learning, including living-learning communities, first-year seminars, and service-learning. During my time in the system, I had opportunities to work in collaboration with faculty and academic affairs partners to advance these types of initiatives. Conversations were often centered on how we could not only increase the number of experiences and students participating in them, but also how we could demonstrate through research the efficacy of these commitments. I appreciated being at the table with department chairs, deans, and institutional leaders as we worked to make fundamental changes in how we helped students make meaning of their learning. It was challenging to create the experiences for students and work to change existing structures to accommodate these practices.

When I transitioned to my current institution, the state was seeking to integrate high impact practices across institutions that shared the same governance structure. When I arrived on campus, I was intentional about setting up meetings with as many faculty chairs and deans as I could. These conversations often took place over coffee or tea and were, largely, without an agenda. I wanted to get to know people's stories: what brought them to the institution, how they ended up in their current role, and what they saw as some of the needs of the students with whom

they interacted. This approach afforded me the chance to understand what might be meaningful to potential partners and allowed me a lens to understand how different parts of the institution might see challenges and opportunities. From these conversations came the development of some new living-learning communities on campus. This approach also allowed me to share the steps my department was taking in developing a curricular approach to students' learning in residence life, helping faculty partners recognize the ways that student affairs might be able to work with them to expand learning beyond a formal classroom. My prior lived experiences working with faculty in learning and living-learning communities was invaluable for approaching these discussions, as I understood the tension sometimes present in doing work that may be at odds with expectations from departments, peers, or the institutional rewards structures.

Despite these initial steps, including movement at the state level to raise the profile of learning communities and other high impact practices, change has been slow to develop in an institution-wide diffusion of these practices. Some promising movement has occurred, however, including adding language in both institutional and divisional strategic plans to identify a movement towards integrated first-year experiences and expansion of learning communities. Additionally, senior administration has prioritized students' retention that has resulted in a commitment to students' success initiatives and restructuring the institution in ways to better align services. Despite this reprioritization, many of the high impact practice initiatives continue to be driven primarily from the staff, sometimes without strong partnership from academic departments or faculty.

With a new budgeting model on campus that is tied to student numbers in majors and minors, there is strong incentive for the colleges to focus on services that can be directly connected to students' recruitment and retention. In spite of available research tied to the role of

high impact practices in supporting students' success and retention, and support from senior administration for enhancement of these practices across the institution, structures have been slower to evolve than I would like them to be in ways that allow for the development of strategic and sustainable practices that move ideas towards action.

This reflection led me to consider the role that organizational change and structures play in the effective implementation of high impact practices at colleges and universities. I began to consider how literature of high impact practice, and specifically learning communities, has evolved in the past two decades and what role researchers in the field have played in helping institutions evolve in ways to support campus-level growth. This led me to reflect on the role of the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education housed at The Evergreen State College and the role its former director, Dr. Emily Lardner, played in affecting change on a national level.

In 2017, a colleague and I were seeking to build campus capacity for the development of learning communities and felt that bringing a version of the existing Summer Institute at the Washington Center to our local campus might garner interest in growing this high impact practice. Through a grant, we brought Dr. Lardner and a colleague to our campus to lead two summer institutes, from which grew some pilot programs and a sustained partnership between one of our campus first-year seminars and the speech program. Dr. Lardner helped to plant a seed on my campus that is continuing to grow and develop.

In the over 20 years that Dr. Lardner served in the director role, she helped to serve as a consultant to more than 75 two- and four-year colleges on implementing learning communities. Additionally, through collaborations with colleagues at the Washington Center, she hosted

learning community campus teams for summer institutes addressing learning community development and sustainability on campuses across the United States.

## Delimitations and Assumptions

This study is a narrative biography, providing an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of one individual within the context of learning communities research and practice within higher education in the United States. A main assumption of this study was that Dr. Lardner would be able to co-construct lived experiences related to learning communities research and practice in the United States. As she is the only subject of this research, her story was critical to the research being conducted. The researcher assumed that the lived experiences that Dr. Lardner possesses are unique to her yet can be informative for practitioners in working with learning communities. This knowledge can provide a better understanding for practitioners about the process of developing and growing learning communities in their own contexts. The researcher also operated under an assumption that Dr. Lardner and the researcher shared common understandings of definitions of learning communities for the purposes of this study—and this assumption was visited and revisited throughout the inquiry process. Dr. Lardner's involvement in this research was conducted on a voluntary basis via Zoom, which was a space in which Dr. Lardner felt comfortable within during the research process.

## Summary

The proposed research study explored the lived experiences of Dr. Emily Lardner as they related to learning communities adoption and practice. This study helps to fill a void within the literature by focusing on the diffusion of innovation of learning communities over a 21-year time period during Dr. Emily Lardner's tenure in the director position of the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education.

# CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

## Introduction

To prepare to build the research puzzle within this study, I conducted a review of the literature using the following key terms: "learning communities in higher education," "high impact practices," "living-learning communities," "organizational change," "diffusion of innovations," and "higher education change." A summary of understandings from the literature include:

1) Learning communities and living-learning communities have multiple definitions associated with them (Gabelnick et al., 1990)
2) Studies of learning communities as high impact practice tend to center on the outcomes of these practices (Rocconi, 2011; Stassen, 2003; Zhao & Kuh, 2010), and less on how the change itself occurred
3) Research in organizational change is more prevalent in business than higher education, but can be an applicable lens for understanding higher education (Kuk et al., 2010)
4) Research on diffusion of innovations is scarce in high impact practice research. One recent dissertation focused on a quantitative study of diffusion of four innovations in higher education (DeRousie, 2014)

## Organization of the Literature Review

This literature review has been organized to address four main sections of research aligned with the focus of this study. Section one provides a brief review of the evolution of higher education within the context of the United States, that laid context for high impact

practice development. Section two provides an examination of historical contexts of learning communities, exploring some of the early attempts by faculty at creating structures to support learning community growth and practice, and providing modern framing of learning communities. Section three engages a synthesis and critique of the current focus on high impact practices, specifically learning communities, and ways that researchers and practitioners are attempting to examine the effects on students' learning and growth. Section four synthesizes and critiques relevant literature on organizational change, framing the ways that change may manifest in college and universities, and articulating learning communities as one organizational change practice. The literature review concludes with an overview of the theoretical frameworks that will guide this study.

## Historical Context for Learning Communities

The story of higher education and students' success in the United States begins with the Oxford and Cambridge models of higher education from England. The Oxford and Cambridge models integrated student experiences across the institution, providing a means for students to interact with instructors in their formal classrooms as well as their co-curricular experiences. In the United States, early colleges were an adaption of these models, where residential tutors saw to students' classroom learning, living, and dining needs in residential campus dormitories (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). At the time, students' success was attributed largely to socioeconomic, gender, and racial privileges and early colleges served to replicate systems that created inequity in structures of race and class (Cabrera et al., 2017). This period in American higher education built a framework for combining living and learning as well as establishing college as an integration of classroom and co-curricular experiences (Rudolph, 1962). Colleges and universities later adopted a higher education model from Germany, focusing more heavily on

faculty research (Rudolph, 1962). This change resulted in higher education institutions where faculty time and the emphasis shifted away from the living and learning model that previously existed.

From the 1940s into the 1970s, higher education in the United States saw an increase in both the number of students entering colleges and universities and the types of institutions available. The GI Bill provided post-WWII service personnel opportunities to attend college, which helped support the creation of new institutions and expanded enrollment at existing colleges and universities. Over 600 public institutions of higher education (of them, nearly 500 community colleges) opened, the number of private institutions grew by 325, and many institutions became co-educational (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). By the end of this era, nearly 50% of high school graduates enrolled in an institution of higher education, approximately 11 million students (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). In the 1970s, the Equal Opportunity Act, the Age Discrimination Act, and Affirmative Action were just a few legislative acts that helped to diversify the student body and those working at colleges and universities (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). The cost of higher education continued to grow, while federal and state governments simultaneously decreased contributions (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). This growth also came with an increased emphasis on the assessment of institutional effectiveness.

The foundation for high impact practice development in higher education was built during the 1980s and 1990s, with an increased emphasis on students' learning and development in colleges and universities. The National Institute of Education (NIE) and the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land Grant Universities both published reports calling for American higher education to focus on undergraduate learning (Fink & Inkelas, 2015). The Commission's publication included a series of recommendations to meet the increased

enrollment of large public institutions as well as the diversity of students' racial/ethnic backgrounds, educational preparation, and socioeconomic status (Fink & Inkelas, 2015).

The American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) worked in the 1980s and 1990s to identify and define what they called "big ideas" in higher education, serving as active advocates for learning communities (Matthews et al., 2012). The Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University articulated a design for the future of research universities that included a focus on undergraduate education (1998). A joint task force report with AAHE, American College Personnel Association (ACPA), and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) identified ten recommendations for collaborations in academic and student affairs (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). These recommendations included an emphasis on building connections across learning, where integration of knowledge occurs in curricular and co-curricular experiences that relate to students' lived experiences (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). The report provided further evidence for early proponents of educational reform to develop structures on their campuses that could sustain development and growth of innovative programs to support students' learning and development and contributed to the further defining of high impact practices in the next century.

However, despite evidence that defined high impact practices, particularly learning communities, can be effective at providing students with gains in a variety of important areas, institutions still require individuals to invest time and effort to lead the development of these initiatives. Often, these individuals are tasked with determining ways to affect change within the organization in order to allow for curricular adoption and integration. Yet, little is known about how individuals work within the context of higher education organizations to affect the type of changes needed for these types of learning experiences to exist.

## Learning Communities

One high-impact educational practice that has been growing within the context of higher education in the United States is learning communities (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Kuh, 2008; Rocconi, 2011). Learning communities are defined as a curricular structure that links two or more academic courses, commonly around a theme or integration of content (Gabelnick, et al., 1990). Learning communities enroll a common cohort of students, allowing these students to work towards examination of the ideas presented that are common to the classes the students are taking (Smith et al., 2004). The courses selected for the learning community may be existing classes in the curriculum or could be courses developed specifically for the learning community (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999). Learning communities may also be residential in nature, combining students' academic experiences with their residence. While these curricular enhancements have been growing in recent decades, the origins of learning communities practice can be traced to the integrated residential models of Oxford and Cambridge (Cohen & Kisker, 2010).

### Operationalization of Learning Communities

Learning communities can be operationalized in a variety of ways on an institutional campus. One of the most common versions of curricular learning communities is the linked or clustered community. In this model, students co-enroll in a pair or cluster of courses that organize around a cross-subject topic; the faculty intentionally integrate course experiences to support this topic (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999). In these types of learning communities, pairings are often interdisciplinary and can serve as foundations within majors or minors (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). They may also be organized around general education courses that build foundational skills for advanced coursework (Smith et al., 2004). The primary role for faculty in this type of learning community is to seek connections between coursework and assignments, to assist

students with synthesis of learning. The model of learning communities at LaGuardia Community College is an example of this type of learning community and is an extension of the model built in the 1970s (Smith et al., 2004).

Freshman interest groups are learning community structures that integrate experiences in large courses. A small group of students (generally 20-25) enroll in a series of thematically aligned courses that are also linked to freshman or general education course requirements (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999). Generally, one faculty member serves as coordinating instructor who facilitates a seminar or course that integrates the content of multiple courses in which the students enroll (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). The faculty teaching courses that are a part of a freshman interest group do not generally coordinate with one another, and while students in the freshman interest group are in their courses, they are often not aware of who they are as content in the large courses does not change (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). This structure is often used at larger institutions, where it is likely students will be taking large lecture courses in their freshman year (Gabelnick et al., 1990). In these types of learning communities, students may enroll in a freshman seminar, another identified high impact practice, which can support their general transition to college. Freshman seminars are defined as:

> A course intended to enhance the academic and/or social integration of first-year students by introducing them (a) to a variety of specific topics, which vary by seminar type, (b) to essential skills for college success, and (c) to selected processes, the most common of which is the creation of a peer support group. (Greenfield et al., 2013, p. 90)

The ability to build relationships with peers and faculty members in groups such as this learning community model can be critical to student understanding and learning (Arum et al., 2011).

A third model of learning communities is the residentially based learning community, also referred to in the literature as living-learning communities (Smith et al., 2004). This learning community extends the connections between the classroom and students' learning environments. Residentially-based learning communities are often coordinated by the housing operations of the institution, clustering students together by shared academic pursuits or interests (Greenfield et al., 2013). There may be little integration with either faculty or the curriculum, although the opportunity to integrate these into the residential environment can provide strong experiences for students (Edwards & McKelfresh, 2002; Johnson & Romanoff, 1999; Smith et al., 2004). When students are co-enrolled in coursework and live together in a community, they may experience a synthesis of their in-and-out-of-class experiences (Greenfield et al., 2013). Although academic component are sometimes absent in some learning communities, students are able to develop important skills including collaboration and sense of community (Greenfield et al., 2013).

## Early Foundations in Learning Communities Development

In the early 21st century, two pioneers of education reform—John Dewey and Alexander Meiklejohn—helped to frame learning communities in a modern context. Dewey believed that the key to engaging learners was "to consider the power and purposes of those being taught" (1933, p. 45). Dewey's critique of education was its failure to recognize students as individuals with experiences and contexts that impacted their knowledge acquisition. Dewey also believed that educators failed to identify that students were partners in learning (Smith et al., 2004). Meiklejohn, focused on creating intersections of classroom and co-curricular experiences through the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin (Smith et al., 2004; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Meiklejohn felt that the first two years of college should prepare students for active citizenship and incorporate integrated learning and helping students develop solutions to modern

problems. Meiklejohn's emphasis was on liberal education outcomes. Although this vision did not transform the undergraduate curriculum at UW-Madison and the Experimental College was phased out over time, it served as inspiration for later innovations including the development of Chadbourne Residential College (CRC), the Bradley Learning Community (BLC), and the First-Year Interest Groups (FIGs) programs (Smith et al., 2004). Both CRC and the BLC harken back to the Oxford-Cambridge model, incorporating elements of residential colleges within the context of a large research institution.

One of the first learning communities post passage of the GI Bill was developed in the 1960s by a protégé of Meiklejohn, Tussman (Fink & Inkelas, 2015). Tussman structured the undergraduate curricula into programs of study that would unify the experiences of faculty and students into distinct programs (Johnson & Romanoff, 1999). Tussman was concerned that education was too heavily focused on individual courses within departments, rather than the integration of curriculum across programs of study (Love, 2012). The community Tussman structured included student-guided study, engagement in writing-intensive and team-taught classes, and aimed to teach students to be democratic citizens (Fink & Inkelas, 2015; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Concurrent to Tussman's work at the University of California, Berkeley, Cadwallader was engaged in creating a similarly-structured community at San Jose State University, Matthews was fostering a learning cluster model of undergraduate education at LaGuardia Community College, and Hill launched a learning community model at the State University of New York – Stony Brook (Fink & Inkelas, 2015).

The Evergreen State College was founded in Washington in the 1970s and one of its founding members was Cadwallader. From the onset of the institution's founding, the faculty committed to an instructional team-teaching approach where institutional policies and practices

(such as merit and organization) supported this philosophy (Fink & Inkelas, 2015). The programs offered at The Evergreen State College were based on a coordinated interdisciplinary studies approach that was flexible in structure (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). The cornerstone of the model at The Evergreen State College was adapted from Meiklejohn's work at the Experimental College a book seminar, whereby faculty facilitate conversations that integrate course materials through weekly conversation (Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Smith et al., 2004). This model of learning communities has existed at The Evergreen State College since its founding and the research center housed on the campus, the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education serves as a national leader for learning communities research and practice (Fink & Inkelas, 2015; Tinto, 2003).

As learning community practice expanded in the 1980s and 1990s, the structure of these communities evolved as well. Prior to this point in history, learning communities had primarily been developed to facilitate learning with incoming students (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999). Students' experiences in these communities helped them overcome the challenges of college transition as they gained academic and transition success skills. Learning communities have expanded to link other courses in the curriculum, such as general education (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999) and service learning (Tinto, 2003). Additional learning communities exist to address specific populations of students (Matthews et al., 1997).

The models and examples of learning communities examined thus far represent the struggle that is sometimes present when innovators attempt to affect change in organizational climates. As noted above, while Meiklejohn's Experimental College at UW-Madison spurred later efforts to develop learning practices on campus, the College itself was not successful in changing the model of undergraduate education. Dedicated individuals, working within their

institutional structures, still needed to restructure of institutional patterns and institutionalize innovation. In some cases, individuals were able to successfully develop and sustain these practices, but faculty were often met with opposition to their implementation from peers and administration (Matthews et al., 2012). Individuals who are innovators or early adopters to practice may struggle to identify ways to advance and institutionalize practices. They may also be challenged with determining how to effectively assess the impacts of these practices on individuals and the larger higher education organizations in which they operate.

## Assessment of Learning Communities as High Impact Practice

As different models of learning communities exist in higher education, the aims and goals for assessing this high impact practice also differs. In reviewing literature associated with learning communities practice, it is important to identify the ways that research quantifies students' learning and growth, as well as attempts to understand the contexts in which learning communities operate.

Tinto (2003) identified three commonalities across types of learning communities: a focus on shared knowledge, shared knowing, and shared responsibility. Taylor et al. (2003) investigated 119 assessment reports from 78 different institutions. The findings include identification that outcomes that are easiest to quantify include retention, GPA, and satisfaction. Although all students benefit from involvement, underserved students participating in high impact practices, particularly those identifying as African American, Latinx, and students with lower standardized test scores benefit at higher rates than other students (Kuh, 2008).

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is a common source of data used in the assessment of learning communities (Kuh, 2008; Love, 2012; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Zhao and Kuh sought to examine if a link existed between learning community participation and students'

success. The authors defined success as "student engagement in educationally purposeful activities, self-reported gains in a variety of desired outcomes in college, and overall satisfaction with their college experience" (p. 119). They utilized spring 2002 NSSE results from 365 four-year institutions, including randomly selected responses from 80,479 first-year and senior year students, all of whom indicated they had participated in, or planned to participate in, learning communities (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). They examined 47 items from the NSSE to construct six scales to represent student engagement. Of this, three measures were to gauge the quality of the environment in college, and three were to measure self-reported learning outcomes.

Zhao and Kuh (2004) found that learning community participation "is uniformly and positively linked with student academic performance, engagement in educationally fruitful activities … gains associated with college attendance, and overall satisfaction with the college experience" (p. 124). The researchers noted a limitation of the wording in the NSSE question about participation in the learning community, as there is no way to know whether respondents have or will participate in a learning community. Additionally, the NSSE does not distinguish learning community structures, so outcomes may be stronger in one type of learning community model. This study represents one of many studies that have attempted to determine the relationship between outcomes and learning community participation.

Rocconi (2011) conducted a study to examine both direct and indirect relationships between learning community participants, student engagement, and learning outcomes self-reported by participants. This assessment, conducted at an urban institution, utilized the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ). The CSEQ utilizes student self-reported measures. Although Rocconi critiqued the potential subjectivity of these results, the author also cited studies of validity for this instrument. The CSEQ and the student development model developed

by Pace were used in part in the development of the NSSE (Rocconi, 2011). The sample size included 241 traditional-aged, full-time, first-time freshmen students (Rocconi, 2011). There were 122 students in the sample who were in the non-residential learning communities program on the campus. Additionally, there were 119 students in the control group who were chosen at random from nine English composition courses. The researcher found a disproportionate number of females (62%) to males (38%) are represented in the sample.

The results from path analytic procedures examining direct and indirect relationships between participants in the learning community and student gains indicated no statistically significant difference in direct gains, indicating that the regression model that was utilized for the influences of variables for both student populations was an appropriate measurement (Rocconi, 2011). Rocconi noted the limitations of this study include its single institution sample, as well as small (241) sample size. Additionally, while the sample for the control non-learning communities group was random, students who participated from the learning communities were voluntary participants, which may affect the results of students' self-reported data (Rocconi, 2011). In the process of collecting data for this literature review, self-reported gains were a common assessment practice in learning community research.

Inkelas et al. (2007) found that students in residential living-learning communities self-reported positive interactions with peers and with faculty, as well as utilization of resources in the residential community. However, the authors also found no statistical significance in ability to think through complex ideas or demonstration of liberal learning. The result does not mean that students did not gain these experiences within the context of their experiences in the living-learning communities; rather, the result could be indicative of the complexity in measuring students' learning over time.

Stassen's (2003) study to examine the effects of three distinct living-learning models assessed the extent to which any of the structures facilitates student social and academic integration and fosters engagement in learning. The study took place at a large Research 1 University and the author evaluated the Residential Academic Program (RAP), Talent Advancement Program (TAP), and Honors College Learning Community. Although all three communities had distinct structures, the researcher found the students in all three learning communities had higher retention rates than non-learning community participants. Yancy et al. (2008) utilized the NSSE results in conjunction with institutional data to assess students' progress at a private and historically Black university. The researchers noted that the primary explanation for changes in student academic performance was attributed to the introduction of freshman academy/learning communities program, as there was no change in basic coursework and. aside from normal attrition, the faculty were relatively the same.

There have been recent critiques of whether high impact practices, such as learning communities and living-learning communities, affect students' retention at the rates reported. Johnson and Stage (2018) evaluated data from primary and secondary sources of 101 institutions to assess the effects participation in high impact practices had on student graduation. A lot of research done to date on the effects of high impact practices are from single institutions, with little research on the ways institutional decisions regarding curriculum may be affected when implementing high impact practices (Johnson & Stage, 2018). Johnson and Stage's results suggested that there was no significant relationship found in eight of ten high impact practices, including learning communities (Johnson & Stage, 2018). While there have been studies that link students' engagement to participation in high impact practices, the authors questioned whether engagement can be directly linked to completion and graduation rates at public institutions.

Kuh and Kinzie (2018) responded to this research by questioning whether the mere presence of high impact practices (HIPs) on a campus is enough to affect student gains. Kuh and Kinzie stated that "simply offering and labeling an activity a HIP does not necessarily guarantee that students who participate in it will benefit in the ways much of the extant literature claims" (p. 3). The researchers noted that institutional scaling of HIPs should be done with an equity mindset, with colleges and universities evaluating whether some students, particularly those who are underrepresented, might not have equal opportunity to participate. Indeed, Finley and McNair (2013) highlighted that disaggregation of data from national data sets, such as the NSSE's reporting on high impact practice self-reported gains, is a necessary step to make institutional decisions based in an equity mindset.

As institutions continue assessment of high impact practices, it is important to consider how to represent individual gains in relation to students' access to the HIP and its potential impact on retention. It is important to assess the contexts in which learning communities operate, as the context of the organization may significantly affect the ability of these practices to grow and develop over time.

## High Impact Practices as Organizational Change in Higher Education

Changes in the higher education landscape occur not necessarily because they are the right thing to do: sometimes, compliance with federal and state mandates necessitates such changes. Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP), an initiative of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), was built on a decade of research by focusing on the alignment of students' learning in college (Kuh, 2008). Rooted in the data provided by the NSSE, the LEAP initiative identifies the ways that a liberal education's outcomes, defined as broad knowledge, intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and

integrative learning (Kuh, 2008) may be applied broadly to all areas of college and university life. Kuh coined the term "high impact practice" and the definition serves as a way to identify practices that have a positive impact on students' learning and success.

High impact practices require that students expend significant amounts of time and effort on the activities. High impact practices also integrate learning inside and outside of the classroom, often require substantive and meaningful interactions with faculty, encourage collaboration with others from diverse backgrounds, and provide students with opportunities to receive frequent and substantive feedback (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2015). These practices evolved from the Kuh (2008), who focused on the activities and items likely to enhance the learning for students in and out of the classroom. Kuh expanded upon the core traits of HIPs and articulated their significance to student outcomes.

Higher education organizations are complex entities, with departments and units that are structured in a way to support autonomy in development of programs of study. For curricular innovations such as learning communities to exist, it is important to situate the practice within the context of organizational change. The practice of linking academic courses challenges higher education organizations historical structures and requires evaluation of the role of individuals and organizations within change management.

## Models of Organizational Change

### Lewin's Unfreeze-Change-Refreeze

One of the early theorists connected to research of organizational change is Lewin (1947), whose contributions to understanding organizational change have been influential in a variety of contexts since the 1940s (French & Bell, 1990). Lewin believed that change, not only

organizational but also societal, could be affected by enabling learning of individuals to understand and reframe their understanding of the world (Burnes, 2004).

Lewin (1947) identified a three-step approach to managing change: unfreeze-change-refreeze (Schein, 1996). The first stage of this theory, called *unfreezing*, involves motivation to change. For change to occur, existing habits and ideas must be unlearned so that conditions exist for new behavior to be enacted (Burnes, 2004). The second step in the process is the *change* itself, followed by the third step of *refreezing*, where the actions undertaken stabilize to protect from regressive action (Burnes, 2004). As articulated by Schein, the context must be supportive of these changes, either the individual's beliefs or the structure of the organization, or the change proposed may not be sustained. This model has been simultaneously praised for its foundational context within organizational change (Schein, 1996) and challenged for a view that its simplicity does not adequately account for the complexity of organizations (Clegg et al., 2005).

In seeking to identify the primary source for this theory, most often cited in the literature as Lewin (1947), I noted that there does not appear to be a complete theory outlined by the original author. This concept is further detailed by Cummings et al. (2015) in a counter history of Lewin's theory, demonstrating how this research may have evolved within the emergence of the organizational change field. Although this counter history may be accurate, and Lewin may not have entirely authored the theory, it has served as a foundational concept for a variety of theories around change and change management.

**Bureaucracy and Organizational Culture**

Weber's writings have served as a framework for understanding bureaucracy in hierarchical organizations. Weber believed that efficiency could be achieved by models built on bureaucratic structure; this concept was utilized by varied organizations throughout the 20th

century (Kuk et al., 2010). The organization of higher education into academic departments, divisions, and colleges are examples of bureaucratic structure in colleges and universities.

Organizations, however, are comprised of complexities beyond reporting structures. Research on organizational culture examines how entities are conceived and viewed in relation to the values and beliefs of those within the organization. The origins for this concept are often credited to Jacques, who looked to understand the emotional context of organizational structures (Kuk et al., 2010). Organizational cultures are formed as members of the organization interact with one another, accepting or rejecting change as it occurs; multiple organizational cultures and identities are likely to exist simultaneously. The restructure of institutional units, for example, can be impacted by the cultures within an organization as communication regarding goals and direction of changes can affect the ways that individual members feel included or excluded from change (Mills et al., 2005).

Change efforts in organizations are not always effective. Kotter and Cohen (2002) identified that successful change efforts had leaders who articulated the need for change, commitment by the members within the organization to change, and a culture within the organization that supported said change. O'Toole (1995) further highlights that the leadership of the organization must demonstrate a full commitment to change, through more than articulation of support.

**Bridges' Transition Model**

Bridges (1986) argued that "change happens when something starts or stops, or when something that used to happen in one way starts happening in another" (p. 25). Bridges stated that the word "transition" is a word often used interchangeably with change; yet, transition explores a psychological process over time, which Bridges noted "cannot be planned or managed

by the same rational formulate that work with change" (p. 25). The first requirement of the process of transition is a period of letting go of the structure and identities that once existed (Bridges, 1986). Bridges noted that

> whether people are moved or promoted, outplaced or reassigned, they have to let go of who they were and where they have been if they are to make a successful transition. A great deal of what we call resistance to change is really difficulty with the first phase of transition. (p. 25)

The next phase is a space between an old reality and a new reality, called the "neutral zone" (p. 25), which is the space where a new orientation is created, but it can also be marked by confusion and loss (Bridges, 1986). The final phase is a new beginning, where individuals become comfortable with new processes and priorities, and act in ways that assist them with functioning in this new reality (Bridges, 1986).

**Diffusion of Innovations**

Diffusion is defined as "the process in which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among members of a social system" (Rogers, 2003, p. 5). It is a unique form of social change, focused on communication around new concepts or ideas, and the ways that these ideas are developed, communicated, accepted, or rejected (Rogers, 2003). The origins of diffusions of innovations research can be traced to the work of Tarde (1903), who defined an S-shaped curve to describe the rate of adoption of innovation and the roles of social standing and those of leadership in the process of diffusion (Valente & Rogers, 1995). Following this research was a study of diffusion of the use of postage stamps and consumer innovations, although the 1940s is when the paradigm of diffusion of innovations was developed (Valente & Rogers, 1995). The study established a research methodology used commonly with diffusion

research: “retrospective survey interviews in which adopters of an innovation are asked when they adopted, where or from whom they obtained information about the innovation, and the consequences of adoption” (Rogers, 2003, p. 33). Ryan and Gross (1943) identified that early adopters to seed innovation utilized a trial period to test the innovation, permitting other community members to gather feedback and data prior to choosing to adopt. They also found that those who found out about the seed innovation heard about it from salespersons, while neighbors were cited as more important to those who were late adopters (Rogers, 2003). Ryan and Gross helped to establish the process of diffusion as one tied to social systems: that “the rate of awareness was faster than the rate of adoption… presumably, farmers had a stronger resistance to adopting the innovation than gaining awareness-knowledge of the idea” (Valente & Rogers, 1995, p. 250).

The concept of diffusion involves four key components: the innovation itself, how the innovation is communicated through social channels, the time of the diffusion, and the social system that it is diffused within (Rogers, 2003). The concept of *innovation* is defined as “as idea, practice, or object perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption” (Rogers, 2003, p. 36). *Communication channels* are the strategies that allow messages to be sent from one individual to another and have an ability to influence whether an individual adopts an innovation or not (Rogers, 2003). *Time* refers to how quickly an innovation is created, communicated, and adopted, while *social system* identifies the social elements: norms, opinions (and opinion leaders), and attitudes that affect the diffusion process (Rogers, 2003). Diffusion of innovations framework informs the ways that various factors, including social constructs and time, affect communication of new ideas. The Rogers diffusion of innovations curve depicts the way in which diffusion spreads throughout a market (Hawkins et al., 1998).

Rogers (2003) identified five main attributes of innovations that are important in the literature on diffusions:

1. *Relative Advantage*: defined as "the degree to which an innovation is perceived as being better than the idea it supersedes" (p. 229). Rogers noted that innovation type and characteristics of the adopters may determine if the advantage is recognized as economic, social, etc.
2. *Compatibility:* "the degree to which an innovation is perceived as consistent with the existing values, past experiences, and needs of potential adopters" (p. 240). Compatibility and incompatibility can exist with previous ideas, values/beliefs, and the needs of the individual seeking innovation.
3. *Complexity*: "the degree to which an innovation is perceived as relatively difficult to understand and use" (p. 257). Rogers noted that the level of perceived complexity of an innovation can negatively affect the rate of adoption.
4. *Trialability:* "degree to which an innovation may be experimented with on a limited basis" (p. 258). This attribute has a positive correlation with adoption of an innovation.
5. *Observability:* "the degree to which the results on an innovation are visible to others" (p. 258). As diffusion of innovations research has historically focused on technological advancements and ideas, observability has generally been seen as hardware and software.

Research in diffusion of innovations has been conducted in a number of fields, including the social sciences, economics, and politics. Although these fields may be diverse, the studies conducted center on understanding patterns of innovation adoption, and these five attributes are

generally attributed to this adoption process. While diffusion of innovations attributes alone do not inform researchers of adoption practices, they play a direct and indirect role in the decision-making process.

The diffusion of innovations theory identifies five categories of adopters: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards (Rogers, 1962; Figure 1). Individuals who are classified as innovators want to be the first to try the innovation. Approximately 2.5% of the population are characterized as innovators. Individuals who are classified as innovators are likely to operate outside the social relationships within an organization, which assists in gathering information outside peer groups (Rogers, 2003). These individuals help bring new ideas into an organization or system. Early adopters, also referred to as opinion leaders, represent 13.5% of adopters. These individuals demonstrate characteristics that align with being open to new ideas and risk, but function primarily within the peer structure of the organization (Rogers, 2003). These early adopters are seen as respected by peers, and therefore their adoption of an innovation is seen as helping reduce uncertainty (Rogers, 2003).

The next category, the early majority, tend to make up a third of the members within an organization or system (Rogers, 2003). Their adoption of an innovation is done purposefully, but often not as a leader within the system. This category of adopter requires evidence of the innovation's effectiveness before adoption. The late majority adopters (34%) follow immediately afterwards, often adopting due to either economic factors or increased peer pressure within a system (Rogers, 2003). This group requires there to be little uncertainty as to the effectiveness of an innovation before they will adopt. The final group, the laggards (16%) look to the past as a point of reference for decision-making around adoption of innovation (Rogers, 2003). They are individuals whose peer group also tends to be centered around tradition. While there is a more

negative connotation for this group, adoption challenges may be rooted within the system as much as within the individual (Rogers, 2003).

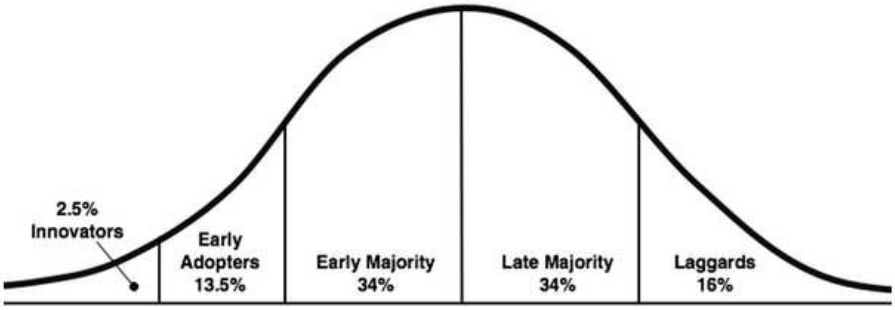


Figure 1

*Adopter Categorization Based Upon Innovativeness (Rogers, 2003)*

Sáenz-Royo, et al. (2015) evaluated the ways that the structure of communities affects that rate of innovation diffusion. The model utilized in the study assessed the ways that initial adopters to innovation interacted with individuals operating within historical established practices and procedures. The researchers concluded that the number of individuals participating in the initial adoption had a direct effect on the probability that an innovation would have successful adoption (Sáenz-Royo et al., 2015). They noted that the higher levels that an organization is connected through social systems, the higher the probability that diffusion of innovations will be hindered (Sáenz-Royo et al., 2015). This argument is based in understanding that "social pressure increases with increasing the number of contacts and therefore…the probability for an agent to accept the innovation" (Sáenz-Royo et al., 2015, p. 10). Social peer pressure can therefore be viewed as a factor in how new ideas are diffused to potential adopters. The authors also cite that different members of an organization can be seen as having different influence on opinion formation (Sáenz-Royo et al., 2015).

Raynard (2017) utilized diffusion of innovations theory to examine approaches for marketing and implementation strategies of electronic books (e-books). Raynard found that

undergraduate students are utilizing e-books at a higher rate than faculty and that these individuals are also likely to be under the age of 35 and male. However, faculty and students are more likely to prefer print books when learning or reading lengthier documents but utilize e-books to search for specific information (Raynard, 2017). The researcher noted that understanding the reasons that members are choosing to use or avoid e-books can assist libraries in determining strategies to market these resources to their members.

In their dissertation research, DeRousie (2014) studied four innovations in higher education: use of common application, test optional admissions, no loan financial aid, and massive open online courses (MOOCs) to review rate of adoption, factors associated with adoption, and similarities/differences in the types of adopters, rate of adoption, and success of adoption. The study was conducted through a longitudinal analysis of descriptive statistics for over 1,300 four-year public and private not-for-profit institutions (DeRousie, 2014). The researcher concludes that institutional environmental and social factors that impacts of adoption were not consistent for the four innovations researched but did determine that characteristics related to prestige were correlated to higher rates of adoption (DeRousie, 2014).

## Summary

Learning communities in higher education have a long history. Historically, learning communities serve as a foundation within the organization of colleges in the U.S., but have also seen a renaissance in growth in the past 20 years. Early educators influenced the field of learning communities development, as they challenged the structures of academic curriculum on individual campuses while seeking to advance ideas of students' learning (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). The emphasis on students' learning and academic development, although discussed in the research as outcomes, does not appear to be as heavily emphasized as the outcomes of retention

and GPA. Arum et al. (2011) stated that institutions should focus on the importance of academic rigor and group learning in social contexts over what they argue to be a focus on social engagement. Browne and Minnick (2005) argued that focusing on student satisfaction, GPA, and retention does not adequately assess student intellectual development, given that outcomes attributed to learning communities includes critical thinking skills and acquisition of knowledge. While student satisfaction, grades, and retention are certainly important outcomes for the investments made in learning communities, focusing on the development of learning community diffusion over time will complement existing research.

Despite an expansive research base and connections to high impact practice, learning communities implementation requires support from academic departments, faculty, and senior leadership, and conditions on campus must exist that support this type of change (Laufgraben, Shapiro, & Associates, 2004). Understanding how individuals who seek to implement learning communities on campuses can challenge barriers to innovation in the curriculum is important for working within the institution to affect change. I describe diffusion of innovations as a theoretical framework to view organizational change within learning communities research and as a guide for the research. Rogers (2003) outlines broad categories from research that have shown to influence the rate of adoption and identified characteristics of adopters within organizations. While the research done on diffusion of innovations has been primarily focused on rate of adoption across multiple individuals over time, this study will seek to utilize the framework in relation to the narrative shared by one individual from a meta-level of leadership within learning communities practice.

# CHAPTER 3: METHODS

This study sought to understand the lived experiences of Dr. Emily Lardner as it relates to her time working with learning communities practice, utilizing a narrative approach to gather data through interviews. I asked Dr. Lardner to reflect on her time working in the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education and explored the research puzzle of what we can learn from Dr. Emily Lardner's experiences as they relate to learning communities adoption and practice.

## Method

Qualitative research is more than a distinction in methods from quantitative research (Laerd, n.d.). Denzin and Lincoln (1994) provide the following definition:

> Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive naturalistic approach to its subject matter…qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the study of and collection of a variety of empirical materials. (p. 2)

Narrative inquiry is defined as "an approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honoring lived experiences as a source of important knowledge and understanding" (Clandinin, 2016, p. 17). Narrative inquiry recognizes narrative as serving both as the method of the study, and the phenomena itself (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). According to Clandinin (2016, "Narrative inquirers understand experience as a narratively composed phenomenon. Narrative inquiry is thus methodology and phenomenon" (p. 16). Narrative inquiry allows an insight into knowledge, as it is shaped by lived experiences and stories, through the "construction of

narratives of experience, there is a reflexive relationship between living a life story, telling a life story, retelling a life story, and reliving a life story" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 71). The narrative approach is dynamic in nature and permits the researcher to gain insight into the role of an individual in context of personal history (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Narrative inquiry has been critiqued by some as an unrefined approach to research. Kvale (1996) noted that "the qualitative research interview has sometimes been dismissed as not being scientific" (p. 59) and critics state "it may perhaps provide interesting results and serve as preparation to scientific investigations, but the interview as such is not a scientific method" (p. 59). Kvale countered these claims by noting that science may be defined as "the methodological production of new, systematic knowledge" (p. 60). However, narrative research methods have been utilized in the history of the social sciences, serving as a foundation for the works of Freud (1955), Erikson (1958, 1963), and Piaget (1948). As narrative inquiry has evolved, so too have approaches to its use in research.

The concept of social constructivism is simultaneously one of realism and relativism (Crotty, 1998). Constructivism assumes that each of us employs a unique view of the world, shaped by our lived experiences and the meaning-making we assign to these experiences (Crotty, 1998). As noted by Rogers (2007):

> Researchers working from a social constructivist stance reject any "natural" account of the self but retain the idea of self as a social creation. This viewpoint assumes a self capable of generating meanings, but these meanings are necessarily conveyed through structures (logical, syntactical) that are social in nature. In brief, the narrator (and the narrative) cannot be separated from the social context…these researchers view the narrator as self-reflective within a social context. In an interview analysis, then, it is

possible to interpret relations between external (social) contingencies and internal (individual and self-reflective) experience. (p. 103)

Narrative inquiry is both dialectical (discussion of ideas and opinions) and hermeneutical (theory and methodology of interpretation) (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This approach permits an opportunity to seek insight into the life experiences of individuals and an opportunity to engage in discussion about the meaning of these experiences.

The approach of narrative inquiry that I undertook in this study focused on first-person reflections by the individual centered in this study. The narrative researcher may "note stories but more often records actions, doings, and happenings, all of which are narrative expressions" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 79). As a researcher utilizing narrative inquiry, I spent time reflecting and contextualizing the perceptions that I had of Dr. Lardner, as well as prior and current experiences with learning communities, as these reflections shaped my inquiry. This approach is as essential, as the researcher's and participant's lives become intertwined through story and both are "shaped by attending to the past, present, and future unfolding social, cultural, institutional, linguistic, and familial narratives (Clandinin, 2016, p. 43).

## Data Collection Methods

The core to narrative research is the interview, which is how data are collected. Narrative research often involves conversations, which can range from unstructured to structured interviews (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007). Interviewing has been defined as understanding the lived experiences of individuals as they make meaning of those experiences (Seidman, 2019). Although a wide range of options exist for structuring interviews as conversations, they all inherently require participation in a way that elicits story. A constructivist epistemological perspective on narrative inquiry shares power between the individual conducting research, and

the individual participating in the research (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007). The relationship also allows for co-construction of the research, so that the individual providing their story is permitted a voice in its presentation (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007). The reflections of the participant are as critical to the research as the reflections of the researcher (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

In alignment with this approach, this research utilized semi-structured interviews, a common method in qualitative inquiry. Semi-structured interviews offer the researcher opportunities to adjust the interviews as needed through information gleaned (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). In this sense, the interviews were iterative, and protocol was adapted to accommodate emerging data. This approach permitted flexibility and adaptability, while also working from a basic structure of interview questions. Details regarding the interview protocol and questions are provided in Appendix A.

After securing approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Colorado State University (see Appendix C), I contacted Dr. Lardner to organize an initial schedule for interviews to take place. In preparation for this conversation, Dr. Lardner was provided with an informed consent document to review (see Appendix B); this document was reviewed in detail prior to beginning our first interview. I recorded these interviews via Zoom conferencing software, following the semi-structured format discussed earlier. Recordings used the feature available through Zoom. I took notes to accompany the audio recordings, to catalog my observations and feelings as they occurred in real time during the interview (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Recording my own experience as it happened was important to combine with the transcripts of my conversations with Dr. Lardner to create a more complete record of our interactions. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) noted that

> Researchers are often more reluctant than necessary to use field notes. They worry that field notes will be insufficient to capture field experiences adequately. When this happens, tape recorders and videotape tend to be overused, with severe transcription penalties later as field notes are made on the basis of the transcripts. In any event, it is the fear that somehow experience will be lost that drives researchers to try to record or tape all of experience. What we fail to acknowledge clearly enough is that all field texts are constructed representations of experience. (p. 106)

**Individual Interviews**

I utilized an adapted three-interview series model, proposed by Seidman (2019). This approach "allows both the interviewer and participant to explore the participant's experience, place it in context, and reflect on its meaning" (Seidman, 2019, p. 21). However, as I examined the lived experiences of one individual over a length of a career, the following topics were addressed in our interviews.

1. The first interview focused on the academic journey of Dr. Lardner. This interview asked Dr. Lardner to discuss her academic background and journey into education, and the stages on that journey that led to her role as a faculty member and researcher.
2. The second interview centered on Dr. Lardner's experiences while serving as director of the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education. Dr. Lardner reflected on this time as it related to work with learning communities adoption and practice in higher education.
3. The final interview focused on asking Dr. Lardner to reflect on the meaning of experiences within the context of what had been examined to this point, and reflections on what was learned from these experiences. We also discussed possible implications that

these insights may provide for current and future work in learning communities in higher education.

As I was unsure how many interviews would ultimately be needed to address the goals I identified above, I initially proposed three interviews of 90-minutes each. I retained the ability to modify the structure as needed to explore constructed themes. As noted by Seidman (2019), "there are no absolutes in the world of interviewing" (p. 25). Dr. Lardner and I ended up engaging in three 2-hour long interviews for the initial data collection. We had an additional 2.5-hour conversation after a draft of chapter 4 was authored, which allowed Dr. Lardner to review the narrative in full with me. During this conversation, we examined areas where additional context and information would be helpful. Dr. Lardner then provided feedback in written format to me, which I reviewed and incorporated into the final narrative.

## Data Analysis

I used a transcription service to create verbatim transcription from each interview. In order to allow for validity of transcription, I reviewed the transcript thoroughly and made edits and corrections as necessary. The transcriptions were sent to Dr. Lardner to review and provide feedback. In addition to the opportunity to provide written feedback to me, Dr. Lardner and I dedicated time at the start of the second and third interview to discuss any feedback or observations. If any additional information needed to be included after further reflection, it was incorporated into the existing data set to minimize researcher error. Following Gibbs (2007) recommendation for narrative analysis, I reviewed the transcripts "for events, experiences, accounts of things that happened, and the details of the actual narrative" (Terrell, 2016, p. 167).

I conducted a search for key words and themes that were constructed from the transcription after each interview, so that I could look for themes throughout the interview

process and discussed these themes with Dr. Lardner throughout. From this, I was able to construct a story based on the accounts received, looking for how the story evolved from the data while seeking to identify sub-themes that emerged from the conversations (Terrell, 2016). A completed narrative is presented in detail in Chapter 4 of this study.

As this research is rooted in narrative inquiry, the storytelling of Dr. Lardner is a creation and recreation of lived stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). As such, this research approach emerged through relationship with the individual in question. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) noted that individuals conducting narrative inquiry

> tend to be less sure of themselves, less clear of what it is they have to say, *after* investing themselves intensely over time in their research than they were prior to doing their research…part of the inquirer's doubts come from understanding that they need to write about people, places, and things as *becoming* rather than *being*. (p. 145)

I kept a journal to log my general observations throughout the inquiry process, as I acknowledged that the process of conducting these interviews affected my own understanding and interpretation of experiences related to my past and current work. The journal helped me keep enough distance to keep the interviews centered on Dr. Lardner's experiences, rather than my own, but also permitted me the opportunity to reflect on my own process of learning. "Personal journals are written by inquirer to separate material likely to be shared with participants from material the inquirer feels is inappropriate to share. This raises questions about whether material kept private at the field text stage can or should be made public at the research text stage" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 176). This journal added dimension to reflections in Chapter 5 and assisted in meaning-making. I chose to share with Dr. Lardner my observations and reflections of each interview, along with the transcripts, throughout the inquiry process.

Additionally, I kept a methodological journal, which permitted me to make explicit what and how I learned through this research inquiry. This journal also informed methodologically the choices that I made in this research.

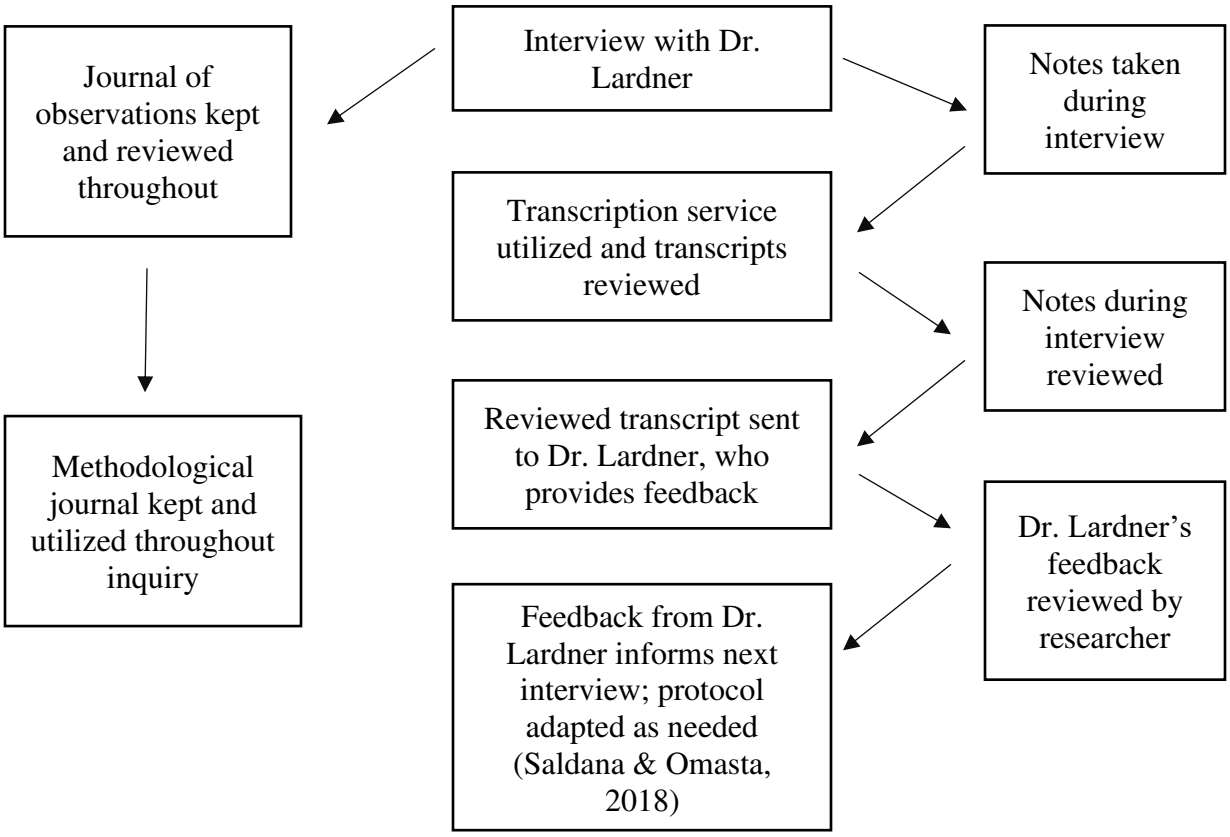


Figure 2

*Conceptual Map of Research Inquiry Methods of Trustworthiness (Validity)*

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) shared that the question of fact or fiction in narrative inquiry can be an elusive process:

> In narrative inquiry, the distinction between fact and fiction is middle. It is confronted as an issue most often in questions over research texts when we puzzle about, or are asked to puzzle about, the factuality and truthfulness of what we have written. But when we

> puzzle over these matters, we are puzzling over matters already evident in early stages of the work, matters that intensify as we come to writing research texts. (p. 179)

As Dr. Lardner shared her lived experiences, it was a construction of experience as told by the individual. The co-construction of these experiences into story necessarily created a narrative based on the interpretations that Dr. Lardner and I both brought to the research. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) noted that it is important to pay as much attention to the story that is not told in narrative inquiry as it is to pay attention to the story that is shared. Narrative inquiry requires thoughtful examination of the decisions made throughout the inquiry: "We need to be wakeful about what we are doing as narrative inquirers, so we can continue to learn what it means to do narrative inquiry" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 184). It was important for me as a researcher to be attentive to how I approached this inquiry and its outcomes.

**Member Checking**

I utilized member checking, where "the final report or specific description or themes" are shared with participants and they are provided the opportunity to provide additional context (Creswell, 2009, p. 191). As this is a co-constructed process with Dr. Lardner, her perspectives in reviewing not only field notes, but also my descriptions and observations, was important to ensuring validity. After each interview, Dr. Lardner had an opportunity to review not only the corrected transcripts, but also my observations and reflections from my methodological journal. Time was dedicated within each interview period to discuss observations and reflections from Dr. Lardner for clarification. Dr. Lardner received a completed draft of chapter four for review. We met for 2.5 hours to review the chapter and discussed areas where further elaboration or clarification. Dr. Lardner reviewed the document after our conversation and sent clarifications. I reviewed the feedback and incorporated these changes into the final narrative.

**Triangulation of Data**

This research inquiry involved multiple interviews with the same participant (Mishler, 1990). It was important for me to engage with "repeated listenings to taped interviews and readings of transcripts" (Mishler, 1990, p. 427) which allowed me to see an internal consistency. Internal consistency seeks to identify whether information shared is not contradictory in another part of the inquiry. In the event that information shared at a later point in dialogue appears to be contradictory, reviewing prior comments and reflections can provide an opportunity to seek clarification (Mishler, 1990). Each interview was listened to three times: the first was to check the transcription against the audio and make appropriate edits. The second listen provided an opportunity to note reflections and comments and to note observations in my methodological journal. The third listen occurred after the final interview was conducted and all transcriptions were completed, so that I could reflect on any spaces where internal consistency in the narrative may have been a concern to be addressed.

**Usefulness**

One measure of trustworthiness in a narrative inquiry is to determine the usefulness of this research. In this inquiry, the question is whether individuals in higher education contexts can find this research useful as they navigate the development of learning communities. Eisner (1998) provided three criteria to evaluate the usefulness of an inquiry:

1. Comprehension: study can help us understand a situation that would otherwise be confusing or enigmatic;
2. Anticipation: study provides descriptions and interpretations that go beyond the information given about them;

3. Guide/map: highlights, explains, provides directions the reader can take into account; deepens and broadens experience and assists in helping to understand what is being looked at (pp. 58-59).

In considering this research's relationship to existing research on learning communities practice, it was important to ensure that the narrative co-constructed throughout the process of inquiry connected to and built on understanding in the field, and that connections were drawn to the existing literature and theoretical framework of diffusion of innovations.

## Ethical Considerations

As a researcher engaging with narrative inquiry, my research was constructed alongside Dr. Emily Lardner as she shared her stories. In this way, I needed to be attentive to the way that I constructed field notes, and how those notes were compiled into final research texts for this dissertation. Clandinin (2016) articulated that one strategy for sharing interim research texts with research participants is through use of "white spaces where words can be added, with wonders, questions, and comments that invite participants to say more, to clarify, to add or subtract details" (p. 200). The process of inviting Dr. Lardner's engagement with my research texts honored her authority within her own narrative and created a relational connection with her within context of this research. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note that, rather than consider who owns stories in narrative inquiry, it is better to consider the relational responsibilities of stories, where issues of presence, attentiveness, and responsiveness are addressed:

> Ethical matters need to be narrated over the entire narrative inquiry process. They are not dealt with once and for all, as might seem to happen, when ethical review forms are filled out and university approval is sought for our inquiries. Ethical matters shift and change as

> we move through an inquiry. They are never far from the heart of our inquiries no matter where we are in the inquiry process. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 170).

Although formal IRB approval was obtained prior to engaging in this research, I felt it necessary to engage Dr. Lardner in a conversation about the nature of my research prior to creating my proposal. Her consent to being centered in this biographical narrative research allowed me to move forward. My role as researcher was to be in a collaborative process with Dr. Lardner to mutually construct the story as the research progressed. The voice of Dr. Lardner and myself expressed in this research was sorted out through exercise of judgment. Dr. Lardner's engagement with my writing throughout the process not only sought accuracy in its depiction, but also allowed her to be engaged with the analysis and interpretation of what was constructed from our conversations. This approach was important to ensuring that my interpretations of Dr. Lardner's narrative represented not only my understanding as a researcher, but her understanding as the narrator. Dr. Lardner reflected that she appreciated the opportunity to understand how I was making meaning throughout the inquiry process, and that being able to dialogue about this learning, in turn, assisted her in better understanding her experiences and current practice.

## Summary

The purpose of this biographical narrative study was to understand the experiences of Dr. Emily Lardner, who served in a positional leadership role associated with the diffusion of learning communities in higher education for over two decades in the U.S. I designed this study to explore the research puzzle of how she, through her extended leadership role at the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education, affected change in learning communities practice within the United States. This study complements existing

research on diffusion of innovations in higher education by focusing on understanding adoption through the lens of an organizational leader within innovative practice.

# CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION AND CO-CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

## Introduction

Chapter four is focused on the narrative of Dr. Lardner and a co-construction of knowledge. As noted in Chapter three, the narrative approach taken into this research shares power between Dr. Lardner as the individual participating in the research and me as the individual conducting research. This research project is focused on the research puzzle, "What can we learn from Dr. Emily Lardner's lived experiences as they relate to learning communities adoption and practice in higher education settings in the United States?" This relationship demonstrates a co-construction of this narrative, honoring Dr. Lardner's voice and reflections within the study. I primarily use Dr. Lardner's own words in presenting the narratives. I utilize italics where I have made connections or use my own words to elaborate on a topic.

From the onset, Dr. Lardner and I acknowledged our positions as individuals who both have knowledge and experience from our different perspectives. I was attentive throughout this process to ensure that Dr. Lardner had opportunities to verify that her experience be represented as accurately as possible. During the analysis between our conversations, I took extensive notes and reflections, and identified key words and themes constructed from each transcript. These documents were shared, along with the transcripts themselves, with Dr. Lardner; in turn, Dr. Lardner reviewed each of these documents and we reflected together in conversation throughout the inquiry process. As this chapter came together, it was shared in its entirety with Dr. Lardner, who reviewed for accuracy and additional notes and context. While Dr. Lardner utilizes a formal title in her daily work, she asked that I refer to her as Emily for the purposes of our conversations. As such, I refer to her as Emily in my reflections throughout this narrative. As

you read this chapter, the use of "I" is done for both Emily and me, with Emily's voice presented first, in italics, followed by my voice, visualized under a series of asterisks. Now, I share with you, the story of Dr. Emily Lardner.

## Key Themes from the Narrative Inquiry

### I Had a Lot of Social Capital

*It was never a life goal to be an academic. I am one of five siblings; the first three of us are close in age, with me being the second born and the second daughter. My mom was trained as an early childhood teacher and earned her master's degree and taught for a number of years before having us kids. She did not go back to work until the youngest was in third grade and I was in high school. My father has a background in business. I grew up in Rock Island, IL.*

*I started kindergarten at four and a half at a private school, where I also did first grade. I am the only kid who got to go to private school, and it's because I missed the public-school deadline. My parents shared that a couple of months into second grade, I came home and said, "At St. Katherine's, they cared about what I wrote about, and at Eugene Field, they only care about my printing." Like a lot of people, my schooling is a mixture of the things that are interesting, like when I learned about geography in fifth grade, and then all the rules: like when you get to go to the bathroom, where your skirts are supposed to fall, and what your sentences are supposed to be like.*

*I think we, as really young children, have our own temperaments, and where we are fosters, facilitates, exacerbates, or kind on builds on that. Education was important to my mom and dad, and I learned through my family that education was important, not that it was enjoyable. My mom's mom also went to college. I had the chance to go with her to her 50$^{th}$ college reunion, and she seemed proud of having an education for the academics of it, but I*

*never heard her talk about the good times she had, or the friends she made. I don't think I ever expected to enjoy education, but I knew that it was important and I should take it seriously. So, even in my worst days in junior high school or high school, I knew I had to maintain good grades. It wasn't because I was a dedicated learner or I loved learning; I knew that no matter what kind of screwing around I was going to do, that it was my job to take school seriously, but it had nothing to do with intrinsic rewards.*

*The city I grew up in is geographically segregated by race. The neighborhood elementary and junior high schools I attended were White. All the kids from my junior high went to the single large high school, as did kids from the other three junior highs. Rock Island High School was (and still is) the place where kids from varied class backgrounds and racial/ethnic identities come together. In 1972, when I was a sophomore, Rock Island High School was closed because of what became known as the "Rocky Riots." In 2018, Joy Shannon and Gaye Shannon Burnett reflected on what it was like to attend Rocky as young African America women, explaining that Black students didn't feel like they had a voice (WVIK, 2018).*

*To put the events at my former high school into a wider context, it's important to understand that Rock Island is a straight shot west from Chicago on Interstate 80. In 1969, Chicago police murdered two Black Panther party leaders, Fred Hampton and Mark Clark. At the time, police alleged that the Panthers fired first. In 1971, the Commission of Inquiry into the Black Panthers and Law Enforcement Officials, whose members included executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Roy Wilkins and former US Attorney General Ramsey Clark, reported that contrary to police claims, the raid functioned as a "search and destroy" mission aimed at the leaders of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panthers. According to the report, neither the Federal Government nor the state sought to establish the*

*truth in the killing of the two Black Panther party leaders (Johnson, 1972). After being buried for months, the report was finally made public in 1972. Among the White students I knew, rumors flew that "the Black Panthers" were coming to Rock Island.*

*I don't know triggered the fighting, nor how the decision was made to close campus. When we came back to school, we had to walk past security officers. School officials also launched a program called "Positive Peer Culture" or PPC. A small group of Black and White student leaders were selected to meet weekly with two group facilitators. The focus of these group sessions was to build mutual respect and understanding and to engage in problem-solving around school issues. I got to be in that group and for me it was a powerful dialogic. Powerful. I don't remember anything I might have contributed, but I do remember listening to my peers talk about lived experiences that were profoundly different than mine.*

*I had a glimpse of the limits of my experience in junior high school. Probably because we lived in such a segregated town, there were exchange days where student council members would spend a day at a different junior high. I got to go to a junior high downtown, one that was predominantly Black. I remember feeling really self-conscious, that "there's nothing about me that fits in here. I don't like the way I walk, the way I talk, the way I dress." I didn't have the language to talk about my own racial identity, but that experience helped me realize that I was a White kid, not just a kid.*

*When I was in elementary school, we had school elections. I won and a boy got second place. A teacher said to me, "well, why don't you let him be president of the student council, and you be president of the Red Cross, because it's better for a boy to be on student council and a girl to be on the Red Cross." I was like, "I don't agree with that." By high school, there were discussions about, and this will date me, why girls were not allowed to wear pants. In high*

*school, there was a girl's track team for the first time; I'm sure it was in response to Title IX legislation. I felt really comfortable advocating on behalf of gender. My parents were supportive of all of us, so there were not gender expectations forced upon us, but gender as a category was problematized for me in school.*

*When I was in high school, I had good grades, but I also skipped school and went to school stoned – I walked that edge of being a good enough girl. That was possible because I had a lot of social capital; I grew up in a White, middle-class, English-speaking family, with an older sister and a mom who was a teacher in the district and my father was a local businessman. I refused to take the SAT test, so the only criteria that I had was to apply for a school that only required the ACT test. Community colleges weren't on my radar at the time, and so I ended up applying to the University of Wisconsin-Madison, which was a huge public school four hours away from me.*

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In listening to Emily share her early childhood, I reflected the ways that identities helped her to experience education in and out of formal schooling. Her mother's background as a teacher may have contributed to her ability to be a good academic student. I found her observations of being taught by her parents the significance of education, but not the enjoyment of learning, interesting considering her future career in higher education and learning communities. In many respects, Emily's account of her K-12 education appears performative; she knew she needed to maintain her grades, even if she was not focused on what she was learning.

With both of Emily's parents, and one grandparent, achieving higher education, I would have expected that she would have experienced a more guided process towards selecting a

college or university. Instead, what Emily illuminates for me is that despite not being a first-generation college student, the choice of which institution to attend can be as random as a student without any higher education knowledge. She chose to apply to the University of Wisconsin-Madison because they did not require the SAT, and it was (relatively) close to her hometown. When I reflect on how much effort and energy is spent in my own employment on helping to explain the merits of living-learning communities, co-curricular experiences, and academic integrations to incoming students, Emily's observations make me wonder what level of impact these efforts ultimately have on the decision-making of high school students.

Emily's early experiences understanding race and gender likely impacted her understanding of self and others. Her privileges were highlighted for her in the moment, but her reflections of problematizing gender and race at a young age highlight early experiences with advocacy, justice, and change.

**I Like School, But I Don't Really Know How to Navigate This**

*Going from a town where I knew my way around, to a large university where you have to walk around multiple buildings and I didn't know anyone was tough. I was blown away looking at the first course catalog and seeing all the types of classes that were offered. I applied to the Integrated Liberal Studies program because of the way they described the learning.*

*When I came back to UW-Madison for my sophomore year, I moved off-campus. I couldn't figure out what I wanted to study. I wondered about majoring in agricultural economics, but I didn't really know what that was. Maybe journalism, but something like agricultural journalism. It was all self-advising. My sophomore year was also when my college TA hit on me. I thought, "I kind of like college algebra" but I didn't want to date him. At that point, I didn't really want to study college algebra anymore. In another class, my law and*

*society course, my professor invited me and another student over to his place. Again, I was just totally naïve. I didn't date, I'd never had a boyfriend. He invited us over and pulls out cocaine. This was the early-80s, before there was an emphasis on sexual harassment. This was a moment where I thought "I like school, but I don't really know how to navigate this."*

*I was also struggling with my experiences in the Integrated Liberal Studies program. I think the most disappointing thing about the program was the seminar called Ways of Knowing. That course was really "mushy." We were reading Studs Terkel, I don't know why we were, and I still remember thinking "I don't know what to do with these vignettes besides read them." I'm pretty sure my teacher didn't actually know what to do. I was doing my best, and that was usually okay because I'm a standard English speaker. I hated the feeling of "I don't get this, and I really want to get it, and I don't get it, and I don't know how to get it, and I also don't know what you're asking me to do." I like to have agency, and to know what I'm doing so that I can get better at it. I didn't know how to get better at learning in that seminar, so I would have appreciated someone being in place to help me learn. I felt that my teacher didn't have any skills in building a community [in the classroom]. I'm sure he was a graduate student in philosophy or something. He was probably a good graduate student, but he probably didn't know what to do with wayward kids who were in college for the first time. That class was really disappointing, because that could have been the connective tissue for me for the whole program. Some kids got it – I could see that. Some of my classmates would hang out with the faculty or at the Meiklejohn House. It seemed like some kids felt they belonged. I tried. I would kind of just stand there, but I didn't know what to do to be an actual member of that group. So I tried to find my own groups. That's how I wound up on the fencing team and wandering around the agriculture barn.*

*In my freshman year, I think I did everything that ILS told me to do. Intellectually, courses like my "Greek and Roman Culture" class were very interesting. I attended a church with one of the professors who co-taught it. I was too shy to say "hello" to them and they didn't ever say "hello" to me. I interpreted that as "I'm supposed to be in this program about integrated knowledge, but we're only supposed to do that in the classroom on the terms of the professors. We don't integrate Sundays and Mondays." The "Physical Universe" class was a wonderful course on its own. But then what? I guess I was supposed to know how to integrate them [my classes]. My sophomore year, I started picking my own courses. Whatever would have been coherent in the coursework was something that I didn't get. I was doing my own advising and I'd moved off-campus; I was not doing what anybody would have recommended, had I asked anybody or if anybody had asked me how I was doing. Maybe if I'd taken the whole curriculum in the sophomore year, the integration would have unfolded in its own special way. I didn't know what college was. I needed somebody to say to me "here's what we've got for you this quarter, Emily. And here's what we've got next quarter." When I didn't sign up for the full gamut of classes, I needed somebody to say to me "We miss you. We like you. We want you. We're so glad you're here." Nobody in ILS asked me why I left the program, or invited me to come back.*

*I took a Swahili course with an incredibly gracious, learned, and kind professor in the African Languages program. He really wanted me to stay and major in languages, because then I could go to Africa and document one of the hundreds of languages that had not yet been written down. I thought "No, I don't think I can do that. I don't know how you can devote your life to documenting language." While I felt highly valued by my professor, I didn't have anyone who helped me connect majoring in languages to a future career. By the end of my sophomore year, I still really didn't know what I was going to major in, and I thought that maybe I wanted to*

*transfer. My folks said, "well, why don't you just come home and live with us and go to the local liberal arts college?" I'm sure they were worried about me, because I really had no idea what I was doing. I think I wanted to go to Arizona at one point because a friend was going to Arizona. When I think about it now, I think how I've heard that in my own kids. I would have said the same thing; "I hear you're having a lot of ideas and I'm not sure you're doing well. Why don't you just come home and live with me and let's kind of get your feet under you." None of my kids went through undergrad in four years—they're all different versions of swirlers.*

*In hindsight, I would say they [UW-Madison] did not have a strong co-curricular program; they didn't know how to build community outside the classroom. The classroom was fine, but then I went back to my dorm that had no connection to the Integrated Liberal Studies program. Most of the girls in my dorm were from Wisconsin and they were rooming with their friends. I was shy and I didn't know anyone. I was sort of happy in school but lonely. I joined the fencing team, because why not? I walked into a building and there was a little sign. That's where I learned to read bulletin boards, and I still read bulletin boards everywhere I go. You don't have to ask anybody questions, you just read the bulletin board and you get a sense of what might be possible there. I found some community there [on the fencing team] for a while and earned a letter. I felt valued by the fencing coach, but that's not enough to build upon.*

*I don't remember anybody saying "what do you think it means to call it Integrated Liberal Studies? What do you think that's for and what do you think it's good for?" I don't remember making meaning of the metacognition of what we were doing. In Meiklejohn's original version of The Experimental College, I recall that the young men, between their first and second years, went home and did projects like ethnographic research based on their homes and came back and shared them. I don't think we got that assignment; I don't think there was a move to*

*make explicit how we would use our life experiences in our learning. So now, when I hear of a first-year seminar course where the teacher will say "we're going to look at this through a feminist lens. We're going to look through a critical race theory lens. We're going to look through a sociological lens. We're going to look through a Marxist lens. We're going to literally practice looking at things in different ways as one way to talk about ways of knowing." That explicitness about ways of knowing that we have now, the degree to which that is incorporated into beginning classes for students, is important, because they're the rules of the game. If we're not explicit, we're saying to students "we're playing a game. I won't tell you the rules, or where they came from, and I won't tell you how to practice. We're just going to start right in and play." As a faculty member, I want to be sure that people know the rules, so they know how to navigate regardless of the setting. Although I made good grades, I felt like I just had to kind of fake it.*

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Emily's experiences at UW-Madison illustrate challenges that students still face in higher education today. She experienced traumatic interactions with both a Teaching Assistant and a professor but did not know how to handle the circumstances or where she may find support to process and take actions. This lack of support caused her instead to close the door to studying further in either department, even though she had some initial interest in mathematics. While there may be different structural supports present for students in 2021, I wonder if students today are any more aware of their options than Emily was in the 1980s.

Emily was excited to join the Integrated Liberal Studies program because of the way that learning was presented to her. She was interested in the way that she might put together learning in her academic experiences and hoped that this would also allow her to find sense of belonging at a large research university. Instead of this integrated experience, Emily found herself confused

by assignments and courses, and her coursework did not appear to help her identify a peer group with which to connect. The lack of friends appears to be a contributing factor to her unhappiness in her first two years of college as Emily notes that the campus appeared to not know how to build community for students. She is aware that some students were able to make connections with each other and faculty, but as someone who needed additional support to build those integrations, the lack of these structures left Emily to navigate on her own. She identifies that she strayed from the prescribed curriculum and was self-advising her course load, but that no one seemed to notice or care that she was doing so.

Meiklejohn's Experimental College was discussed in Chapter two. The Experimental College community was focused on a liberal arts curriculum that centered teaching the love of learning and integration of course curriculum. Emily's experience with the ILS program, a later evolution of the Experimental College, lacked for her the connections to learning in and out of the classroom. She notes that she was not helped to put together the meaning of the program's coursework, which led her to be further frustrated by the faculty who taught her. Additionally, Emily made reference to the fact that one of her instructors was likely a graduate student, who may not have known what to do to support the experiences of new college freshmen. Her comments made me reflect on the importance of not only what students are taking when they arrive on campus, but who is teaching them, and how prepared they are to address what the students' needs may be. It is very possible that if Emily was being taught by a graduate student, they were following the syllabus and assignments that someone else prepared and may not have known how to help the students make meaning of the readings or assignments.

Although Emily was enrolled in a program called "Integrated Liberal Studies," she did not identify integration as an outcome. Although she experienced an academic environment that

may have been labeled "high impact practice" (if we had been utilizing that terminology in higher education at the time), in an assessment of integrated learning, she would not likely have been able to identify the academic and social impact of the experience.

**This Is, At Some Level, Ridiculous Because Only One of Us is Working Really Hard Here**

*So I went home to Rock Island and enrolled at Augustana College. I was a townie, not a kid on campus, and I wasn't in a sorority. I wasn't in a dorm. I had a job in the kitchen making donuts and I worked early in the morning and then went to class. I was an outsider, and I was also getting more skeptical about who my professors were. I would be recognized academically, like "You wrote a good paper. You got an 'A' on a test" but I didn't have a sense of belonging. I found a form of community on the track team, and some community on the swim team, but I didn't belong to any good co-curriculars and did not experience being seen for myself.*

*I was on a competitive community swim team from the time I was seven all the way through high school. I swam again in college when I transferred. I know about hard work and going to practice and competing, and the comradery of all that was a big chunk of my time. In college, I only swam for two years, which wasn't enough time to really make friends. You don't really get to know somebody swimming laps next to them.*

*The coach of the swim team was the also coach of the track team and cross-country teams. I went out for cross-country and for track as a transfer. I remember once running a two-mile race on the track, eight laps around. It was cold and raining. I had on the little outfits that runners wear. My coach was bundled up on the sidelines in a coat and sweater and maybe even a hat. And she yelled something she probably meant to be encouraging, like "work harder." And I thought, "who are you to tell me what to do really?" I remember in that moment thinking, "This is, at some level, ridiculous because only one of us is working really hard here." I guess*

*my heart wasn't in it. I wasn't disrespectful or disobedient; coaches said, "do this, this, this, and this" and I did it, but I don't remember believing that my coach cared about me as a person, maybe because she didn't know how to show it or because I wasn't in a place where I could recognize it. It was hard being a transfer student, and a townie. I felt pretty alienated from campus culture.*

*In spite of mixed experiences with coaches, I still use the metaphor of coaching [in my work], because I think it is about coaching. But to be a good coach, the person you're working with has to agree to be coached. They have to believe you have their best interests at heart. I think, in a coaching relationship, there is a recognition that one person is trying to get better at something, and the other person's job is to support them. In the end, they both want that to happen. There's no competition. Coaches want the whole team to be successful. And coaching assumes that learning is iterative—coaches try to help their teams get better, whatever the starting point is. In terms of developing coaching relationships with learners, we have to recognize that it takes a lot of trust for a learner to try something and risk trying it again, and risk trying it again, because then you're deeply engaged with school. I think many, many, many students, at some level, are kind of skeptical about school.*

*One good thing about that college was that the men's track coach, Paul Olsen, taught an African-American literature course. Even though by then I was an English major, Olsen's course was the first time I had a course that focused exclusively on literature by African American writers. I remember reading Richard Wright's collection of short stories, "Uncle Tom's Children." It blew my mind. Wright took the beloved title of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin, and turned it on its head. Wright's stories are fierce. They force readers to contend with White supremacy and pervasive violence and cruelty inflicted by White people on*

*Black people. Oh my gosh, you know, it was just overwhelming. I have this image of Professor Olsen talking to us students. When I was a student at Augustana, most of the students were White. But Olsen's class on Black literature drew Black students as well as white students. Olsen modeled how a White teacher can talk about race and racism.*

*I didn't know what to major in, and went through four, five, or six different ideas of majors and finally just decided on what would be easiest, which was English. And then I was like "well, what do you do with a major in English?" I didn't know, so I applied to a master's in teaching program at the University of Chicago, where half of the English department at Augustana had gotten their graduate degrees. I applied for a master's in English at the University of Michigan, which is where my dad went to school. And I applied at the University of Virginia and the University of North Carolina in their English programs. I didn't know anything about them except from a little reading I had done. I also talked to a recruiter from State Farm about being a claims adjuster. I didn't know what I was doing.*

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Emily's experiences at Augustana, in some ways, mirror her experiences at UW-Madison. She was still experiencing disconnect with the campus and struggling to truly find a connection to peers or her academics. She appeared to settle on a major based on the credit hours she had accumulated to that point, identifying it as the "easiest" option. She identified a strong connection to her African American literature course, and her faculty member, who helped her to contextualize her race, and explore systemic racism. Her recollection of this experience indicates the depth that this early interaction in the classroom had on her. It seems that this was an isolated experience for her as a transfer student; she did not identify other learning moments that impact her as strongly as this one. In four years of undergraduate education, at two institutions, Emily

identified two substantive interactions with faculty members, and both were centered around understandings of race and justice. These experiences connect to earlier experiences understanding her privileges.

Emily's continued struggles with not building true connections to her student-athlete experiences was surprising to me; I would have assumed that being on a team and being with a coach would have helped her with developing a sense of belonging. However, Emily experienced feelings of distrust of her coach, and lacked belief that this individual was invested in her success. I reflect on how often I have been in meetings where the conversation centers on "We have a resource that can help students with that. What do we need to do to get students to engage with that resource?" Reflecting on Emily's words reinforces the importance that we frame the question to also ask what barriers exist to having students access those resources, and whether the individual(s) trust that their best interests are centered. I also reflect on how Emily shared that, in coaching, you are trying to get the entire team to succeed. While this is true, it is also important to consider how different team members may be coming with different experiences – it is these differences that may also impact how a player hears words of encouragement.

Her decision to apply to graduate school came because she was not sure what she could do with her English degree; this idea that furthering education might be connected to not knowing what else to do is one I know that I have personally heard from other students. She looked at institutions that were known to her (an institution known to her because of her faculty, and one that she knew because her father went to school there), but also appears to have identified two institutions at random, or at least in hindsight did not appear to have had a purpose for her. She was also pursuing a possible position with State Farm. Overall, while Emily received

a liberal arts degree, she does not appear to have received a liberal education, which would ideally have helped her to build the connections between classes and concepts, and hopefully helped her to connect those experiences to work after her undergraduate degree.

**Occasionally, It's Had Really Bad Consequences, But Mostly It Hasn't**

*I wound up going to the University of Michigan because I didn't get into any of the East Coast schools. I could have gone to the University of Chicago, but I wasn't sure about becoming a K-12 teacher. My dad encouraged me to give Michigan a try. In my first year of graduate school, I lived in a residence hall for graduate students. That's where I experienced community with peers who were also navigating graduate programs. I started to feel like I could belong. I was elected the student representative for the master's class. Once I was admitted to the PhD program, I started teaching English 101. That led to another feeling of belonging, because as a graduate teaching assistant, I was also part of a union for the first time in my life.*

*I'm sure I was a terrible teacher when I started out because I didn't know what I was doing. What helped me was that the grad students teaching English 101 were mentored by Professor Bernard Van't Hul who worked on the Middle English Dictionary. He loved rhetoric and he would use the longest sentences with the most elegant syntax—totally grammatically correct of course. I'd never heard anybody use language the way Bernie did. He would convene us in the student union and people would have beers – well, he would have beers for sure. These meetings in the union were one of the first times I experienced a sense of collegiality, of being part of an ongoing conversation about ideas. Bernie and his colleagues had written a primer on how to teach academic writing which I still have. It was organized around the concepts of "MAPS"—medium, audience, purpose, and situation. We began by discussing the differences between speech and writing, and moved in exploring the ways that audience, purpose, and*

*situation influence what writing looks like—how it works. Another member of the English Department had written a very successful handbook about English—I am lucky that this traditional handbook of correctness was not the framing I was introduced to as a new teacher of writing.*

*In terms of my own experiences as a writer, I wasn't asked to revise anything until I was in graduate school. It was another linguist, Richard Bailey, who said basically, "what you have so far is okay, but now rewrite it because I don't understand this, this, and this." It just blew my mind that you could rewrite a paper, reorganize it, change your ideas from what you first put down. Up until that point, all of my academic experience was like a performance—do it once, get the grade, and move on. With Van't Hul's mentorship and Bailey's influence, I started to appreciate how language, including written language, worked. I loved learning about speech act theory and discourse analysis. I loved thinking about how to be a better teacher for my students. Bailey and Van't Hul and some colleagues in the Education School organized a one-credit seminar for graduate students to read and discuss the Ann Arbor King Case, in which a group of parents at an elementary school brought a lawsuit against the district claiming that teachers were discriminating against their children for speaking Black Vernacular English. The argument was that when teachers heard kids use BVE, they made inferences about kids' intelligence, which then played out in classrooms in the form of diminished expectations. All of this converged, and I felt like I was part of a community of thinkers who cared deeply about matters of justice and education.*

*Ironically, I still had to write a dissertation about literature. In spite of its dual focus on language and literature, at the time I was in graduate school, Michigan's English department only recognized linguistics and literary studies. There was no recognition of rhetoric and*

*composition as a field of study. When I asked about writing a dissertation on a topic in rhetoric and composition, I was told no. So I set about writing a dissertation on regionalism in American literature. To be honest, throughout the whole process, I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do—how I was supposed to organize my argument.*

*Now they have added methods courses to doctoral programs, but when I went [to Michigan], we didn't have a methods course. You were just supposed to know how to do it. I remember, in a moment of panic, calling the graduate school and saying, "how long is a dissertation supposed to be?" Whoever answered the phone said, "well, like in math, sometimes they're one page. And in history, it could be as long as 500 pages." I thought, "oh, that's not very helpful." I felt so intimidated because by then, I was clearly supposed to know what I was doing. I felt that if I were honest with my advisor, she would know that I really didn't belong in the program. So I kept quiet and really struggled. I'm a White, middle-class, English-speaking, physically able woman, so if I experienced that, I can't even imagine what the ramifications are for others [without these privileges]. Which is why I think it's really important to find ways to be in dialogue with students, to make it OK for someone to say—I really don't understand what you are asking me to do. It feels like such a simple move, to try and create conditions where students can ask for help without feeling as if the question will reveal the fact they don't belong, but I think we still have a ways to go.*

*I was not successful in advocating for the legitimacy of rhetoric and composition while I was in graduate school. However, I was also part of a group of women grad students who advocated for including at least one female author in the survey of American literature course, which would have been a radical departure from the standard curriculum. Advocating for changes didn't have significant consequences for me until I had finished my doctorate and was*

*working as a lecturer at the English Composition Board, now the Sweetland Center for Writing, which operated independently from the English Department. The ECB was nationally recognized for its work in rhetoric and composition, and it was exciting to join that team.*

*The ECB ran the writing assessment that placed students into their introductory English classes, and at that time, students were given a topic and blue book, and asked to write for 50 minutes. Afterwards, students could make appointments in the writing center to appeal their placements. I listened to lots of students explain why that method was not a reasonable way to assess their writing, as did my colleagues. So, we organized an alternative assessment, where students would present a portfolio of writing they completed in high school or at the colleges from which they were transferring. Reading those portfolios helped us understand how much the language arts curriculum in high schools had evolved. For example, we had assumed we were the first teachers to introduce students to peer review, and we were wrong. Seeing what students were doing before they came to us helped us develop better courses. I remember saying "we're underestimating what students already know when they get here."*

*Some of the versions of English 101 that were being offered at Michigan were not honoring what students were being taught in high schools or in community colleges. I was fierce about, "we are building this up-to-date and current writing program" and ultimately, the Dean brought in an external review team because there was tension between our writing program and other departments. As I recall, the reviewers noted the tension between the English Department and the English Composition Board. The strategy for resolving the tension was to appoint a member of the English Department as the director of the ECB. That was my first experience where advocating for the right thing had negative consequences for me personally—in this case, the unit I worked in would no longer be led by someone who understood the work we were doing.*

*I feel like somehow early experiences of being able to practice advocating and not being punished for it helped me be clearer, or freer, or more confident to continue to advocate for what I think is ethical or right for students. Occasionally, it's had really bad consequences, but mostly, it hasn't. When I think back to my childhood, what would have happened if I had been told "that's a really bad idea" when I first advocated on behalf of myself in school? If I had gotten kicked out, or if my parents had heard I was making a fuss and I got into trouble at home? Reflecting on this helps me think about how we create experiences where people get to practice advocacy that's real, but also relatively safe. It's got to be consequential or else it's not "real," but you've got to have enough positive experiences so you believe it's worth taking the risk, or you have enough of a reserve of social capital or health that you can afford to take the risk.*

*Leading the design of the portfolio-based assessment was a big advocacy project, and I liked it. I liked working on systems to improve students' experiences beyond my own classroom. When the restructuring of the ECB was announced, I realized I needed to find another job. When I talked with a colleague at Michigan about what to do next, he said "well, if you like advocacy work, then you should check out the Washington Center." So I did. I wasn't familiar with learning communities. Some of the rhetoric around learning communities, I must confess when I read it, I thought "This sounds like promotional literature. It doesn't sound real to me." But, I applied for the job anyway because I thought "it's a Center that's supposed to improve undergraduate education." They had just done a big project with calculus reform, and they were working with the WA State Board for Community and Technical Colleges. The Washington Center had an expansive mission, and that attracted me. Through the process of applying, I realized that my experience with ILS was relevant. I could also draw on my experiences teaching a writing course that was contextualized to support biology students, and a first-year seminar*

*course that was part of a larger effort to help students make sense of the university. I didn't have traditional learning community experience, but I had some other experiences to draw on.*

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Emily found a passion for learning while at the University of Michigan, thanks in large part to building a strong connection with one of her faculty members, who helped her find a community as a scholar but also in a peer network. Although Emily had previously attended a large, research-intensive institution that, by many accounts, was quite similar to Michigan, she spoke about her residential experience, and the union space, very differently than she described the isolation at Madison. When I drew attention to this during our first interview, her comment was that "she didn't even see" the opportunities at Madison. Emily's turn as a scholar while in graduate school was born from the environment she encountered. The idea of collegiality with other academics may have helped her to be open to the idea of learning communities practice.

Emily applied to work at the Washington Center without having a real context for what learning communities practice was or how it was contextualized at the Washington Center. At the time she applied, she understood that her experiences at UW-Madison in the Integrated Liberal Studies program were connected to the concept of learning communities, but I find it interesting that, although she likely spoke favorably of the experience during her interview, by her own words she did not find that learning environment particularly supportive in her early college years. I wonder if she recognized the disconnect during her interview, and how she framed the experience at that time.

The preparation to apply and interview with the Washington Center seemed to be the first time that Emily was introduced to the idea of learning communities practice literature. Her initial response to it was to question the legitimacy of the claims made of the impact on students'

learning. At this point in her career, she had been teaching for a number of years, and had experience with integrated learning, but not directly with what the literature called "learning communities." Her investment in applying to the Washington Center was not about lived experiences with curricular integrations, but instead was around the idea of advocacy work in higher education, which she had experience with during her time at the University of Michigan.

Emily made some significant connections to the ways social capital, personal health, and positive environments, allow individuals to be able to take risks in practicing advocacy. This makes me think about how individuals who seek to create transformative learning experiences on their campuses need to be in a context that will permit that type of innovation and exploration without high risk of personal or professional harm. Advocating change of existing contexts in the academic environment may not always be met with positive outcomes, and if individuals are in a context where change is not welcomed, it is unlikely that an innovation may be adopted.

**We Had Grown Past the Early Social Networks into Something More Like a Disciplinary Network**

*So when I first started to learn about learning communities, it took me a while to begin to understand how the curriculum at Evergreen worked. I wanted to know how they assessed students' learning, but at that time not everyone who was keen on learning communities saw value in assessment. In fact, some of the long-time learning community practitioners were anti-assessment, arguing instead for letting learning emerge from the rich curricular structure.*

*I kept thinking about how I didn't want to just become a believer [in the propaganda of learning communities at Evergreen]. I sought out the experience of team teaching with someone. I remember it was exciting because with two of us, and more time in the classroom together, we had the liberty to design things differently than we could on our own. Given that, we could create*

*rich and supportive learning opportunities for students. But just because it's called a learning community doesn't mean those rich and supportive learning opportunities always happen. That's a matter of design and intention. That's what drove me nuts about the early literature, because it said, "if it's a learning community, there's active learning, it's student centered." And I thought "that's just not true." All those things can be present, but they're [active learning experiences] only there because educators chose to put them there. It's fine to have literature to promote an idea, but don't claim it as a description of people's lived experiences. Don't mix those things up because learning communities practice is wildly uneven. It can potentially be powerful, but it's not inherently better.*

*I was really fortunate because, the year before I got hired at the Washington Center, Evergreen had hired a woman named Jeanine Elliot to come in as the new director. Barbara Smith had transitioned to become the Provost at Evergreen, and Jean McGregor was the associate director. Jeanine had been working at the Great Lakes Consortium, a consortium of liberal arts colleges. She understood how you organize professional development across multiple colleges. She was the first person I worked with closely who didn't have a campus lens but had a consortium lens. That was really important. She was drawn to the Washington Center because it advertised itself as a consortium. When she arrived, she realized that Washington Center wasn't organized as a consortium. Instead, the Center's funding came from Evergreen, and the people working there were employees of Evergreen. Nonetheless, the Center was committed to collaboration. Jeanine had a strong background working on equity projects with the Great Lakes Consortium. When I arrived, I found a mentor in Jeanine who was different from me in terms of background and training, but like me, was an outsider to Evergreen. Jeanine was also well-*

*versed in collaborative learning, service-learning and problem-based learning, and a whole range of other reform-minded strategies.*

*When I started at the Center, there was a director, assistant director, a program coordinator, an event coordinator, and a secretary: three classified staff and two professional staff. When Jeanine retired, I applied for the director job, which I was offered after a national search. When it was time to replace my position, I advocated for a co-director model because it better represented the principles of collaboration. We did another national search and Gillies Malnarich became my co-director. We were co-directors until she retired in 2014.*

*Early on, Barbara Smith and Jean MacGregor worked to get a legislative proviso for funding for Washington Center. Those funds flowed through Evergreen's operating budget. The way provisos work in our state is that, after two years, the proviso goes away, and the money is basically an increase to the college's operating budget. What happened over time is that the college reduced the amount of funding they put into Washington Center's operating budget. By the time I left the Washington Center, more than half of the budget we had, we raised ourselves. At one point, Gillies and I worked to get external supporters of the Washington Center to advocate for another proviso for the Center to keep some money in the operating budget. We did not do this through Evergreen's own legislative lead. We were successful because educators at other colleges in WA state advocated for us. The funding structure of the Center will always be in question, in a way, because it's tied to the budget at Evergreen. That means without a specific legislative proviso, Evergreen can repurpose the money. For the Center staff then, there's an inherent challenge in being useful to internal stakeholders at Evergreen and also meeting the needs of diverse campuses across the state and in the US.*

*Washington Center benefited from being part of a national reform network early on, opportunities that were available because of Evergreen's reputation as an experimental college. Jean MacGregor met an officer from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) who was on Evergreen's campus to visit the college. Jean accompanied the officer on a tour of campus. He got interested in the work of Washington Center, and encouraged Jean to submit a grant for learning communities. She did, and it was funded. As a provost of one of very few public experimental liberal arts colleges, Barbara Smith collaborated with other education reformers who were forming national organizations in support of those efforts, including the American Association of Higher Education. Barbara knew Zelda Gamson and Art Chickering; they did a workshop early on for the Washington Center and the Center newsletter published Gamson and Chickering's principles of undergraduate education. Barbara knew Russ Edgerton, who became a foundation officer for Pew, and in his last year there, supported a significant grant to the Washington Center to support what was called the "National Learning Community Project." That's how the Summer Institutes started. That's what paid for the monographs that were published. That's when the first big national conference on learning communities occurred. That grant money helped build a national infrastructure for learning communities. It was the combination of external funding that allowed the Center's national profile to grow. When those grants ended, it was my role, with Gillies Malnarich, to maintain that national infrastructure, but we didn't have any additional funding for it. We felt enormous pressure.*

*One of my earliest images of being new at Evergreen, and new at the Washington Center, was going to a Summer Institute, and a session for people who were going to be the trainers, the resource faculty. We were asked to line up according to the number of years that we had been working on learning communities. I'd never been to an academic conference where years of*

*experience in a field was called out in such a way and I felt uneasy about it. In my tenure as director, what mattered to me was supporting resource faculty in developing what Veronica Boix-Mansilla refers to as "flexpertise"—flexible expertise. Having years of experiences doing learning community work on campus may make you an expert on that campus, but doing learning communities well requires lots of adapting. Campus conditions vary significantly, and the worst thing that happened at the Institutes, from a teaching point of view, were resource faculty who could only focus on what they knew how to do in particular contexts.*

*I also actively recruited resource faculty from various networks and conferences. For example, I'd go to the National Learning Communities Conference and listen to sessions, actively seeking out people who were working to implement learning communities at scale in different institutional contexts. Jean came to one of the closing dinners at the institute and said, "I don't recognize anybody." That helped me realize that the community of practice was actually expanding—we had grown past the early social networks into something more like a disciplinary network.*

*Because of my involvement in composition studies, I knew the value of a recognizable field of knowledge. Composition went through its own growing pains as a field too, starting as an offshoot of the study of literature. Stephen North's book, The Making of Knowledge in Composition, was groundbreaking because in it, North explained that what held composition together as a field were not shared research methods. In fact, he outlined the different methods scholars in composition were using to "make knowledge." What held the field together were questions about literacy. North's book guided my thinking as I led the push to start an open-access peer-reviewed journal focused on learning communities. Kennesaw State University had launched a print journal, but the subscriptions were very limited, and they were not going to*

*sustain it. I also had the experience of helping launch another interdisciplinary, on-line, open-access, peer-reviewed journal, Numeracy: Advancing Education in Quantitative Literacy, with geologist Len Vacher. Vacher and his colleagues who created that journal because numeracy crosses disciplines.*

*I think I can look at all of the action plans that I have from my time as director and safely say that practically every campus that came to a Summer Institute, and did the action plan, increased its capacity to make change on their campus. It was such a shocking experience for most people to have to work collaboratively for multiple days on a project. They had to pay attention to people across the campus and not just stay in their lane, whatever their role was. People had to have a concrete plan in four days, which meant coming to a conclusion as a group. One of the features we added to the Institute, based on feedback from teams and resource faculty, was the requirement that teams turn in a draft of their plan prior to the last day. We worked hard to help resource faculty give teams useful feedback. I also think that the very fact of turning the draft in and then coming back to it the next day and presenting was useful. The very few teams that didn't get much out of the Institute were teams that didn't actually make a plan. I think in all there were maybe three over the years.*

*I believe there are benefits for students in well-designed learning community experiences, and I believe it's worth trying to create those experiences on our campuses. I think we have to be imaginative and intentional in how we do that. One of my early commitments in the role of director was to move from a discourse of how it's supposed to be, to more scholarly discourse of "what works, how do we know," and, in a way, deconstruct the model to then say, "what are the elements that make this work for students." In your context [as a practitioner], you're going to*

*want to take it apart to know what parts you can put together and try to achieve similar outcomes for students.*

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When Emily begins working for the Washington Center, she also becomes connected to The Evergreen State College, which is where the Washington Center is situated. She shares that it took a while for her to understand the structure of The Evergreen State College, which was rooted in co-enrolled learning community structures, as detailed in Chapter 2. She noted that her early assessment of literature on learning communities practice at the time showed that individuals could be working practitioners in the field, but be either avoiding assessment measures entirely, or be elitist in the approach to practice. She noted that early on she questioned the use of language in learning communities' literature, and wondered what was actually stated in the research. She made note that just because the elements of a learning community are present, does not mean that it is student-centered, or that learning is taking place. She shared that it is important to not claim the lived experiences of individuals within communities because of the elements of a community being present.

Emily helped to provide a history of the Washington Center's leadership, as well as recalling her own transition to the director position. It is clear from her story that the evolution of the Washington Center's role in the national landscape of the United States evolved from being primarily focused on higher education in Washington State to helping define the infrastructure for supporting learning communities practice across the United States. Previous directors were able to leverage personal and professional relationships to help fund initiatives of the Washington Center; these relationships helped them to become part of a community of influential leaders in higher education and to access social capital (that later turned into actual

capital). From the way Emily described it, The Evergreen State College did not necessarily have a means to sustain the funding after grant periods concluded. Emily makes note that the structure of the office evolved over time as well, with funding of staff increasing during grant funding periods. Emily was able to advocate for a co-director model for the Center, instead of replacing the assistant director role she held before becoming director.

Emily shared the ways that she sought to expand the voices who were able to share their practice at Summer Institutes, by tapping into presenters from the Center's annual conference. She shares that what appeared to be valuable when she first came to the Washington Center was length of time working in learning communities and the relationships that previously existed. Emily also shares that there was a definition of learning communities practice that did not encompass the totality of practice around the United States; her emphasis on growing the definition of learning communities allowed more practitioners to likely "see" themselves in the work that was being done.

**What Matters Most is What Students Do**

*There are two really big moments for me when I first became director of the Washington Center. One was when Gillies and I wrote an occasional paper about the shift from an exercise that Barbara and Jean had developed called "Designing Learning Communities in an Hour," which everybody loved. I had only ever heard how much people loved it. Imagine, you and I are teaching together. We have all the time and all the money we want: what do we want to create for our students? We would imagine this cool thing that we're going to do, that we're going to fly to Paris and, we invent this super cool thing. But then it's like, "well, you can't do that. I can't do that." So the power of imagining crashed into this growing attention to course outcomes*

*and limited funding on campuses. I disliked doing that activity, because there was always a sense at the end of it, that "we can't do that, so nothing can happen."*

*Gillies and I invented an alternative exercise that we called "Designing Integrative Assignments." You start with the outcomes from both courses and think about whether any of them can be combined. Based on that, you create an assignment tied to those outcomes. The exercise was designed from the get-go to be doable, and to focus on the mental practice or habit of integration. To me, that felt revolutionary. As long as both or all the teaching partners can identify outcomes for the courses or areas they are responsible for, there's an opportunity to look for overlaps or connections. Now, we can have integrative assignments that pair my class with student life, or my class with another class, or with all of our classes. It's good for students, and it's good for us because we build community around what matters most. When David Conley published his paper on "Reaching College Readiness" (2007), we did lots of workshops inviting faculty to integrate elements of college readiness with their regular course outcomes.*

*The second big moment was when we could use national research to focus our advocacy for learning communities. Around 2007, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), began identifying what they called "high impact practices"—practices that colleges and universities were doing with students that were highly correlated with student engagement. NSSE did a more in-depth survey with students to ask them what in particular about the high-impact experiences was most meaningful. In response to the question about learning communities, students pointed to things that make learning communities effective: intentionally designed integrative experiences, out of class experiences, and cohorts of students. This was huge for the learning community field, because suddenly we had a research base to say, "these are the practices that make learning communities high impact so this is what we should focus on." That*

*research helped reframe learning communities as a set of practices where there are integrative experiences, a cohort of students, and some connection with student affairs/student life, but how you parse it out depends on your campus context.*

*The initial literature [on learning communities] seemed to have established a hierarchy where coordinated studies were the purest form of learning community, followed by linked classes. Practitioners I met kept thinking they should go for full-time coordinated studies, which is nearly impossible in most institutions. One way the learning community discourse has changed is that I don't hear echoes of that hierarchy anymore. I think that the argument for learning communities had to be deconstructed so that it could be reconstructed as a set of intentional practices.*

*The high impact practice literature caused campuses to become interested in learning communities. I also think that high impact practice literature gave campuses more choices about what to do for students. First-year experience programs were an alternative to learning communities. Some of them [first-year experiences] looked like learning communities, or involved learning communities, but some of them were essentially first-year seminar programs. The University of South Carolina really helped campuses embrace the first-year experience or the first-year seminar as a practice in itself.*

*In 2012, MDRC released two reports as part of their six-year Learning Community Demonstration Project. One of them, Commencement Day: Six-Year Effects of a Freshman Learning Community Program at Kingsborough Community College (Sommo et al., 2012), shows strong results. The other, The Effects of Learning Communities for Students in Developmental Education: A Synthesis of Findings from Six Community Colleges (Visher et al., 2012), showed mixed results.*

*The second study, a "replication study," had a chilling effect on the field of learning community practice. Five of six colleges implementing learning communities didn't lead to increased graduation rates. After lots of heated discussion about what exactly counted as a learning community in the gold-standard, random-assignment tests on the campuses involved in the study, MDRC researchers published another paper [What Have We Learned About Learning Communities at Community Colleges? (2012)]. MDRC's concession was to say, "we should also talk about fidelity to the model [of learning communities]," because although the other five community colleges weren't very faithful to the model, they measured the outcomes as if the implementation was complete. Still, because of the random assignment method, the replication study is still cited in the Department of Education's "What Works Clearinghouse" [https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/] as strong evidence that learning communities in community colleges have limited effect on retention and graduation.*

*My experience with MDRC was a powerful catalyst for thinking critically about educational research. The other day, a faculty member asked me if I could share some studies that prove that culturally responsive curriculum works in math classes. That literature doesn't exist. High quality educational research is always nuanced. While many studies argue that culturally responsive practice can be effective in math classrooms, the outstanding variable will always be the way that research or that new practice actually gets implemented. What is the teacher's mindset? Improving education is so complex because it's always about people in organizations. If, as an administrator I'm supportive of creating the conditions for our incoming students to experience linked classes, to get there, first I might choose to be supportive of a comprehensive professional development program and the development of college success courses, and deliberate linking with co-curricular experiences. I know that by doing this, and*

*working on a scheduling efficiency software, when we get all of those other pieces in place, it will be easy to create linked courses that will work for students. But, if I wasn't tracking all those variables, thinking about change management, and simply said, "I want 10 learning communities next fall," we could get them, but the effort wouldn't be sustainable. Implementing learning communities is a complicated phenomenon. You need a big picture vision and the experience to take steps toward that vision. You need a comprehensive plan in a way that recognizes how many people need to be on board to make it work.*

*One of the strategies for change at the Washington Center was to be a part of other people's initiatives. A monograph that was supported by the PEW grant reviewed the existing literature on learning communities to identify what we knew as a field. One conclusion drawn in that monograph was that we knew very little as a field about the actual learning made possible by learning communities. That finding gave rise to the 2006 project, Assessing Learning in Learning Communities [http://wacenter.evergreen.edu/assessing-learning-in-learning-communities]. We connected with Veronica Boix Mansilla at Harvard Project Zero, because she had just published an article in Change magazine on assessing interdisciplinary learning. She was a terrific colleague, because she had expertise in describing and assessing disciplinary and interdisciplinary learning, and we wanted to figure out how to assess learning in learning communities. Veronica worked with us, and teams from about 20 two- and four-year campuses, (including for a short time a team from U of Washington's medical school) to develop a protocol for assessing interdisciplinary learning. This work produced really interesting distinctions that, honestly, not everyone was excited about, like distinguishing between interdisciplinary learning and integrative learning. Veronica encouraged us to be precise in defining our terms. She also shared a protocol developed through the "Evidence Project" at Project Zero where teachers*

*shared and assessed samples of students' work.*

*We adapted that protocol for this project. People brought samples of work from learning communities, and when we assessed them, it turned out there was little evidence of integrative or interdisciplinary learning. We were all surprised because everyone knew that learning communities promoted that kind of learning. Gradually we realized that while the conversations in learning communities reflected integrative and interdisciplinary learning, and faculty knew that was the goal, the actual assignments students were getting were not asking them to demonstrate those habits of mind. This problem of practice is familiar—we know it from the literature in writing studies and assessment—that we can only assess what assignments ask students to do. Sometimes, when key elements are missing from the student work, it's because the assignment hasn't asked students to demonstrate that aspect. This turned out to be the case in the national project.*

*The National Project on Assessing Learning in Learning Communities reinforced a bigger pedagogical concept: the way we craft assignments really matters. We need to be explicit with students about what we want to see and why we want to see it, so students can create it. It's like being a good coach. You really do need to say, "shoot the ball through the hoop," or else they may not. They might be able to, but we forgot to say that. The widespread adoption of the Transparency in Learning and Teaching framework, TiLT, that arose at University of Las Vegas Nevada [https://tilthighered.com] is evidence of this today.*

*We were part of other initiatives as well. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have a faculty development network and based on Jean MacGregor's early connections with that network prior to her joining The Evergreen State College, the Washington Center became involved and regularly partnered with the HBCU faculty development network.*

*We made sure to have someone from the HBCU faculty development network on the staff of the Summer Institute. The Institute for Higher Education Policy had a grant with NSSE working with minority-serving institutions; Gillies and I were both resource people on that grant, which brought us into contact with another 40 minority-serving institutions, including institutions from Puerto Rico, around high impact practices. Through that project, we developed a relationship with Jillian Kinzie that was very consequential because Jillian regularly attended the Summer Institute and she always brought in new research. She also had a good sense of which campuses were using learning communities as a student engagement strategy. We worked extensively with Rachel Singer, who led the learning community work at Kingsborough Community College and was deeply involved in the MDRC studies. Rachel left Kingsborough to go work with Achieving the Dream, and through our collaboration with Rachel, we became connected with campuses involved in Achieving the Dream. Being a part of these wider networks, where learning communities were one of many strategies used by campuses to improve students' experiences of learning and increase retention and graduation, was really critical to the success of the Washington Center.*

*Another thing that changed during my time at the Washington Center was the attention paid nationally to issues of college readiness. This included national conversations about the long "remedial" or "developmental" course sequences in math and English (and sometimes reading) that led up to college-level courses. Researchers uncovered the pervasive pattern that African American students were frequently placed into low-level pre-college math courses which significantly decreased the likelihood of completing a degree. Debates ensued about more equitable strategies for placement and better curricular and pedagogical designs in both pre-college and college-level courses. Conceptually, the argument around college readiness was*

*framed initially as a problem students needed to solve—they needed to develop college readiness skills prior to coming to college.*

*David Conley, whose research I mentioned earlier, turned the argument around, claiming that colleges needed to help students navigate college. Conley described several types of college readiness skills. We used that taxonomy as the basis for integrative assignments, inviting faculty to select specific college readiness skills to integrate into their existing courses. That strategy was so successful that we applied for and received a grant from the College Spark Foundation to work with teams of faculty from five WA community colleges who were focused on integrating college-readiness skills into courses at all levels. Faculty at colleges and universities also found Conley's argument helpful, because they too were working with many students who needed coaching on how to navigate college. This integration of two literatures—college readiness and learning community practice - led the learning community practitioners to really focus on helping students feel a sense of belonging and agency at college. Suddenly, the scope of learners that we're supporting becomes much bigger.*

*Intentionally focusing on integrative assignments can serve as a Trojan horse, in a good way, into unpacking course design and strategies to increase students' sense of belonging and engagement in learning. Adding an integrative assignment to a course requires revising an existing assignment or adding a new assignment. That inevitably brings up the question of time—how many days, or hours, or even minutes, can be allocated to help students with the assignment and all the related scaffolding? If teachers are still following the "one chapter per week" coverage model of instructional design, the addition of an integrative assignment will be challenging. Through a focus on integrative assignments, we were able to engage faculty in conversations about which learning outcomes were most important in their courses, and how*

*course activities, including assignments, were aligned with those outcomes. We often prefaced workshops on integrative assignment design with workshops on how people learn, drawing heavily on John Bransford et al's (1999) publication from the National Academy of Sciences, How People Learn. Helping faculty think about how they've learned things and what learning actually looks like, in contrast to memorization, is a powerful precursor to designing integrative assignments.*

*We also drew on the research about the power of multicultural learning communities, as they were called then. Sonja Nieto's book, The Light in Their Eyes: Multicultural Learning Communities (1999), begins with a description of how quickly students decide whether or not they can learn from their teacher. This is true for all students, but it's critically important for White teachers to recognize this dynamic with students of color. Shifting one's stance from "I deserve your respect because I am a teacher" to "my aim is to show that I am worthy of your trust" is a big deal, and it's right in line with the other moves I've been describing. Making time to think about which learning outcomes are most important and why is like asking why this course is important—what's worth learning? If that's a real question, and not a rhetorical one, that provides a critical lens to keep course material relevant and useful. Taking time to think about how students actually learn, and then designing a course that supports their learning, is also a big deal. For me there's some humility in it, because it turns out that what matters most is what students do, not what I tell them as their teacher. Learners learn by doing, and the tradition of higher ed has for far too long been one where teachers talk, and students go home and figure out what to do to learn. Privileging class time as an opportunity for students to actively learn with each other, centering students' voices and experiences rather than teachers' voices, matters a lot.*

*Thinking again about David Conley's work on college readiness and thinking about how we are trying to design learning experiences for students, we can't overestimate how explicit we should be with students about why we're asking them to do the things we ask them to do—why it's in their interest, what we expect from them, and how we will support them. It's not to limit what students can do, but it's to be clear about, "we see you, we value you, we want to be sure you understand the rules of our game, and we want you to play it with us." The TiLT work I mentioned earlier added a powerful research base to this philosophy. Their studies, first at UNLV and then at a set of minority-serving institutions, showed that when faculty TiLTed even one assignment in a course, students did better. Why? It seems to me that by adopting the TiLT framework, faculty are acknowledging that it's important to share the rules of the game with students. Questions that are often coded as "bad questions"—signs of unmotivated students—like "what do you want me to do?" are re-interpreted as genuine questions. What do we want you to do, and why do we want you to do it, and how do we want you to do it? Explicitness gives more students access to our own insider language.*

*Along similar lines, I have seen simple practices that are highly effective. Faculty nearly always ask students if they have questions. Lots of times, students won't ask. So, in a learning community that linked a communications course with a math course, the communication studies faculty member gave students the assignment to ask questions in the math course. Students did, and the math faculty member was really pleased that students were asking questions, which allowed that teacher to engage in further conversations. An assignment like that identifies a practice we want students to do, like ask questions in class, and formalizes it into a learnable routine. Instead of telling students to ask questions, these teachers created an opportunity for students to practice the behavior of asking questions. Way more powerful.*

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Emily shared an exercise that people loved; it asked individuals to imagine big, with unlimited resources and abilities, and to craft a learning community experience for students. She shared that, while individuals expressed how much they enjoyed dreaming in the exercise, it was also challenging to be faced with realities of limited resources and capacities to enact the change. She and colleague Gillies created an exercise that still allowed individuals to dream big, but within the context of integration. This activity, as Emily shares, is designed to focus not on what practitioners could do with unlimited resources, but how they could be integrative with existing courses and practices and centering the types of experiences individuals want for their students.

In conversation with me, Emily shared her observations of early literature on learning communities practice. In particular, she notes that there appeared to be a hierarchy, where the inability to create a learning community that met the highest standard, coordinated studies, left many practitioners feeling that they were falling short of the "best" best practice. Emily shared that now, discourse in learning communities has changed to make an argument for intentional practices, not necessarily structure. She notes that context, resources, and structures within institutions are all factors that contribute to the type of model of learning communities that may be successful in a practitioner's sphere of influence. Emily shared that a study conducted by MDRC on learning communities models at 6 institutions, found that student retention and graduation was not positively impacted. Later discovery indicated that the model that was being used in the study was not faithfully followed at these institutions and was likely a factor in the outcomes of the research. This note reminds me of the study by Johnson and Stage (2018) noted in Chapter 2, where no significance was found in 8 of 10 identified high impact practices, and

the response authored by Kuh and Kinzie (2018), which questioned whether presence of a practice makes it a high impact experience.

In Emily's tenure as director of the Washington Center, she and the Center became key partners in a number of initiatives in higher education curricular reforms. From being connected with NSSE, to the incorporation of Project Zero, to partnering with the HBCU Faculty Development Network, Emily and her colleagues helped to ensure that the work of learning communities was connected to critical efforts occurring in the United States. The practice of learning communities was seen as one of many initiatives that colleges and universities could undertake to impact students' learning. Emily also noted the importance of being explicit with students about what we are expecting them to do and learn, so that they build agency as students and learners. This action continues to align with her previous emphasis on creating equitable experiences for students, and centering students' learning in learning communities practice.

**If We Idealize Models and We're Not Respectful of People's Actual Working Conditions, We Limit What's Possible. At The Same Time, These Models Help Us Imagine What's Possible**

*In some ways, the work Gillies and I did as co-directors of the Washington Center continued what Barbara Smith and Jean MacGregor did at the beginning, in terms of building on professional networks. We looked for opportunities to integrate research from higher education reform into Washington Center's day-to-day work. Gillies had a strong background in the scholarship of teaching and learning from her previous work in British Columbia. Because of Canada's relationship with the United Kingdom, Gillies was also well-versed in the literature on deep and surface learning, assessment as learning, and learning agency. I knew the literature in composition studies and equity and diversity more broadly. I was also interested in the making of*

*knowledge—including the role of writing and publishing, as a way to participate in a wider community of practice. During my years at Washington Center, we strengthened the research base behind our practice. I found lots of colleagues who were also activist-scholars in a range of fields. For example, professional development workshops drew both tenured/tenure-track faculty and contingent faculty. We drew on Adrianna Kezar's work with the Delphi Project, focusing on the experiences of contingent faculty. Reading widely was critical, to try to track the varied bodies of scholarship that spoke to the complex lives and dimensions of the groups I was working with. Actually practicing integrative thinking by reading widely and then bringing different bodies of research together – that was the real pleasure of the work of the director role. It was really challenging, exhausting, and also really fun.*

*The Washington Center director position is complex because the person in it works externally and internally. The balance between those shifted during my years there, but the director is an employee of The Evergreen State College. It was possible to be in conversations nationally and on other campuses about how to implement changes that would support students' success, while not being part of those conversations at my home institution. This was not the case for the original director Barbara Smith, who served as both a dean and Washington Center director. She left Washington Center to become Evergreen's provost. During her tenure as provost, the Washington Center director was included in internal planning conversations. That shifted once Barbara retired.*

*For many years, I taught academic writing as an adjunct faculty member in the Evening and Weekend Studies program. In that role, I got to know students and other faculty. Several times, Gillies and I initiated professional development projects for Evergreen faculty, including one focused on the scholarship of teaching and learning. After Barbara Smith's retirement, our*

*work at Washington Center was for the most part separate from Evergreen's internal work. Ultimately, that disconnect is what led me to leave Evergreen.*

*I didn't want to leave the Washington Center, but I needed to leave Evergreen. I felt like I had exhausted all opportunities to contribute in a productive way to improving learning experiences for students at Evergreen—from participating in committees and task forces, to designing summer institutes for faculty, to co-writing a federal Title III grant. At the same time, I knew from my students that some of them needed more support, more advising, clearer curricular pathways, more opportunities to develop their skills and abilities. I think the weight of being founded as an alternative liberal arts college characterized by a particular curricular structure has made it challenging for Evergreen to change. For so many years, the coordinated studies structure has been a calling card for the college—regardless of the mix of practices that occur or don't occur within that structure. Loyalty to the structure has made it hard, I think, for some of the leaders on the campus – faculty and administrators – to imagine how to improve learning experiences for students. There's also been, and this is part of the history of being an alternative college, a strong belief that students are free—free to choose their programs, free to choose what to study, and free to fail.*

*I just had the opportunity to speak on a virtual panel about the history of the Washington Center. Because of the pandemic, the current Washington Center team, in collaboration with the Washington Learning Community Coordinator network, organized three discussions. The first was this history panel, focusing on the question of how Washington state became a leader in the national learning community reform movement. Barbara Smith and Jean MacGregor spoke about their roles at the Center, then I spoke, and then Dr. Joye Hardiman, who served as director for two years after I left in addition to being involved with Washington Center since its*

*inception, spoke. The invitation, in the context of these discussions with you about learning communities, made me start thinking about my narrative—the story I wanted to tell about learning communities.*

*I chose to highlight the occasional paper Gillies and I wrote on designing integrative assignments, because for me that really crystallized a shift in Washington Center's practice. I feel like the origins of Washington Center can be characterized as effective advocacy for a specific practice, learning communities. In its advocacy for learning communities early on, the Washington Center offered an idealized version of the practice—asserting that learning communities come with active and collaborative learning, reflection, co-curricular experiences, all those things. But in practice, that was not the case. Some learning communities incorporated those elements but not all of them did just as some stand-alone classes incorporated those elements, but not all of them did.*

*When we broke away from the "Designing an LC in an Hour" activity and started using the integrative assignment heuristic, we were deliberately grounding our work in the actual conditions in which teachers were working. Instead of imagining that there were no constraints, we invited teachers to talk explicitly about what they were able to do—the space they had to try something new in support of students' learning. We shifted the focus from models to practices, and looking back, that strikes me as a big move.*

*The distinction between models and practices gets played out in other ways too. In the literature on high impact practices—it started with NSSE identifying practices that were linked with high levels of student engagement. AACU expanded on the list of high impact practices. From my perspective, high impact practice has become a relatively loose term—it's not clear anymore how a practice gets to be called high impact, or by whom. Campuses learned to think in*

*terms of using high impact practices. But then, as a field, we realized that more questions needed to be asked: who has impact to high impact practices was one critical question. The other focused on how the high impact practice was actually implemented—what were the actual practices within the first-year seminar, or the learning community, or study abroad?*

*What matters is keeping the right frame of mind and staying focused on students' experiences. We need literature on effective practices to help us decide what to implement—the whole move to implement guided pathways in community colleges right now is based on national research suggesting that when students know what their educational choices are and understand the relationships between their educational choices and their career aspirations, and are supported in pursuing their goals, they are more successful. That research seems reasonable on the surface. But implementing guided pathways as if we are following a standard recipe won't work, just as following a cookbook for learning communities didn't work. Instead, we need to know the practices we're hoping to implement—like cohorts, integrative assignments, and co-curricular experiences. We have to figure out how we can do each element well, and if we actually can do each element.*

*Instead of leading with an answer, it's more like using a framework or a set of questions for which there are a number of possibilities. Can you do cohorts? Great. Do you have the capacity to develop co-curricular experiences? Great. Can you do integrative assignments? Great. Can you do two or these or three of these? Wonderful. Can you do all of them? Even better. At one point, Seattle Central College, which had been featured in Vince Tinto's early research on retention and learning communities, could no longer offer coordinated studies programs. The enrollment wasn't strong enough to justify the cost, and students weren't signing up for the ones that were offered. So, faculty worked together to create what became the Water*

*Project. There were no cohorts. There was a common co-curricular experience at the beginning of the quarter, which was a showing of a film on water. There was a series of integrative assignments, but with a twist. Students in an English class worked on a bibliography about access to clean water. They passed that off to students in a sociology class who were investigating who had access to clean water. Students in a statistics class were working with a tool that calculated the amount of water needed for various aspects of daily living, including eating a hamburger. Those calculations were handed to the English students. At the end of the quarter, students were invited to a symposium to share the various understandings of water they had developed in their classes. The Water Project enriched students' learning, fostered a sense of belonging for students, built community among faculty, and was not "a proper learning community." However, that team used the practices that make learning communities a high impact practice to create something that enhanced students' experiences of learning and was possible in that moment when other forms of learning community were simply not an option. If we idealize models and we're not respectful of people's actual working conditions, we limit what's possible. At the same time, the models help us imagine what's possible—how much we actually can change and improve conditions supporting students' learning.*

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Emily's background contributed to the directions she took as a scholar and leader at the Washington Center. She sought to answer what works in learning communities practice, and how we can leverage high impact practices to support students. To be fair, establishing the Washington Center was likely a different role for Emily's predecessors, as starting an initiative and building traction can be a different leveraging of resources than transitioning or maintain an initiative. Emily shares that for her, practicing integrative thinking in the director role helped her

to see connections between the work of the Washington Center, and the movements occurring in higher education in the United States.

The context of the Washington Center at The Evergreen State College continued to be a theme of conversation with Emily. Emily notes that the institution's founding around cohort courses may in fact have made it difficult for leadership at the organization to imagine a different approach to students' learning, even when evaluation and assessment may have brought this information to light. This observation made me reflect on the difference that may exist between being afraid of change and being unable to reimagine a structure that would permit a change to occur. It became increasingly difficult for Emily to remain at Evergreen with the disconnect between her daily practice in the Washington Center and the institution's response to student needs.

Emily also shared the ways that high impact practice literature has evolved over the span of her career. She notes that since the initial NSSE publication identifying seven practices has expanded, the term high impact practices may be considered a very loosely defined construct in higher education. In a reflection that mirrors her feelings about marketing learning communities or highlighting only a few voices in early literature on learning communities practice, it may be a question of how we gatekeep which practices are seen as valid and good, and who is able to make that determination.

Emily reiterated her belief that it is more significant for practitioners and leaders to determine what works best within their context, and work to utilize a framework or guiding questions to determine the structure that will accomplish the desired outcomes. She also reflected on the role she and her colleagues had in shifting learning communities work at the Washington Center to focus more heavily on integrative learning and assignments than on any particular

model of practice. This shift seems to serve as a catalyst for larger changes within learning communities research and practice and helps to broaden further the role the Washington Center played in higher education reform.

**If We're Serious About Doing Better Work for Our Students, We Have to Be Serious About That Work All the Time, And That Means Recognizing Our Privilege In Having Jobs And Educations Ourselves**

*College leaders have to be courageous enough to say, "our college is not working for students." We have to commit to re-examining everything about the institution to make sure we haven't created barriers for our students. As Tia McNair described it, we have to commit to becoming "student-ready colleges." The problem is not our students. If you're a leader, you've got to use this like a mantra. There will always be people who resist questioning the status quo practices of their areas, because questions are likely to lead to changes, and change is hard. It takes more energy.*

*I got some feedback from a trusted colleague that I am perceived as "intense," and that word has stuck with me. She shared that with me after a faculty meeting where our president made a point to thank faculty for all the work they had been doing to support students during the pandemic, and when it was my turn, I introduced the concept of equity gaps in courses—what they are, what that means for students, and why we need to tackle them given we aim to increase our graduation rates and close equity gaps in those rates. I debated whether to bring up the topic, but I know it's on the agenda for our next academic year, and I felt like in fairness to faculty, this was the time to introduce the concept—before we try to address it. After the meeting, my colleague said, "Oh my gosh, that's you, Emily. You're just so intense." So I asked her, "when is the right time to talk about racial equity gaps? If we wait a year to start the*

*conversation, that's another year when students suffer." I appreciate my colleague's comments, because there's no point in overwhelming people. At the same time, if we're serious about doing better work for our students, we have to be serious about that work all the time, and that means recognizing our privilege in having jobs and educations ourselves.*

*In addition, most of the students at our college identify as students from historically underserved groups. Most of our faculty, about two thirds, are White. Our president is African American, and I'm White. In this situation, it's my job to say—in as an engaging way as I can - we have work to do to close our persistent equity gaps. Otherwise, our systems of Whiteness are perpetuated, even as we cloak ourselves in rhetoric of Black Lives Matter and equity matters.*

*Marxist theory distinguishes between class situation and class position. Our class situation is what we're born into. I was born into a middle-class family. Our class position is what we do. Part of what I do is recognize the class privilege embedded in tenured and tenure track positions, especially in relation to our students but also in relation to staff whose wages are typically lower. Staff typically have less autonomy as well. That distinction works as well with racial identities. Beverly Daniel Tatum's, "Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" (2003) was one of her first books. Dr. Tatum spoke at a Washington Center conference years ago and talked about a study she or some colleagues conducted. Eighth graders were asked to name 10 things about themselves. Black kids always included "Black" in that list; White kids rarely included their racial identity in that list.*

*As White educators committed to equity, the question is what we do with our Whiteness, with our White privilege, with our class privilege. It's absolutely the case that because of my racial identity and my class privilege, I've been able to take risks professionally. Even now, I know that worst case, I lose my job and can't pay my mortgage, we have family we can move in*

*with. We'd be OK. I'm not afraid that my kids will be shot by police because of their race. I'm not worried that my mom will get worse health care because of her race. I know that I carry what Peggy McIntosh (2003) calls the backpack of White privilege wherever I go.*

*A privilege of working at the Washington Center was having enormous freedom to decide what I thought was worth focusing on—how we could, as a Center, "improve undergraduate education." When my dad was still alive, he would call and ask, "well, are you doing any good?" His question haunted me. How in the world could I tell if we were doing any good? His question was a wonderful gift to me—and I still use it to guide my work. Another huge gift from my time at Washington Center, and all the work with learning communities, was developing an appreciation for integrative learning. It's not one widely valued as a core competency or college-wide outcome in the way that critical thinking is. I wish it were, but maybe it's too revolutionary in a way. Integrative thinking or integrative learning requires the courage and intellectual freedom to draw upon various sources of knowledge—whatever you have available to you. In a way, integrative thinking or an integrative habit of mind aligns with early feminist critiques of knowledge, including whose knowledge counts as real knowledge. Integrative thinking, as I understand it, says to students, "given this complex problem or issue, what have you learned, in and out of school, in any of your courses, that can help you address this?" That's such a courageous way to approach a problem, especially for students.*

*Once when I was visiting a campus and interviewing students about their experiences in learning communities, one student said their only issue with their learning community was that it was hard to keep track of which notes to put in what notebook. They had a system where notes from their poli-sci class for example, went in a blue notebook. Their English notes went in the red notebook. In their LC, it wasn't clear where to put the notes. At Washington Center, it was*

*exciting to integrate research on college readiness with research on backward design, or emerging research on change management in higher education and Kezar's work on improving the working conditions of contingent faculty.*

*Another gift from my years at Washington Center is the gift of collaboration. I've mentioned a few key partners, including Rachel Singer and Jillian Kinzie. Pat Hutchings is another collaborator, and Jen Whetham, who coordinates professional development for our state's community college system. Many of the resource faculty are people I've been able to collaborate with and learn with for years, and they are from all parts of the country and varying institutions. Each time I visited a campus, and I've visited hundreds, I got to collaborate with the team there to design workshops that would be useful for the people on that campus at that time. The journal was a collaborative project, between authors, reviewers, and editors. Opportunities to collaborate with organizations—Achieving the Dream, NSSE, HBCU Faculty Development Network, WA State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, MDRC, the National Numeracy Network that give birth to the Numeracy journal—so many opportunities to be in the company of educators committed to making systems and processes work better for students. I have learned so much by being in the company of many, many people.*

*One of the gifts from my colleague Gillies Malnarich was learning to ask, "what am I?" or "what are we for?" Coming out of a PhD program in literature, I was highly skilled in criticizing texts—spoken texts, written texts—I was trained as a critic. Gilles helped me learn to think like an organizer. To start a movement, or to rally people around something, you have to say what you are for, not just what you're against. Again and again, Gillies helped me reframe my thinking to focus on what we are for, and that was an extraordinary gift.*

*As activist-educators, we constantly have to talk about what we are for, because that's the common interest, the shared goal. I can tell in my current role that if I get too bogged down on the policies and practices that need to change, all the minutiae, the larger project of changing the college so it works better for students won't succeed. There are many, many things that need to change—the number of small, specific situations that need to get sorted out feels endless. But getting too caught up in that, or letting that fatigue get to me so I forget to say, "here's why we are doing this," that's something I'm working really hard on. My husband teases me about how terrible I am at framing things. When I try to talk about something with him that's related to work, I usually plunge right into the details and he's left wondering what the real issue is. Those details are ever-present in my mind, but that's not what rallies people. My president is superb at framing things—that's one of the reasons I love working with him. But I still need to get better myself at saying—to everyone around me and to myself—here's why we are working so hard. Here's why we are doing what we are doing.*

*Honestly, our conversations [through this dissertation process] have crystallized this feeling that I've had for a long time. No one has ever said to me before, "Emily, that's not the dominant narrative, integrative assignments are not the dominant narrative." Now I get why some people don't agree with me. I appreciate your questions and perspective. I appreciate the values we share. I have appreciated the opportunity to unpack all of these assumptions about higher education and high impact practices. And I am really grateful for the time and space of these conversations; I'm honored that you invited me into this space.*

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Each of us, as leaders in higher education, need to be willing to acknowledge when we are not doing the best job for students, and then put into action ways to address what we identify.

Emily shares that she is currently challenging her faculty to consider the ways that racial equity gaps in courses are creating adverse outcomes for students and asking faculty to work with her to identify means to improve. She shared that the reason she is comfortable having this conversation is because she is supported by her president. Emily further noted that she is able to use her Whiteness to bring attention to this topic; she shared that it is not enough to just acknowledge her privileges, but she needs to act to work towards equity.

Emily made an important observation that her privileges contribute to her ability to speak up, because she has supports that would help her in the event that she lost her job and was unable to gain other employment. To relate back to an earlier comment in her story, the ability to seek innovation is tied in part to our ability to feel comfortable and able to try, make mistakes, and try again without consequence. Not everyone is afforded the privileges to try and fail in the same ways. Emily shares that giving voice to the work being done, and the individuals who are doing said work, is critical to the success of an organization and helping to continue to push for change. You need to articulate expectations, and have support for those around you, so that people feel comfortable to push the boundaries of the organization and help achieve a vision.

As we wrapped up our conversations, Emily had an opportunity to reflect with me on the totality of our discussions. Emily, I am grateful for the opportunity to be in dialogue with you, and I am honored that you have allowed me to share your story with others.

# CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

## Introduction

The purpose of this biographical narrative study was to understand the experiences of Dr. Emily Lardner, who served as director of the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education from 1996-2017. This chapter includes a discussion of the results of the co-constructed knowledge gained from this inquiry, including what importance these results can have for practitioners working with learning communities. Also included is a discussion on the connections of this inquiry to the future study of learning communities practice and draws links to relevant literature regarding organizational change and diffusion of innovations. The chapter concludes with an examination of limitations of this research, suggestions for future inquiry, and a brief summary.

This chapter contains discussion and future inquiry suggestions to help explore the research puzzle "What can we learn from Dr. Emily Lardner's lived experiences as they relate to learning communities adoption and practice in higher education settings in the United States?" Dr. Lardner's narrative highlights the following themes: (a) individual identity and context are salient factors for educators to acknowledge, (b) developing relationships remains important for students' establishing a sense of belonging, (c) engaging learners in understanding the rules of higher education are critical factors to students' retention, and (d) the dominant narrative in learning communities research and practice may necessitate evolving to further its adoption in higher education. Each of these themes helps understand how learning communities practice has diffused in higher education in the United States.

## Interpretation of the Findings

Dr. Lardner's individual experiences highlight themes related to sense of belonging, students' learning and retention, and how practitioners can establish the purpose and impact of learning communities on individual campuses. Each theme is elaborated on in the follow sections.

**Individual Identity and Context are Salient Factors for Educators to Acknowledge**

In Dr. Lardner's narrative, she examined the ways that she was exposed to ideas of race, class, and gender at an early and formative stage in her education. Dr. Lardner was a participant in a "positive peer culture" program, which centered on building mutual respect and understanding, and engagement in problem-solving around racial dynamics in her high school. This early exposure to understanding her race was furthered through in-class experiences in undergraduate school, where Dr. Lardner was exposed to White supremacy and notions of racial power. As noted by Kendall (2013), it can be a struggle for White individuals to see social structures and patterns. Strayhorn's (2016) articulation of Group Contact Theory is also applicable here, as it is through her experiences and relationships with others that she is able to understand herself and learn prejudices and biases.

When Dr. Lardner reached the University of Michigan and the English Composition Board (ECB), she was working to identify ways to equitably assess students' learning and experience. She challenged an approach to assessment of writing to broaden the context and allow learners to demonstrate writing over time – from high school onward – through a portfolio program. She and her colleagues sought to honor the work that students brought to college with them and recognized that understanding the student in the context of experience was relevant to evaluation and assessment of ability. This work aligns with her later role at the Washington Center and drawing on the research of Sonja Nieto (1999) and multicultural learning

communities. Dr. Lardner notes that it is of critical importance that White educators recognize the dynamic of learning that occurs with students of color, and that it is important to demonstrate the aim, as a White faculty member, to be worthy of the trust of your students.

In her current role, Dr. Lardner acknowledges that she has a responsibility to address equity gaps in courses at the college, not only because of her positional role, but because she has a responsibility as a White person to address pervasive systems of Whiteness. She draws on relevant Marxist theory (1818-1883) to describe the distinctions between class situation (what we are born into) and class position (what we do with our positionality). She notes the importance of not only recognizing the privileges that White educators hold, but to also understand that this racial privilege carries with it the responsibility to act. This lens aligns with the framework of applied critical leadership (ACL), which identifies the importance of addressing gaps in academic, socio-economic, and cultural experiences of learners at all levels of education by leaders acknowledging their role in socially just changes (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2011). In this narrative, Dr. Lardner's own story mirrors, in many ways, the work she describes done by Paul Olson at Augustana College. She models how a White administrator can talk about race and racism, and work to change the organization through this role modeling.

**Developing Relationships Remains Important for Students' Establishing a Sense of Belonging**

Dr. Lardner's first college experience was at a large research university. She shares that she struggled to find a connection with her peers in her residential community or in her classes, and that, while she had some faculty that she felt were strong teachers, the curriculum did not help her find a sense of belonging. Although a student in an integrative learning program at her first campus, she lacked the support to help her build the connections to what she was

experiencing in different courses. Despite research indicating that integrated coursework and learning communities impact students' retention (Taylor et al., 2003), in Dr. Lardner's case, the lack of a support structures led to self-advisement and eventually transferring institutions.

Dr. Lardner's lived experiences align with research by Terenzini et al. (1995), which indicates that students benefit from targeted and active support in their first year of college. At the time Dr. Lardner was a student, the emphasis on the first year of college was not as supported in the literature as it is now. However, Dr. Lardner's time in college highlights the significance institutions must place on understanding individual student experiences and addressing individual student needs. Dr. Lardner was not a first-generation college student: her family had instilled in her an understanding of the value and significance of an education, which is likely why she persisted and continued to enroll despite facing obstacles that could have driven her away from education. She struggled with asking for help and understanding her resources, but she had also been socialized to value an education. A student who is not rooted in the same social capital may not persist in the same ways.

As noted by Astin (1984, 1993), the relationships between faculty and students may be the variable most critical to students' retention at the institution. It is not until Dr. Lardner makes her way to graduate school that she finds a sense of belonging at the institution and begins making meaningful connections with her peers and faculty. This is considerably further into an academic career than many students may achieve, so in many respects, it is likely due in part to her privileged identities that Dr. Lardner achieved these steps in spite of the educational environments she inhabited.

This study highlights that developing an understanding of students' lived experiences and helping to connect with them is one of the roles faculty can assume to support students' retention

and success. Kiyama and Rios-Aguilar (2018) shared that utilizing a funds of knowledge (FK) framework in higher education can be used to counteract deficit thinking in relation to college transition and measures of persistence and success, as it centers student experiences as attributes and strengths. Dr. Lardner makes use of a coaching metaphor in relation to the ways educators can work with students. She shares that, in this type of relationship with learners, educators have to recognize that it takes a lot of trust for a student to try and to risk trying repeatedly. By acknowledging student lived experiences, educators can demonstrate they are worthy of the trust a student might have in them.

**Engaging Learners in Understanding the Rules of Higher Education is a Critical Factor to Students' Retention**

This study highlights Dr. Lardner's personal experiences in attempting to understand the rules of higher education. Dr. Lardner's narrative points to moments where she may not have understood expressly what she was being asked to complete or why. Her experiences in the Integrated Liberal Studies program did not make apparent why she was reading certain texts, or how the coursework she was engaged with was connected to a larger picture. Although cited as a practice that may serve as a means of building foundational skills (Smith et al., 2004), Dr. Lardner's linked courses did not help her make apparent what was supposed to be occurring as integrated learning in the curriculum. Perhaps, had someone engaged with her in a conversation about what was happening and how to build those connections across the curriculum, she may have had a different outcome at the institution. Additionally, Dr. Lardner noted that throughout her educational experience, she did not recognize that she could revise and revisit her thoughts. She was unsure of how to approach writing her dissertation, fearful that by asking questions, she would unveil to her advisor that she did not belong.

Dr. Lardner cited the work of Conley (2007), whose work reframes college readiness to argue that it is the role of colleges and universities to help students navigate the institutional context. Dr. Lardner also mentioned the Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TiLT) framework, developed at the University of Las Vegas (UNLV). This research asks educators to recognize the importance of helping learners understand how they learn, and for those who are educators to learn from the experiences of others in coordinating learning moments. These frameworks connect back to the concept of coaching students, which includes making explicit why and how a student might accomplish the tasks they are being given.

As colleges and universities seek to impact students' retention and success, high impact practices have been identified as initiatives that may have positive impacts in these areas (Kuh, 2008). However, the mere presence of these initiatives does not ensure that they positively impact students (Johnson & Stage, 2018; Kuh & Kinzie, 2018). Practitioners in learning communities work need to make sure that an equity mindset is taken during the implementation and evaluation of learning communities (Kuh & Kinzie, 2018).

**The Dominant Narrative in Learning Communities Research and Practice May Necessitate Evolving to Further its Adoption in Higher Education**

In Dr. Lardner's narrative, she examines the evolution of the work of the Washington Center during her tenure as director. She shared that her predecessors were focused by necessitation on establishing the Center and its work, and that the collaborations and networking that they undertook helped to connect financial and social capital to the work occurring at The Evergreen State College and the Center. Dr. Lardner shared that despite not having the same financial resources during her time as director, she and her colleagues were intentional about making explicit connections to the work of others in higher education, including purposeful

connections to the MDRC, a project on assessing learning in learning communities, the HBCU faculty development network, and the NSSE. This work helped to model integrative practice, as Dr. Lardner and the Washington Center worked to find connections between different research practices and approaches.

Throughout discussion with Dr. Lardner, it became apparent that her framework for learning communities practice was one of integrative learning. She shared that she was unaware of the literature surrounding learning communities prior to applying at the Washington Center, and that she brought a healthy skepticism to the claims made at the time regarding outcomes for students. She advocated in her leadership to move away from a focus on the model of practice, and instead on how to know what is working and why it is so. This change in practice led to a broader community of practice and a stronger knowledge base in the research of learning communities, including implementation of a research journal. Dr. Lardner states that practicing integrative thinking by reading and bringing together different research was both challenging and enjoyable.

Despite Dr. Lardner's emphasis on integrative practices, the primary research base for learning communities practice remains focused on what individuals are doing and the outcomes easiest to quantify. These outcomes include GPA, retention, and satisfaction (Taylor et al., 2003). While Dr. Lardner feels that the argument for learning communities has been reconstructed as a set of intentional practices, the field of higher education is still heavily focused on student outcomes and success measurements. Integrative learning is not a highlighted keyword for learning communities research in the ways that it might be; as such, if higher education is to emphasize how we make explicit the learning for students, then learning

communities research needs to more make more explicit the use of integrative learning and how it can be assessed and quantified.

## Implications for Theory and Research

Chapter 2 included models of organizational change. These models included Lewin's (1947) theory of unfreeze-change-refreeze, Bridges's (1986) transition model, and Rogers's (2003) theory of diffusion of innovations. The ways in which this study's findings align with these models, including the framework of diffusion of innovations, is discussed in the following section.

### Lewin's Theory of Unfreeze-Change-Refreeze

Lewin is credited with identifying a three-step approach to managing change: unfreeze-change-refreeze (Schein, 1996). Existing habits and ideas must be unlearned, so that the change itself can occur, and actions are then taken to stabilize the change (Burnes, 2004). In this study, Dr. Lardner's work at the Washington Center helped the organization move from centering existing learning communities practice to broadening scope and practice. The Washington Center's focus on building a scholarly base is particularly important for stabilizing the changes that occurred when the Center aligned its work with other practices occurring in higher education around high impact practices, students' learning, and retention.

This study illuminates the context of change within the Washington Center structure at The Evergreen State College as important. As the Center was funded initially through a legislative proviso, the operating budget of the Center is beholden to the decision making of leadership at The Evergreen State College. As Dr. Lardner noted, the structure will always be in question for the Center, because of the ties to the budget of Evergreen. The longevity of the Washington Center, therefore, must be leveraged against organizational and budgetary changes

that may be out of the control of the Center's staff. The changes that took place at The Evergreen State College to ensure ongoing support for the Washington Center may not have factored in when the proviso was awarded. For higher education institutions seeking to structure learning communities practice, this is an important notation of the stability needed to "refreeze" change.

**Bridges's (1986) Transition Model**

Bridge's (1986) transition model argues that the requirements of transition include an initial period of letting go of existing structures and identities. This is followed by a period in which a new orientation is developed, but it can be accompanied by loss and confusion (Bridges, 1996). The new beginning is the final phase, in which new processes and priorities are seen as comfortable for individuals (Bridges, 1996).

This study aligns with this model in the ways that former leadership of the Washington Center experienced the transition to leadership of Dr. Lardner. In her narrative, Dr. Lardner noted that the former director of the Washington Center, Dr. Jean MacGregor, came to a closing dinner of a Summer Institute, and remarked that they did not recognize anyone in attendance. This statement marks a period in which the Washington Center was broadening its reach and encouraging engagement in resource faculty from individuals who had not previously been included. This period may have marked a time of loss for Dr. MacGregor, in which the Washington Center was moving towards a new set of processes and priorities.

Additionally, Dr. Lardner spoke about the ways that institutions who were a part of the work of the Washington Center needed to think about ways to transition from structures they may have been operating from to envision a new paradigm. This manifested through teams attending Summer Institutes who were asked to create action plans in which they needed to work collaboratively and agree to a concrete plan in a span of four days. She shared that this process

required individuals to come to conclusions as a group, and to pay attention to individuals across the campus, not only the contexts in which they operated organizationally.

This model also aligns in the study in the ways that faculty were asked to engage in the Designing Integrative Assignments exercise. Dr. Lardner shares that individuals begin with the outcomes associated with two courses and try to find ways to integrate an assignment that meets both sets of outcomes. The shift from thinking about separate structures for courses to being integrative represents an example of moving through Bridges (1986) transition model.

**Rogers's (2003) Theory of Diffusion of Innovations**

Diffusion is defined as "the process in which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among members of a social system" (Rogers, 2003, p. 5). As noted by Rogers (2003), there are four key components to diffusion: the innovation itself, how it is communicated through social channels, time to diffuse, and the social system in which an innovation diffuses.

This study aligns with this framework in the way that Dr. Lardner described the history of the Washington Center and the work of learning communities practice. The Washington Center staff worked early on to receive funding for the Center through a legislative proviso. These early leaders worked to build social networks to communicate not only its existence, but the value of the Washington Center on a national scale. Former director Dr. Jean MacGrebor utilized her connections to build relationships of the Washington Center to FIPSE, AAHE, and the Pew Foundation. These early connections helped to establish the Washington Center's national profile, as funding from a large Pew grant helped build a national infrastructure to support learning communities. This funding supported the Washington Center's Summer Institutes, and the first national conference on learning communities. These early social channels helped to

build the Washington Center's momentum as a hub for learning communities research and practice in the United States.

As Dr. Lardner came onboard as the director, and as she was joined by Gillies Malnarich as co-director, she felt pressure to sustain the national infrastructure of the Washington Center without the funding that previous leadership had been able to access. Dr. Lardner was able to continue to leverage social channels as she made connections to research and literature outside existing learning communities practice. These efforts included partnerships with community colleges, HBCUs, NSSE, MDRC, and the National Numeracy Network. She worked over the tenure of her time as director and co-director to make purposeful the role of the Washington Center as a supporter to other initiatives occurring in higher education. She also helped to bring a peer-reviewed journal on learning communities research and practice under the umbrella of the Washington Center portfolio.

As the Washington Center continued its work and its connections to other movements occurring within higher education, the Center and the staff helped faculty, staff, and administrators to build structures of learning communities practice on their own campuses. Summer Institutes and national conferences provided opportunities for networking and a growth of social systems where learning communities ideas could be generated and communicated.

Diffusion of innovations also examines the types of adopters: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards (Rogers, 1962). In this study, Dr. Lardner's narrative describes the ways in which adopters to learning communities practice grew as the Center broadened its focus and networked to a larger community of practitioners. The exercise that Dr. Lardner explains occurring at an early Summer Institute, where individuals were asked to line up

in order of the length of time spent in learning communities practice, describes a visualization of the idea of type of adopter to an innovation.

This framework also aligns with the research done by Sáenz-Royo, Garcia-Lázaro, and Moreno (2015), who argued that an innovation's adoption can be hindered by organizations with high levels of existing social connection. The argument proposed in this research notes that the ability to build social networks and leverage peer pressure can be a motivation to adopt an innovation. As Dr. Lardner and colleagues built networks within higher education, and brought in new perspectives, they assisted the growth of learning communities practice in the United States.

Additionally, the research done by the NSSE in identifying high impact practices helped to build a research base that reframed learning communities as a set of integrative experiences that help students learn and engage in college. As the research on HIPs expanded in higher education in the United States, Dr. Lardner notes that there was an increase in the attention paid to creating these types of experiences aligned with institutional contexts.

## Implications for Practice

Learning communities practice has grown since the development of the Washington Center as a national foundation for research and practice. As learning communities practice has expanded, so too have the resources and research regarding effective implementation and efforts to impact students' learning.

However, the results of this study imply that we still have gains to be made in how practitioners talk about learning communities practice and demonstrate the impact on students and students' learning. There are multiple ways to structure learning communities (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999). Each model of implementation may be grounded in different curricular and co-

curricular structures (Smith et al., 2004). Within the field of higher education, it may be beneficial to consider beginning with what outcomes we want students to experience, and then build programs backwards to determine if a learning community model would accomplish this aim. Too often practitioners may be, as noted by Dr. Lardner in this study, starting with learning communities in mind. In these instances, individuals may be missing opportunities to consider alternatives to learning communities as means to reach student outcomes.

As noted by Dr. Lardner, Seattle Central College had been featured in the research by Tinto (2003) on learning communities and retention. Their campus enrollment declined, and the cost of maintaining the learning communities structure they offered was not viable in their new structure. Dr. Lardner describes the way that the faculty collaborated to offer a common co-curricular experience at the start of the quarter, followed by integrative assignments in various courses. This approach reimagined how the tenants of high impact practice could be maintained, but within a different structure outside learning community models. Practitioners could be well served by not only scanning the environment and literature to see what other campuses are doing, but to envision what may work with the structure of their unique campus context. If existing models of learning communities will not work for a practitioner's environment, determining what could is a possible way to invigorate faculty and campus partners.

This study also highlights the importance of making explicit the "why" and the "what" when it comes to students' learning, as well as making clear the rules that students are expected to follow in higher education. Dr. Lardner's narrative describes instances where the curricular and co-curricular environments left opportunities for her to fall through a proverbial crack. Without an individual to monitor her course enrollment, or help her to build a social connection to peers, or to check in with her to let her know that she mattered and was seen, or help her

understand how reading Studs Terkel was connected to a deeper learning moment, Dr. Lardner was left to navigate her college experiences largely on her own. Dr. Lardner's description is aligned with Strayhorn's (2012) definition of sense of belonging for college students: "perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by and important to the group…or others on campus" (p. 3). Learning communities or linked courses is only a structural feature of the college or university; if they are not accompanied by intentional efforts to support students as they transition through the institution, they are not accomplishing all that is possible. Dr. Lardner's narrative also encourages practitioners to consider how they are measuring student experiences, and being cautious to not make an assumption that because learning communities exist on the campus, that they are delivering intended outcomes.

## Limitations

This study was conducted using the narrative of one individual, Dr. Emily Lardner, to answer the research puzzle of what can be learned by her lived experiences. While the researcher agrees that this approach helped to bring about a story of the Washington Center and learning communities adoption, there are numerous other individuals whose work is interconnected with the work of the Washington Center. Additional narratives could be added to the data included in this research; the ability to interview other individuals who are identified in this narrative as colleagues and partners could help strengthen the study.

## Recommendations for Future Research

There are several studies that could complement and build upon this biographical narrative study. For example, there are many other professionals who have been a part of the Washington Center's work in the past two decades. A qualitative using either narrative

biography or through case study where the experiences of other leaders could be done to complement the narrative presented in this study. A qualitative study could also be conducted in which the partners identified by Dr. Lardner—either individuals or organizations – could be examined to learn about the roles they played in learning communities development. An other possible idea is to research the impact of these partnerships on those individuals or organizations (e.g., in what ways did the partnership with the Washington Center impact the work done by the entity)?

A study could also be conducted using quantitative or qualitative methods to learn more about how they took the knowledge gained and implemented new practices on their individual campuses with participants who participated in the work of the Washington Center since its inception. A different study could look at these same individuals and evaluate the ways that learning communities diffused over time or how organizational change was managed.

One of the features of this study is that it presents the lived experiences of an individual who led a national center in higher education in the United States. There does not appear to be a large body of literature or research that examines the roles of individuals leading from this macro level within the field; it may be a worthwhile research project to gather narrative experiences from individuals who are or have held roles in similar organizations. In particular, organizations that focus on other high impact practice areas might be a valuable area to focus on, as this body of literature continues to be foundational to transformative practices on colleges and universities.

As noted earlier in this chapter, the dominant narrative in learning communities research and practice does not emphasize integrative learning. Additional studies that center learner experiences and demonstrate the impact of integrative learning in learning communities could be a complement to existing literature and research.

## Conclusion

Colleges and universities are continually seeking to support the retention of students through to their graduation. Learning communities may be seen as a structure to support this aim, but they require the environmental structure to not only develop them, but to sustain them. The presence of learning communities and other high impact practices on a campus does not ensure that students are experiencing an integrative environment that helps them develop a sense of belonging or assist in their readiness for college. Practitioners must be cognizant of evaluating student experiences and supporting their meaning-making in and out of the classroom.

Dr. Lardner's narrative highlights the following themes: (a) individual identity and context are salient factors for educators to acknowledge, (b) developing relationships remains important for students' establishing a sense of belonging, (c) engaging learners in understanding the rules of higher education are critical factors to students' retention, and (d) the dominant narrative in learning communities research and practice may necessitate evolving to further its adoption in higher education.

The relationships that Dr. Lardner built with her faculty in graduate school helped her to finally establish a sense of belonging and agency in her education. She shares how her community of peers also supported her when needed. The literature on sense of belonging supports the important role that faculty and peers can play in helping students to feel that they matter and are valued (Strayhorn, 2012).

Dr. Lardner's personal experiences attempting to understand the rules of higher education highlights the importance of making explicit what is expected of students. The role of colleges and universities is to help students to navigate institutional contexts (Conley, 2007). By coaching students in what is expected, and helping them to understand the "why" and the "what,"

practitioners can help students feel more ownership of their experiences and help them practice integrative learning skills.

Learning communities research can more expressly evaluate and quantify integrative learning as a part of intentional practices. Dr. Lardner's narrative points to a number of ways that research partnerships of the Washington Center worked to expand the literature base, and to build relationships with organizations whose research interests were themselves integrative. Continuing to work as a field to research in this area would further develop this high impact practice.

This study centers the lived experiences of Dr. Emily Lardner, who served as director of the Washington Center, housed at The Evergreen State College, from 1996-2017. In her narrative, Dr. Lardner describes the role that she and the Washington Center played in learning communities diffusion in the United States, as well as providing context for the partnerships of individuals and organizations in broadening the scope of the work of the Washington Center in other initiatives occurring within higher education. The narrative describes not only Dr. Lardner's professional journey and work, but also highlights that each individual working in higher education has faced their own challenges to become who they are as academics and practitioners. When colleges and universities take the time to hear the stories of students, they are better able to understand the supports and challenges that may be present. This understanding can present opportunities to make explicit the "why" for participating in high impact practices such as learning communities.

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# APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

## Interview 1: Centered on the Academic Experiences of Dr. Lardner

I would like to start by having you share with me the story which led to you becoming an academic. I would like you to include all the events and experiences which were important for you. Please start whenever you like, I will not interrupt you, but I will be taking notes.

1. After this first question, I will ask to take a small break, and construct follow-up questions based on what is shared. The follow-up questions will be centered on solicitation of more story from Dr. Lardner.

## Interview 2: Focused on Dr. Lardner's time at the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education

1. I would like to start by revisiting our first interview. Please share with me any observations or reflections you have had since that time, including any reflections you may have after review of transcripts or my notes.
2. Please share with me the story of what led you to apply to serve as director of the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education.
3. I am interested in hearing your account of the first year you served in the director role, including how you came to understand the organization, its mission, and the personnel you worked with.

I am interested in hearing the story of how learning communities practice in higher education changed in the United States over the time you served as director of the Washington Center. Please share the story of the work you and the Washington Center conducted during this time period.

I will ask to take a small break, and construct follow-up questions based on what is shared. The follow-up questions will be centered on solicitation of more story from Dr. Lardner.

**Interview 3: Reflection of Dr. Lardner on the meaning of experiences within context of what has been discussed, reflecting on lessons learned.**

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT

**Colorado State University**
**Consent to Participate in Research**

***Understanding the Lived Experiences of Dr. Emily Lardner: Lessons for the Adoption and Practice of Learning Communities in Higher Education***

**Introduction and Purpose**
My name is Adrianna Guram. I am a graduate student at Colorado State University, working with my faculty advisor, Dr. Laurie Carlson, in the School of Education. This research study seeks to answer what we can learn from your lived experiences as it relates to learning communities adoption and practice in the United States.

This study is a biographical narrative inquiry, which is dynamic in nature and co-constructs story between me as the researcher and you as the narrator. I believe that this study will contribute to existing literature regarding learning communities, and believe that you are particularly positioned to share a story of how learning communities practice diffused over two decades in the United States, and the particular role that you and the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education played in this diffusion, related to changes that were occurring in higher education institutions through national policies and legislative action.

**Procedures**
If you agree to participate in my research, I will conduct a series of interviews with you via Zoom at times we mutually agree to. With your permission, these interviews will be video and audio recorded and I will take notes during the interviews. The recording is to accurately record our conversations and will be used for transcription purposes. Copies of these transcriptions will be provided to you for review throughout the research process.

These interviews are anticipated to take 90-minutes each. While I am proposing an initial 3 interview process, I acknowledge that I am unsure what may come from our conversations, and I retain the ability to modify structure as needed to explore constructed themes.

Interviews will be designed to gather information regarding three specific areas of your lived experiences:

- Interview 1: Centered on your academic experiences.
- Interview 2: Focused on your time at the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education.
- Interview 3: Reflections you have on the meaning of experiences within the context of what has been discussed, reflecting on lessons learned.

Due to the nature of narrative inquiry as a reflective practice, there will be time between interviews for you and I to review notes and transcriptions, reflect, and then engage in another formal interview. The time between interviews will provide me the opportunity to construct research text, where I, as a researcher, can revisit constructed themes and topics, and seek to

identify a framework for future inquiries. You will be provided with enough time to review and provide reflections and edits as needed; these edits will be reviewed by me as well in construction of the research text.

**Benefits**
There is no direct benefit to you from taking part in this study. It is hoped that the research will contribute to the existing research on learning communities adoption and practice for practitioners in higher education.

**Risks/Discomforts**
This research centers your story, based on your own voice. It is possible that some questions may make you uncomfortable or solicit a range of emotional responses from you. You are free to decline to answer any questions you do not wish to or stop/pause the interviews at any time.

**Confidentiality**
As with all research, there is a risk that confidentiality could be compromised; however, I am taking precautions to minimize this risk. Any identifiable information you provide regarding individuals or institutions will be assigned a pseudonym.

I will be using a transcription service to transcribe recordings as soon as possible after the interview, and then store these in my external hard drive and google drive. Copies of these transcriptions will be shared with you for your review and edits/additions. When the research is completed, I will save the transcriptions for possible use in future research done by myself. I will retain these records for 5 years after the study is over. I may be asked to share the research files with the CSU Institutional Review Board ethics committee for auditing purposes.

Due to the nature of this research, it is important for me to engage in triangulation of data. I will engage with "repeated listenings to taped interviews and readings of transcripts" (Mishler, 1990, p. 427) to allow me to see an internal consistency and identify that information shared is not contradictory in another part of the inquiry. If information shared in a later point in our dialogue appears to be contradictory, the review of prior comments and reflections can provide an opportunity for me to seek clarification from you (Mishler, 1990).

**Compensation**
You will not be paid for taking part in this research study.

**Rights**
Participation in research is completely voluntary. You are free to decline to take part in this research study. You can decline to answer any questions and are free to stop taking part in the research at any time. Whether or not you choose to participate in this research and whether or not you choose to answer any questions or continue participating in this research, there will be no penalty to you.

**Questions**
If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact me at [phone number provided] or Adrianna.Guram@colostate.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights or treatment as a participant in this study, please contact the Colorado State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) at: 970-491-1381, or email RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu.

# APPENDIX C: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Colorado State University

*Knowledge to Go Places*

**eProtocol**
**Office of the Vice President for Research**
**321 General Services Building - Campus Delivery 2011 eprotocol**
**TEL: (970) 491-1553**

| | |
|---|---|
| **DATE:** | October 08, 2020 |
| **TO:** | Carlson, Laurie, School of Education |
| | Guram, Adrianna, School of Education, Faircloth, Susan |
| **FROM:** | Felton-Noyle, Tammy, Senior IRB Coordinator, BMR, CSU IRB Exempt |
| **PROTOCOL TITLE:** | Understanding the Lived Experiences of Dr. Emily Lardner: Lessons for the Adoption and Practice of Learning Communities in Higher Education |
| **FUNDING SOURCE** | None |
| **PROTOCOL NUMBER:** | 20-10361H |
| **APPROVAL or DETERMINATION PERIOD:** | November 19, 2020 |

**NOTICE OF IRB REVIEW FOR HUMAN RESEARCH**

Your study was reviewed and determined to be Not Human Subjects Research (NHSR) by the Colorado State University IRB (FWA0000647). As such, your activity falls outside the parameters for IRB review. You may conduct your study as described in your application without additional obligation to the IRB.

This memorandum is your record of the IRB decision related to this study. Please maintain it with your study records.

Please contact this office if you have any questions or require assistance. We appreciate your cooperation, and wish you success with your research.

Please direct any questions about the IRB's actions on this project to:

IRB Office - (970) 491-1553; RICRO_IRB@mail.Colostate.edu
Claire Chance, Senior IRB Coordinator - (970) 491-1381; Claire.Chance@Colostate.edu
Tammy Felton-Noyle, Senior IRB Coordinator - (970) 491-1655; Tammy.Felton-Noyle@Colostate.edu

Chance, Claire

§46.102(l) Research means a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge.

The regulations specifically consider the following activities to be excluded from the definition, above:
Scholarly and journalistic activities (e.g., oral history, journalism, biography, literary criticism, legal research, and historical scholarship), including the collection and use of information, that focus directly on the specific individuals about whom the information is collected.

After review of the information regarding Understanding the Lived Experiences of Dr. Emily Lardner: Lessons for the Adoption and Practice of Learning Communities in Higher Education, it was determined that your activity as presented would not meet the regulatory definition of research 45CFR46.102(l), and would therefore not be under the IRB 's purview.

None