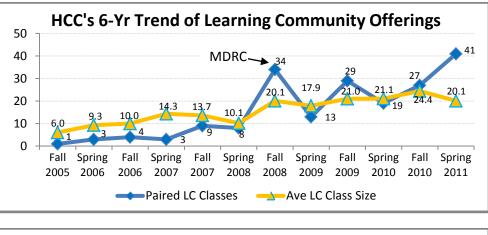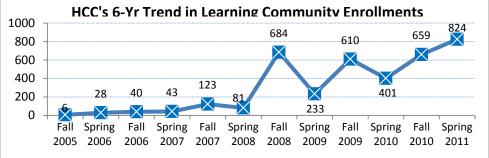# Learning Communities 6-Year Trend, 2005-2011

In 2004, Northeast College opted to choose Learning Communities as their "Achieving the Dream" (AtD) initiative, one of HCC's five AtD initiatives at that time. For HCC, a Learning Community (LC) was defined as two "linked" classes, not only in location and blocked time, but also in some syllabi content structured to meet the learning objectives of each of the joined classes. The two instructors were each given one release period for developing the combined curriculum in the semester prior to its offering, followed by a $200 stipend each for teaching the LC classes. Also a counselor was to be assigned to each LC so the instructors would have quicker access to counseling efforts when needed.

Enrollment Trends: Development was slow, with just one LC offered in the pilot year's Fall 2005 schedule. Only six students were enrolled in the two classes – developmental Reading and the orientation/study skills class at that time. The pilot year's Spring Semester 2006 had only 3 LCs (6 classes) with 28 students enrolled in both classes. The classes included developmental Reading with orientation as in Fall, plus a developmental Reading with Sociology, and an Arts class with English Literature.

The two trend graphs below depict the growth of LC offerings, LC class sizes, and LC unduplicated enrollments over the past six years. Excluding the first pilot year, there has been more than a 750% growth of the number of LCs offered, and more than 1500% more students involved. However, this is still less than 10% of the course offerings available at HCC.
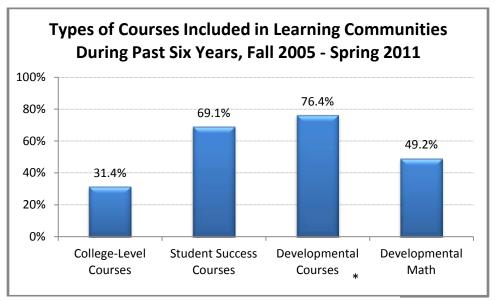

LC Course Trends: For the first two years, there was no focus on what particular courses should be combined. Instead considerable effort was needed to blend two classes, get them correctly on the

schedule, and make students and counselors aware of the new technique. Early in 2007, MDRC requested HCC to be one of six colleges to conduct a research study on learning communities with developmental Math as one of the LC components. So HCC organizers set up and began enrolling students into Fall 2007 randomly-assigned LCs for the MDRC's study, which narrowed the focus of combinations but increased the number of offerings. The study was to run through Fall 2009, but continued through Spring 2010.

Since Fall 2005, subjects linked as LC have included all developmental courses in Math, English, and Reading, the Student Success Course (GUST1270) and its predecessor GUST0303, as well as college-level English, Psychology, Sociology, Office Procedures (POFI), Art History, Accounting, History and Fashion History, Government, Library Science, Speech, and most recently Chemistry and Biology. Although this appears to be a broad selection of college-level courses, only 31.4% of LCs contained one or more of these courses. The majority of LCs consisted of developmental classes (76.4%) – of which 49.2% were developmental MATH classes. The developmental classes were most frequently linked to the College Success Course, which was one of 69.1% of the LCs offered. (See chart below.)

Types of Courses Included in Learning Communities During Past Six Years, Fall 2005 - Spring 2011

* Note: Developmental courses include Developmental Math courses

LC Development Issues: Creating Learning Communities has been a difficult process from the beginning. The more difficult problems have to do with administrative set-up and communication to faculty, counselors, and students. Since PeopleSoft does not have the programming required to track LC classes and students, a more manual process had to be developed. To control for error, one person has been assigned to each college to inform one person in the Vice-Chancellor of Instructional Development Office of which LCs have been created and if those classes are unlinked because one or both are cancelled. Although this facilitated LC set-up, it was too manual a process and did not assure accuracy or facilitate course and student tracking. Discussions between the VC's office, Institutional Technology (IT), and Institutional Research (OIR) during last Fall and early Spring 2011 resulted in a coding system identifying LC courses with a class note of "1867," and batch coding the students within the LC with a

student group code of "LC." IT also developed two PeopleSoft queries for identifying LC classes and students at any point of time for current and past semesters. After a detailed semester-end review by OIR, with any corrections made the system personnel, the resultant information is available on PeopleSoft for future retrieval and in OIR for tracking analyses. This administrative set-up is still to a large extent a manual process, and may likely need revisions in the future.

The second issue with communications is actively being addressed at all colleges. A mix of efforts includes a LC one-pager describing LCs that are available, notice of LCs on college websites, short promos on AXIS TV, discussions with counselors and faculty. I believe communication through Eagle On-line is even being planned. Although release time for developing LCs was eliminated, there is still a $200 stipend for faculty teaching an LC. However, this money is budgeted a stipend funds in the department budget and is able to be diverted for non-LC purposes via a line item transfer. Much of this communication effort is relatively new and in flux.

LC Strategy Analyses: Analyses of LCs compared to un-linked classes for three Fall semesters showed that there was significant improvement in successful course completion rates for students enrolled in LC classes. The rates for all students were 6% to 15% higher than their counterparts, with African-American, Hispanic, and Pell student rates ranging between 10% to 14%, 6% to 12%, and 5% to 12% respectively. The student successful completion rates for LCs containing developmental classes ranged from 4% to 9%, with developmental Math having the greater gain. Due to limited offerings and other confounding issues, at this point there is not sufficient evidence to determine if HCC LCs significantly improve student persistence.

In summary, learning communities of two classes with connected syllabi do encourage students to persist and succeed in their classes. HCC has had growth in LC offerings, but LCs are still uncommon. This new pedagogy has technical and cultural hurdles not yet cleared, but progress is slowly being made.