Instructional Teams at Guttman Community College: Building a Learning Community of Students, Faculty, and Staff

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Introduction

...many experts believe that students’ academic and social experiences during their first semester of college often determine whether they will persist in school over the long term. According to this theory, students who develop strong initial connections with other students, with faculty or staff, and with the material they are studying are far more likely to continue and succeed.¹

At the heart of the Guttman Community College (GCC) model is the mandatory full-time first year requiring that students be enrolled in houses (more commonly known as learning communities) and participate in an interdisciplinary curriculum taught by a team of faculty who work with the students throughout the year. In each house, faculty, librarians, and student support staff (called Student Success Advocates) form an “instructional team”—the main focus of this report. This briefing paper will describe and discuss the instructional teams at GCC, including their purpose, functions, operating norms and culture, supports to students and participants, and faculty and staff assessments of their effectiveness.

A central feature of the college—not found in most community colleges—is that students are randomly assigned to houses (otherwise known as learning communities) without regard to their academic skills. No test determines their placement. Within houses, students are grouped into cohorts, and each cohort follows the same interdisciplinary program of study in the first year.

The first year, including the instructional teams, was described in the 2008 Concept Paper, which informed the planning of the college and the submission of a detailed document outlining every aspect of the proposed college to the New York State Education Department and to the CUNY Board of Trustees for its accreditation. This first-year model drew on an extensive literature review of what was known to

¹ Dan Bloom and Colleen Sommo, Building Learning Communities: Early Results from the Opening Doors Demonstration at Kingsborough Community College (MDRC, June 2005), 45. [http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/full_36.pdf]
contribute to the success of underprepared, low-income students in persisting and completing college. The statistics on college completion for students who were referred to one or more developmental courses reveal very low rates of persistence and completion. These statistics presented a challenge to the designers of the college. Other data on completion from community colleges that incorporated learning communities into the first year were more encouraging; in particular, data from Kingsborough Community College showed promising early results.²

With this and other research in mind, the solution proposed by the planners was that academic skill development should be integrated into a rigorous, full-time, interdisciplinary curriculum that would challenge and engage students over a period of one year, and that faculty and support staff would work together to implement this curriculum and support students in succeeding. A decision was also made to focus on issues related to New York City and other global urban settings—a subject area that was likely to engage students and also provide numerous opportunities for interdisciplinary and experiential learning.

In addition to requiring an engaging and demanding curriculum that integrated skill development into an interdisciplinary curriculum, the college also emphasized the importance of having faculty, library staff, and support staff work in close collaboration to support students in persisting and overcoming the many barriers that low-income, poorly prepared students have to college completion. To this end it was suggested that the instructional teams meet weekly to discuss student progress and issues impeding students’ progress as well as curriculum and pedagogy—what was working well and not so well in their classes. The model called for Student Success Advocates to participate in

² This initiative was cited in the Concept Paper: M.G. Visher et al., The Learning Communities Demonstration: Rationale, Sites and Research Design (National Center for Postsecondary Research, 2008). More recent data published after the Concept Paper revealed that Kingsborough’s model alone among the six sites that participated in a random assignment evaluation showed positive effects on graduation rates. This was attributed to its unique model which included advisement, tutors, and stipends and was sustained over an entire year. See M.G. Visher et al., The Effects of Learning Communities for Students in Developmental Education: A Synthesis of Findings from Six Community Colleges (NCPR, 2012).
instructional team meetings so that they could learn from faculty about issues that students presented in their classes and contribute information to faculty that might help them understand how to better address the needs of individual students who fall behind.

An extensive literature also exists on faculty learning communities (FLCs), which in some ways are similar to instructional teams. Composed generally of faculty from various disciplines, FLCs may include administrators and other staff; they focus primarily on a theme or issue of importance to improving teaching or learning; they share their learning with colleagues in their institution and sometimes beyond it; they are collaborative in nature with a lead facilitator; and they have specific goals to accomplish.\(^3\)

Like FLCs, the effectiveness of the instructional teams depends on developing a culture of collaboration and trust among the participants. As with FLCs, each instructional team ideally develops a distinctive community among its members, and its impact depends on how well it addresses students’ needs and the needs of each faculty member. To make such trust possible, participants must be willing to share both successes and failures and to learn from others so that faculty can make changes on an ongoing basis.

In this report, we examine what we have learned from documenting each of the instructional team meetings in all four houses during the fall 2012 and spring 2013 semesters, from interviewing the faculty, librarians, and Student Success Advocates in each house, and from documenting selected faculty and curriculum meetings and events such as professional development and assessment days. What follows is a distillation of our year-long documentation in which we describe the main features of the instructional teams—their organization, how they address students’ issues, and curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. We do not report on impact as it is too early to evaluate in such a new and innovative institution; this will be left to others at a later

\(^3\) Milton D. Cox, “Introduction to Faculty Learning Communities,” *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 97 (Spring 2004).
point in GCC’s development. Rather, our descriptions and observations are intended to
describe the range of issues addressed by the instructional teams, how they were
addressed, some of the dilemmas that surfaced from our observations, and questions
that might be considered going forward.

The report is divided into the following sections: 1) The Organization and Functions of
Instructional Teams; 2) GCC Instructional Teams: Communities of Teaching Practice;
3) Going Forward: Moving from the Inaugural Year Instructional Team Experience.
Chapter 1. The Organization and Functions of Instructional Teams

The growth of any craft depends on shared practice and honest dialogue with the people who do it. We grow by trial and error to be sure—but our willingness to try, and fail, as individuals, is severely limited when we are not supported by a community that encourages such risks.⁴

When appropriately designed, learning communities become spaces to bring together the theory and practice of student development and diversity, of active inclusive pedagogies, and of reflection and assessment.⁵

Experimental spaces are challenging and thinking about “failure” is interesting; parts of an experiment have to fail and that is positive and is part of the experimental space concept. The failure is if we do not respond to the issues and rethink what we are doing.⁶

This chapter tells the “story” of the organization and development of the instructional teams, which are at the heart of GCC’s innovative model. Learning communities, called houses at GCC, can be found in other institutions and have been described in a number of scholarly publications. What makes the GCC experiment innovative, and therefore important to document, is that the houses and the instructional teams that lead each of them are composed of faculty who are full-time and have been hired not only because of their disciplinary background but also because of their commitment to implementing the model. The instructional teams form the structure that supports the implementation of the fundamental aspects of the first-year experience, which includes collaboration among faculty and support staff in planning and supporting student success. The team is where faculty from diverse disciplines, librarians, support staff, and graduate student coordinators gather weekly for an hour and a half to make all the decisions about the teaching and learning in their house and needed supports for students. Faculty receive release time to participate in the instructional team, and the members enjoy autonomy


⁵ Barbara Leigh Smith et al., Learning Communities: Reforming Undergraduate Education (Jossey-Bass, 2004), 97.

⁶ Faculty leader of an instructional team.
to implement the curriculum for the first year as they deem appropriate.\(^7\) In this sense the instructional teams are at the heart of the GCC model; much can be learned from their first-year implementation.\(^8\)

Given the need to implement a new educational model as well as the start-up of a new college, faculty and staff experienced both the exhilaration of designing something new, but also the challenge, and often exhaustion, of constant invention—of having to pilot the airplane while building it. Because of this they had to develop a structure for collaboration at the same time as they were implementing a new curriculum and new approaches to pedagogy and assessment. The innovative nature of the college and its “newness” informs every aspect of it in the sense that whatever exists is also under scrutiny to see if it indeed is working on behalf of students’ success and persistence, and if not, how it can be improved.

The following topics related to instructional teams are presented in this chapter:
1) structure, commonalities, and differences among the teams, including house culture and practices; and 2) support of students’ persistence and success by addressing their academic and social/emotional needs. Chapter 2 will present the focus on curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, which is a critical and major part of the instructional teams’ work.

\(^7\) The syllabi for each part of City Seminar and the other course offered are the same, but how faculty implement the syllabi is left to the individual instructors as is the way in which the curriculum in City Seminar is integrated; this topic is discussed in the next section.

\(^8\) The Concept Paper authors recognized the challenges of providing a rigorous interdisciplinary curriculum among faculty with varied academic backgrounds, including some with limited experience teaching students with weak academic skills. The principal author, Tracy Meade, realized that the effort would require that faculty and student support staff draw on one another’s experiences and knowledge to collectively decide how to make the curriculum and their teaching most effective, how to acknowledge failure and change course when needed, and how to effectively address student issues, whether academic or social/emotional. During the final year of planning the college, the First Year Committee described the functions of the instructional teams including their composition of faculty, librarians, and representatives from student services.
Structure, Commonalities, and Differences in Teams

Faculty and Student Success Advocates (SSAs) are proud to note that while the houses have a similar structure, each house is different. Members highly value this positive attribute of the houses: their structure and overall purposes are similar, but given their composition, they develop their own culture and community. Some examples include: how they organize meetings; how they address teaching and learning issues; how they develop standards for assessing students’ work; how they build a culture of support and caring for students through ongoing communication and community-building events that include all members of the house.

As currently organized, GCC has four houses: each house has three cohorts of students composed of 25 students who follow an interdisciplinary first-year curriculum. The curriculum in the first semester focused on consumption, waste, recycling, and sustainability, and the second semester focused on immigration. All topics were interdisciplinary in their readings and required collaboration from the faculty teaching each part of City Seminar—Reading and Writing, Quantitative Reasoning, and Critical Issues in the first semester, and in the second, Critical Issues and Quantitative Reasoning, with Composition I offered as a separate but related course. Two additional courses—Ethnographies of Work (EoW), a two-semester sequence, and Statistics, which was given either as a one- or two-semester course depending on students’ prior mathematics background and achievement—are separate from City Seminar. The EoW instructors participated in the instructional teams, but the Statistics instructors did not participate on a consistent basis because of schedule conflicts or, in the case of some adjuncts, because meeting time was not covered in their contract.¹⁰

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¹⁰ The number of students will grow once the college begins to enroll more students. A new facility will eventually allow for an enrollment of 3,000 students. The number of cohorts and students decreased in the spring semester partly because of some attrition but also because a number of students were in recuperation courses and therefore, depending on the faculty assigned to teach these courses, did not participate in the same house and cohort as they did previously.

¹⁰ The Provost is currently addressing this issue, including finding a way to provide adjuncts with additional time to participate in instructional team meetings through an appeals process regarding contractual hour limits on teaching and non-teaching assignments.
In addition to the four instructors, a Student Success Advocate is assigned to each house, and a member of the library staff participates in all meetings. The SSAs listen to issues that faculty encounter with students and bring information, as needed, that could assist faculty in addressing student issues without violating confidentiality. The SSAs also plan and facilitate a weekly activity related to EoW, called LABSS (Learning About Being a Successful Student), which helps students develop the habits of an engaged college student and begin to plan their majors and careers.

By participating in meetings, library staff learn what resources students need to complete their assignments, how they can support their learning, such as through developing research skills and becoming familiar with the library’s resources. In addition, librarians give workshops as needed during the semester, for example in how to annotate a research paper and how to format footnotes and bibliographies. The librarians’ participation in the instructional teams ensures that “information literacy” is a part of every aspect of teaching and learning at the college.

Other members of the team are the Graduate Coordinators. These are CUNY graduate students who facilitated a component of the model titled Group Work Space (GWS) in the first semester, which was intended to provide students with support in their academic work that would reinforce what they were addressing in their classes. This session was held once a week and was not graded.11 As GWS evolved over the first semester, it was renamed “Studio,” a name intentionally suggestive of what artists do in their studios—practice, reflect, and revise their work to achieve mastery of their craft. A syllabus informed this focus on practice to support learning with follow-up reflection at the end of each session. Studio was again facilitated by Graduate Coordinators, who in the spring semester participated in the instructional teams. Points on students’ grades in City Seminar were given for their participation in Studio.

11 As a result of suggestions to strengthen it, partly in response to students’ poor attendance, GWS was rethought and renamed Studio in the second semester.
Peer Mentors, who are important members of the college’s support structure, do not participate on instructional teams only because of the confidentiality issues that may arise from having students participating in discussions of other students’ grades. However, Peer Mentors play a major role in Studio, assisting with the implementation of the curriculum, as well as participating in classes and providing academic support to students when asked, and being general resource people outside the classroom to whom students can turn with questions.

Each instructional team is led by a faculty member who prepares the agenda and writes up summary notes, which are submitted as a permanent record of the work of the instructional teams to its members and the Provost. Depending on the house, the leader, who is selected by the Provost, either facilitates the meeting or occasionally asks another faculty member or the SSA to do so. Beyond these responsibilities, leaders also keep in touch with members throughout the week via email and bring ideas to the meetings, when appropriate, on topics such as assessment or organization of students’ end-of-semester presentations.\(^{12}\)

The organization of each instructional team meeting differs depending on the leader as well as the participants. Certainly, the leader and her or his particular style of convening meetings and building community among its members made a difference in how instructional teams functioned. In addition, each leader brought particular strengths from their disciplines, previous teaching experiences, and, in some cases, administrative experiences as well. Such strengths positively affected each of the instructional teams, and in different ways.

Other differences stemmed from organizational decisions, such as the extent to which the leader, as opposed to other members of the instructional team, led the meetings and the extent to which agendas were carefully followed or in which discussion was

\(^{12}\) For a description of instructional team meetings, including time allotment, the role of conveners, and the purpose of the teams, see *The New Community College at CUNY: Provisional Faculty Handbook 2012-13*, pp.44-45.
more free-flowing. For example, one leader began each meeting with an “essential question” related to teaching and learning; another began by asking, “What is going extremely well?” so that successes could be noted, celebrated, and lessons learned from them.

Across the instructional teams the topics included: supporting students experiencing personal and academic barriers to success; setting house ground rules for addressing student issues such as chronic lateness or excessive absences; discussing what was working well and not so well and for which students; discussing the level of difficulty and appropriateness of the readings and assignments; refining assignments; planning student experiential experiences outside the classroom and mid-point and end-of-semester presentations; developing common grading forms; and discussing the uses of e-portfolio in assessment. Some instructional teams also organized social events with students to reinforce their sense of belonging in their house.

What is significant is that instructional teams approached the issues cited above differently. For example, regarding policies on student behavior, the only agreement across instructional teams was that a single rule applied uniformly across the college would not work within the context of a college dedicated to helping students succeed and become responsible learners. Each house made its own rules about issues of absence and lateness in order to take into account the realities of students’ lives. Other differences were the extent to which the curriculum was modified (e.g., the timing of assignments) to meet students’ needs. Some but not all instructional teams brought students together for social events. How mid-semester and end-of-semester student reports and presentations were assigned and organized also varied.

That faculty, SSAs, and Graduate Coordinators worked together harmoniously and effectively in each instructional team to create a unique culture of communication and support among themselves and for their students was considered the major strength of the house structure. But this structure also supported faculty autonomy in the
classrooms and a variety of approaches to dealing with student issues, which is discussed in the section below on supporting students’ social/emotional and academic needs.

**Improving the organization of the instructional teams:** A criticism made of three of the instructional teams was that they did not include the instructors who taught statistics, which disadvantaged the statistics instructors as well as the other faculty. The reason for this had to do with the scheduling of statistics which included one- and two-semester versions. Statistics faculty sometimes dropped into the meetings, schedule permitting, and one statistics faculty member was able to attend continuously throughout the first year. This instructor commented on how valuable the feedback from others was for her teaching, and the other members felt that her feedback on students and curriculum was similarly valuable for them.

Opportunities for statistics faculty and the others to work together were provided during assessment days at two points in the semester. At these times everyone noted that the opportunity to work with statistics faculty as well as with the other members of their team, greatly enhanced their understanding of their students. As indicated previously, this issue is currently being addressed by the Provost since there is agreement among administration and faculty about the value added to teaching through broad-based faculty participation in the instructional teams. Another issue is providing release time for leaders of the instructional teams who have noted that their job requires considerable preparation and organization beyond the meeting times. At a recent negotiation between labor and management this issue was addressed and will result in release time for instructional team leaders.
Support of Students’ Persistence and Success

*Who are the students?* The students at GCC are enrolled through the CUNY admissions process, and they are similar demographically to students at other CUNY community colleges except in their ages, which tend to be younger—20 years old or below for the most part. One other difference is that the condition of their enrollment is their commitment to attend a mandatory 12-day Summer Bridge program beginning in mid-August and to attend full-time in the first year. This entails full-time attendance in each of the two simulated semesters, each of which is composed of two sessions totaling 18 weeks (Fall I composed of 12 weeks and Fall II of 6 weeks; Spring I composed of 12 weeks and Spring II of 6 weeks). This calendar was selected deliberately to allow students to complete their degree in two years and for students requiring additional academic support or intervention to retake a course or enroll in a “re recuperation” course, specifically aimed at supporting academic skills in reading, writing, and math. The goal of the college is have at least 35 percent of students completing the two-year program with a degree or transferring to a four-year college within three years.

The full-time requirement meant being on campus five days a week for either an a.m. or p.m. session during the Fall I and Spring I sessions; courses were scheduled differently in the six-week semesters to meet needs for both accelerating students and those requiring recuperation in a shorter amount of time. Participation in all four semesters in the first year is mandatory. Often students choose the a.m. session with the hope of working the rest of the day. But 8 a.m. classes are notoriously difficult to populate with students because of the early hour and long commutes, and this was no different at GCC. In addition, because most students need to work, their time was often split between work and school with long commutes to the college. While these issues are common to all community college students, what made a huge difference was that faculty and staff were committed to seeing all students through the first year with supports that could help them participate fully and effectively. This included some incentives provided by funding from the Robin Hood Foundation in the form of
MetroCards and lunch money for Summer Bridge and a one-time stipend of $300 for purchasing books.\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Becoming members of an academic community:} One of the reasons many first-year students drop out—especially those who are first-generation and from communities where few complete college—is that in most colleges minimal attention is paid to encouraging entering students to feel part of an academic community that is very different from high school. It is widely recognized that there is a need for a process of acculturation so that students feel “membership” in an academic community, and many colleges address this through orientations and summer bridge programs, but often these are not enough. As early as the 1970s when CUNY became an “open admissions” institution, Kenneth Bruffee wrote about what it meant for first-generation students to become part of “knowledge communities to which their teachers belong.”\textsuperscript{14} Equally important is what it meant for faculty and other staff to understand the circumstances and diverse backgrounds of their students and the richness of experience that they bring. Despite the Summer Bridge program and availability of SSAs, it came as a shock to many students that they were expected to do the reading in advance of classes and be prepared to discuss it, that reading and writing assignments required considerable work beyond the classroom, and that instructors expected a high level of participation in class. To develop such habits and for everyone to feel membership in a lively academic community were the goals of all the instructional teams.

Given these expectations and the persistence among some students of a high school mindset, in some respects the first semester aimed at moving students from a prior learning situation that for many was rote to one that was analytical, from one that focused on individual short assignments to one that emphasized both individual and collaborative long-term learning projects, and from a classroom that permitted short

\textsuperscript{13} The Lumina Foundation has provided incentive stipends for second-year students who are full-time and successfully achieve a series of benchmarks during the year.

\textsuperscript{14} Smith et al., \textit{Learning Communities}, 101.
answers to a teacher’s questions to one that encouraged lively discussion. Faculty described their mission across houses as developing students as “scholars” who would begin to understand that to learn was a lifelong project of inquiry and reflection and took considerable discipline. Students would begin to understand what it meant to ask questions rather than deliver rote answers and to write analytically about issues of importance to them.

All the SSAs and faculty agreed that in the first semester getting students to understand the college’s emphasis on learning, completing work, and developing analytical thinking was a steep climb. In addition, like students in all community colleges, many of them faced tremendous obstacles to participation: poverty and a pressing need to work full- or part-time, illness of family members, family issues that were emotionally stressful, physical and/or academic learning disabilities, and changes in housing or lack of housing as result of Hurricane Sandy.

In addition, because there were no developmental courses, students’ academic skills varied widely, and no matter what their skill level and comfort, students were required to participate in academically heterogeneous classes. These were some of the complexities that students, staff, and faculty faced and increasingly understood as they worked together. One consistent stance across the houses among faculty and staff was a complete acceptance of the students that they had—with the full range of challenges and varied academic backgrounds. The issue of weak academic skills was something to be addressed, never to be complained about; this was consistent across houses. Another stance was that both faculty and staff were engaged in a community-building process, which was reinforced by the faculty’s modeling of community among themselves as well as by a variety of spaces that faculty and students shared: the Info Commons (the name given to the library) and the space where faculty and SSA cubicles were located and where students were welcome to come and seek help and advice.

15 Fifteen percent of students in the first year had documented physical and academic disabilities, a very high percentage compared with six percent in other CUNY community colleges.
Notwithstanding this commitment to students, faculty’s experience working with students varied a great deal, and in all houses faculty needed to learn how to scaffold assignments for students, how to think about grading in terms of student progress and development while maintaining high standards of performance, and how to figure out the amount of effort they would expend in following up with students who were reluctant or disengaged.

These were everyday challenges for the faculty, SSAs, and Graduate Coordinators and the first semester was a steep learning curve for everyone including the students. What faculty learned in the second semester was that much of the “hand holding”—the consistent contact with students, such as emailing them at all hours and seeking them out when their efforts were clearly flagging—paid off. Students were assuming more responsibility for their learning, were becoming more analytical, and were working collaboratively with greater ease.

This didn’t mean that problems didn’t surface in the second semester. Some of the most capable students tried to slide by, and some students who were assigned to “recuperation” classes began to feel discouraged and to attend less consistently. Nevertheless, at the end of the second semester, faculty and staff could assert that students had matured, that there was less day-to-day support necessary, and that students were more analytical in their approaches and more accepting of the diversity of the student body. In large part these changes could be attributed to the strength of each house, no matter what type of approach was used. Some examples of what helped students and what helped faculty “do their jobs better” are described below.

**Supporting each house member with challenges and successes:** In three instructional teams, meetings began with a discussion of student academic and/or emotional and social issues and then moved to curriculum and pedagogy; in the fourth instructional team, this order was reversed. The varied perspectives on any student who was facing academic or social barriers leading to lateness, absence, failure to complete work, or
problems with general demeanor in class could help resolve issues for that student. Faculty learned if a student was having difficulties in a home situation such as illness of family members; they also learned if a particular student was participating well in other classes but not in theirs. Faculty and SSAs contributed strategies for communicating with students who seemed to tune out or were rude.

These discussions removed the burden of finding solutions from individual faculty members. When presenting a problem, faculty felt a sense of relief that others recognized the issue and had possible solutions. In the second semester, these discussions were also enriched by the presence and perspectives of the Graduate Coordinators who taught Studio.

**Developing a community in each house:** Faculty, SSAs, librarians, and Graduate Coordinators together modeled a community that students could emulate. While students may not have realized this and occasionally felt they were experiencing “cohort fatigue,” preferring to have students from other houses in their classes, the end result was a coherent structure of support and a model for getting along regardless of whether you liked some students in your house or not. Students were encouraged by the SSAs to seek out faculty support when they had academic difficulties, and they did so increasingly throughout the semester. The physical arrangement of faculty and SSAs cubicles also allowed for a close interaction among faculty and SSAs out of class as well as in team meetings. Beyond the meetings there was a great deal of informal sharing that helped faculty and SSAs understand and address student issues. This interaction also provided cross-disciplinary interchange and opportunities for joint planning among faculty teaching in the City Seminar.

**Addressing the broad range of students’ academic and social strengths:** The heterogeneity of houses in terms of academic skills was a source of discontent for some students but an asset from the perspective of faculty and staff. On a number of

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16 Because of limited space in the building, faculty were assigned to cubicles and grouped together with the SSA for their house in half of one floor of the building called the mezzanine.
occasions more academically advanced students complained about the pace of work or
the level as being too much like high school. However, in seeing how groups worked
together to make presentations on their work at mid-semester and end-of-semester, it
was clear that the collaborative work in heterogeneous groups had a very positive
effect. In the first half of the fall semester, presentations often consisted of the
strongest team members doing most or all of the work with token participation by
weaker members. In the final presentations at the end of the first semester, the strong
participation of all members was striking as well as the improved quality of the
presentations.

An instructional team that was seeing poor attendance in the spring semester from
some students and failure to turn in work, especially among more advanced students,
took steps to meet with the entire house. At the meeting, these students acknowledged
that they were “lazy” and that they appreciated the faculty taking the time to address
these issues with them. The attendance and handing in of work improved following the
meeting.

Another issue related to the EoW course arose in the spring semester when students
were required to observe a workplace and interview someone there. Finding work
places and people to interview proved to be a problem for some students. Some
workplaces they chose would not allow students inside because of the potential for
accidents or harm (e.g., a restaurant kitchen); others were confidential about their
practices and did not permit students to interview people about the focus of their work.
Faculty intervened to resolve these issues for students who needed the extra support.
The Provost set up an appointment for a student to observe a mediation court and
interview the judge afterwards. We cite this example to illustrate that throughout the
college, faculty and staff go out of their way to help every student who is willing to
succeed.
Not all students do succeed, of course, and that is a subject of conversation in all houses—for example, when a student is perhaps too overwhelmed with personal issues to continue. One SSA described a student who is “the man of the house.” His mother is ill and cannot work, and his sister is finishing high school. It was agreed that he should take the semester off and return when it would be possible. Another student took a full-time job to support herself since she could not afford to pay her tuition bill; when the SSA learned about this, he intervened and arranged a work-study job for her, which enabled her to complete the semester.

Faculty in the second semester across instructional teams also concerned themselves with student success and persistence beyond the first year. One of their concerns was that for more advanced students who hoped to finish in two years, there weren’t enough courses being offered to complete their majors in time. This was ultimately addressed by having a few courses offered in Spring II that were preparatory for several majors. Another concern expressed by faculty across instructional teams was preparing students who wished to continue in a four-year college to begin the process in the spring semester. In one instructional team a form was developed that included colleges selected, application dates, and recommendations. Faculty were similarly concerned about their input into students’ choices of major. They wanted to be sure that students’ passions and interests played a part in their choice of majors and that students fully understood the academic requirements. Faculty, especially those teaching EoW, intentionally mentioned career possibilities related to content under discussion, thereby helping students see the relevance of their classroom learning to their long-range goals.

Faculty reflections at the end of Spring I on what is working for students: At the end of the Spring I semester, faculty and SSAs reflected in all of the houses on what was working well in the instructional team structure. A compilation of their reflections across houses includes:

Having mostly the same students across semesters and really getting to know them and see their progress. This is sustaining for me. Faculty
A sustained focus on one topic each semester allows students multiple entry points into the content. Because they are doing the same topic in Critical Issues and Comp I the instructor in Comp felt that she could go deeply into some readings and aspects of the curriculum. Faculty

They know we care [about the students] and we all talk about them. How can that not be a positive. SSA

Improvements in students’ performance from first to second semester were gratifying; students are definitely more independent and taking charge of themselves rather than waiting to be asked how they are doing. SSA

When I allow students to spend more time in class doing their writing and when I am there to offer suggestions, they do better. Faculty

The importance of particular structures—scaffolding assignments, using the Socratic Seminar approach which students loved, expectations of behavior in the Info Commons—all helped students attach to the college and complete work. Faculty

Unique nature of EoW—it is the only course in which students can study “work” as a concept and students are very interested in it from a practical point of view. Faculty

Importance of having clear assignments in Studio and the use of technology has engaged students in this class; also more independence for students in developing their own projects. ¹⁷ Faculty

I arrive in the Info Commons at 6:30 a.m. and students are there by 7 a.m.—at least 25 waiting in the Atrium. Students use the space as both a place to study and to socialize. This speaks to the students being secure at GCC and the lack of security for some in other places in their lives. Librarian

Developing a community of faculty and SSAs:

It helped students knowing that there was a team working with and for them; it created a sense of community; the sense of team helped them continue. Students recognize we have a relationship and so students modeled our relationship.¹⁸

In reflecting on the successes and shortcomings of their experience at the end of the first semester, faculty and SSAs agreed that the instructional teams were critical to the success of their work. As one SSA said, “everyone on the team is supportive of one

¹⁷ Some more advanced students protested that Studio was boring for them. The response by faculty was to treat the protest respectfully and ask the students to propose an alternative. The message was clear that protesting was not enough if an alternative was not provided.

¹⁸ Faculty member.
another and really cares about the students.” He noted also that “the instructional team helps him do his job better—the faculty see students daily and help him be proactive with his individual support of students.” Another young faculty member contrasted his time at the college and as an instructor at another CUNY campus where “he had to figure out everything on his own.” Another praised the discussion of the students in each meeting: having “more eyes on students” was consistently helpful. One faculty member noted, “I did not feel crazy; I could compare my perceptions about students with other people’s.” One of the leaders noted that the success of her house was that people took advantage of other people’s strengths; in her case one of the faculty’s expertise with technology made her life much easier. Another leader noted that the inclusion of SSAs was the “glue of the college”—both because they were outstanding choices and because of what they were therefore able to contribute. Another leader said that more students come to her when they need help than ever before in her teaching career because of the SSAs’ encouragement to do so.

**Addressing diversity among students and faculty:** Critical to developing a community of students and faculty was the recognition of the diversity of backgrounds among both faculty and staff as well as among students. While issues of race, class, gender, and ethnicity were addressed all the time in the classes, below are two examples from different classes, one EoW I and another Critical Issues, in which instructors brought students and faculty together for open discussions of these issues on both a conceptual and personal level.

This first class conducted an activity called, Culture Chest, which is described below because it illustrates the ways in which students were encouraged to understand and respect diversity among themselves and in the faculty and staff.

The exercise was part of the EoW I curriculum: “Drawing connections between the self and work and creating an ethnography of their own journey as they contemplate their

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19 An activity introduced in EoW I by Nicole Saint-Louis in Fall I 2012 and involving all her students and Instructional Team colleagues.
future.” The exercise was used by one house to reflect on the diversity of “journeys” undertaken and continued by both students and faculty toward the end of the semester. This was a reflective exercise for students and their professors who collectively articulated and revealed some of their values, vulnerabilities, and hopes. The assignment required that all participants bring a container—a box, a bag, or other such vessel—in which he/she was to place three to five meaningful items connected to who they are and where they want to go with their lives. These items could reflect issues of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, abilities, religion, social class, or age. It was an individual choice. Their presentation was to not only describe the items they chose and explain why they chose them but also to summarize how others see them. Then students were asked to describe how the items and outside perceptions related to work and/or potential career paths. Finally, each participant spoke about what they learned about themselves during the first semester. They were given approximately five minutes each and were encouraged to talk from an outline, notes, or extemporaneously.

This discussion explored the many aspects of identity—for the students an aspect of identity they were willing to share or an identity that was the most prominent at this stage of their lives. The fact that their professors and SSAs contributed as well provided additional significance to the activity. With very few exceptions, the students were attentive, respectful, and supportive of one another. In addition, they seemed mesmerized by the culture chests of instructional team members. Instructional team faculty and staff were honest in their presentations and conveyed experiences that resonated with the experiences of many of the students. A few students were clear about their vocational goals, but most students addressed this in vague terms conveying uncertainty about their direction. A number of students talked about their challenges and efforts to overcome them. Most students felt comfortable enough to talk extemporaneously and had by this time in the semester developed a significant comfort level with their peers and their professors to make these oral presentations. Students who were clearly English Language Learners moved through their oral presentations
with more difficulty but with a great deal of perseverance and the openly supportive embrace of their peers.

In another house, student presentations about immigration provided interesting snapshots of how the personal and the conceptual content of the course found expression in the learning community. The concepts of stereotypes and race—two lightening rod issues—were explored by presenting students and through peer responses. In giving their presentations two students feared the reactions from the group: in one, a white student was concerned about being accused of racism, and in another, a student from the Middle East was concerned about stereotypes of Islam and the Arab world. Both presentations were met with supportive responses from their peers. While views on the presenters’ experiences differed, the students listened, respected differences in points of views, and sought to engage one another with respect and deference to the presenters’ feelings.

**Concluding Thoughts**

A recent issue of *The Chronicle of High Education Review* tackled the difficult issue of “resiliency” and what it means in various disciplines.\(^{20}\) Michael Ungar, a founder of the Resilience Research Centre, explains some of the reasons for resilience in people this way: “In addition to basic services like health care and education, strong webs of relationships are crucial to healthy communities. Social justice is key: believing that you’ll be treated fairly regardless of gender, race or religion. And personal and social efficacy is necessary as well. For people to be resilient, they must believe they have the power to control their lives.”

It appears from the evidence gleaned by the documentarians through observations of the instructional team meetings, classrooms, and interviews with all members of the instructional teams and selected administrators that the instructional teams were

critical to the success of the first year of the college. They supported faculty, staff, and students; they surfaced problems that arose and made suggestions to resolve them; and they created a community that nurtured both the adult members and the students.

It occurred to the documentarians that the instructional teams as they are designed may also be fostering resilience among students, especially among the ones who were most tentative in their feeling of “belonging” to an academic community. The diverse and respectful community of their house and the community modeled by caring adults, including their teachers and support staff, the modeling of “academic behavior” and the support to become a “member” of an academic community may have bolstered their confidence in themselves and their ability to persist in the face of often difficult living circumstances and academic challenges. The sense of community may have made them more resilient and therefore capable of taking the next steps in their development. The story of the college and its experimental first year continues to unfold, and the question of building “resiliency” through the house structure and their instructional teams is tentatively offered and will need to be examined with all the available data, but it is tempting to believe that such structures are what help first-generation students at a commuter community college persist and succeed.
Chapter 2. GCC Instructional Teams: Communities of Teaching Practice

Very little research and assessment on learning communities has explored the effects of these programs on the faculty, student affairs staff, students, librarians, and other individuals who serve on learning community teaching teams. These teaching teams are themselves “learning communities” of professionals collaborating on behalf of improved curricula and greater student learning and success; the quality and sustainability of these initiatives depend on the communities of teaching practice that emerge around them.21

As the learning community movement grew, so, too, did attention to pedagogies of active and collaborative learning in order to foster community and to explore and assert connections among disciplines and ways of knowing.22

All instructional team members worked to create a culture of respect and openness among all participants. Although student support was always the central focus of the instructional team meetings, as the teams came to know the students and to know one another (especially in the second semester), they engaged in discussions of pedagogy and curriculum more frequently. Instructional teams were both the forum and training ground for experimenting with and sharing teaching and assessment strategies. As one faculty member expressed it, “We are never alone in the endeavor; the instructional team gives us stamina.”

This chapter presents examples of how the instructional team learning communities 1) became the site for collaboration (on a curricular level and on a personal level), 2) fostered dialogue about curriculum and pedagogy, and 3) were vehicles for discussing assessment on the micro and macro level. The fourth section describes how toward the end of the first year, the instructional teams began to think about not only talking within each team, but talking among the four teams, talking “across the institution,” and talking beyond the college.

21 Kathe Taylor et al., Learning Community Research and Assessment: What We Know Now (The Washington Center at Evergreen State College: National Learning Communities Project, 2003), iv. [http://www.evergreen.edu/washingtoncenter/about/monographs/researchassessment.html]

The Institutional Teams as Sites for Collaborations

For the instructional team the first year was exploratory in many ways including the way curriculum integration varied across houses. The model’s emphasis on a full-time common course sequence in the first year with interdisciplinary components necessitated that faculty teach not only in a collaborative way but also stretch beyond their own disciplines. At different points in time, the question of what was important to know from their disciplinary perspective was raised. During this time, each faculty member was in the position of having to revisit and/or (re)learn new content while at the same time synchronizing their own learning and implementation with that of their team members. As everyone learns differently, some began with the strategy of focusing on mastering their own part of the content while staying attuned to how other content areas were unfolding in instructional team discussions. Others moved directly to engage their instructional peers in developing a closer interplay of the content. Both approaches could be found in the same instructional team at different points in time.

Critical Issues and Quantitative Reasoning: The most basic level of integration was most often found in the relationship between Quantitative Reasoning (QR) and Critical Issues (CI). This early approach to integrating curriculum was due in part to schedules and in part to mastering a new curriculum. Most QR instructors had to attend more than one instructional team since their QR classes were paired with Critical Issues in different teams. Faculty who were not able to be a part of the instructional team relied on a more general understanding of QR’s link to CI and the Reading/Writing portions of City Seminar. They were, in effect, parallel courses conscious of the other but not necessarily

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23 Fogarty [1991] and Harden [2000] describe curriculum integration as a range of actions moving from a distinct discipline with minimal or no connections to an intentional awareness of other disciplines on up to multi – inter – or trans-disciplinary content. The more one moves onto “the integration ladder” the focus shifts to problems or issues rather than the disciplines themselves. Thus, interdisciplinary is a form of curriculum integration that includes two or more disciplines applied to a problem or theme simultaneously. Increased curriculum integration finds the shape of each discipline is typically less in full view. Finally, the authors note that greater levels of curriculum integration require increased collaborative time whether among the faculty or the students themselves.
linked beyond the description in the syllabus.\textsuperscript{24} Therefore, QR instructors did not benefit as much as others regularly attending meetings from the instructional teams’ collective effort in adapting pedagogies to student needs. In addition, the instructional team did not benefit from understanding the full range of QR successes and the challenges of implementing QR within City Seminar. However in the second semester there was more of an exchange between QR and CI: for instance, a form to guide students in the steps of writing about a graph or chart in QR was picked by faculty in other disciplines as a good way to teach summary and analysis, and at least one CI/QR team worked hard to integrate the two courses—a step closer to an interdisciplinary integration involving more collaborative time for planning and assessing.

Working closely to align the CI and QR parts of City Seminar, one team said that they were dividing the points for the course evenly between CI and QR. This team regularly observed one another’s classes and developed assignments that were focused on the same subject matter but from different perspectives. For example, when students studied the 1924 immigration quotas from a historical perspective, they were asked by the QR instructor to research and graph the various quotas and their impact on each immigrant group. Both the students and the instructor indicated that they learned a lot together and would like to build on what they have learned in the future.

\textbf{EoW and LABSS:} As QR related to CI, LABSS had a comparable relationship to EoW. However, it also had a unique perspective, which was to develop students’ ability and persistence to become successful college-level students. EoW is faculty-led with an emphasis on “work” from a sociological and anthropological perspective. LABSS, facilitated by a talented group of younger professionals, is a range of sessions designed to address dual tracks of activities—those devoted to student success strategies and those devoted to the exploration of career interests and skills related to success as an

\textsuperscript{24} A number of QR instructors tried following and/or contributing to instructional team discussions informally or by making extraordinary efforts to sporadically attend instructional team meetings. Most agreed that this was not an optimum arrangement.
engaged student and employee. The SSAs’ responsibility for facilitating these classes was in addition to their responsibilities of addressing and often troubleshooting individual student needs. The exploration of career interests and employment strategies was seen as having a clearer connection to the intellectual traditions being explored in EoW.

Again, curriculum integration varied. For some, EoW was a newer, more nontraditional course. Thus, adding body to the corpus was a major focus for those teaching the course with integration operating on a basic level. Yet, unlike many of the QR instructors, the SSA was an integral part of the instructional team. Nevertheless, instructional team discussions with the SSA primarily focused on knowing students and promoting persistence. The degree of curriculum integration was primarily one of mutual awareness. Instances where the EoW faculty member worked with the SSA in coordinating content were also found.

One SSA considered his instructional team a “true partnership.” He found everyone on the team to be supportive of one another and to care deeply about student learning and persistence. Another SSA pointed out in an interview that his instructional team helped him do his job better: the faculty see students daily and help him to be proactive in his individual support of students and in the LABSS curriculum; he appreciated his collaboration with the EoW faculty member who helped by commenting on LABSS and its relationship to EoW. An EoW faculty member said she felt the SSA provided the psychological, social, and emotional support needed to help students focus on and succeed in their academic work.

**Writing:** Writing was promoted across the curriculum: every class without exception, including QR and LABBS, required that students write. The fact that students performed better on the CUNY-required writing test than on the reading test suggested that this emphasis on writing was effective. The concern about writing routinely surfaced as English faculty felt that certain types of writing were being emphasized over others, but
in general, the consensus was that writing per se was essential in all courses. Faculty and SSAs synchronized their planning, implementation, and assessments regarding writing both within and outside of the instructional team meetings. There were also instances of participating in one another’s classes.

**Student/teacher collaborations:** In classrooms in general, learning need not go in one direction alone; teachers can themselves be challenged to think further not only about the subject matter but also about themselves. The context of the instructional team and the Learning Community (the house) set up a structure for digging deep both on the students’ part and on the instructor’s part, as this email description from an exchange within EoW I indicates:

> The funny thing about teaching is that we often go into the classroom thinking that we will transform lives when in fact as educators we are the ones who leave transformed. The last three weeks have been deeply personal for me because my students have forced me to answer some of the questions that I am asking them. In the Ethnographies of Work course we have been grappling with what constitutes work. We talk about concepts and sift through narratives about work and as a class we lean forward and interrogate some of the very personal stories of work presented. This sort of interrogation leads to questions of life’s pursuits and engaging passions and whether work can be a place of daily innovation and transformation. We have written short responses to questions like “If you could do one thing, what would that be?” We have talked about happiness and whether “work” can be a place of sustained happiness. As I force my students to think about their own passions, talents and gifts, and their own career dreams they too have forced me to be honest with them about my own ideals, passions, and dreams.

> As a class we share stories about work and I sit and listen to all these narratives about dreams followed by anxieties and some people declaring that they know they will never get to their dreams. . . . I have asked my students to listen to those inner stirrings and told them to dream big, make plans, and begin to do the work -- the labor that comes with

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25 Email message to the academic listserv and cited with the permission of Nicola Blake.
wanting something more.

By being so close to those stories, they have asked of me the same questions I have asked of them. They ask me if I love my job or if this is my "one thing" or if I leave NCC (now GCC) each day gratified. These are pretty hard questions and I do give all of them honest answers because they know me and they understand that like them I too am in pursuit of something not yet fully defined. . . . I am glad that they are holding me accountable to my own notions of pursuing life to its fullest – to diving all in and making sure that at the end of the day my place of work is a meaningful place of innovation and transformation. These students – my social workers, stylists, cardiologists, policemen and firemen, artists, physicists, occupational therapists, bankers, bakers, lawyers, musicians, architects, and undecided – make diving in worth it.

**Emotional support.** Finally, instructional team members supported one another emotionally as well as professionally. One faculty member commented on how it was positive that the team learned from one another’s strengths and offered support for those who felt out of their “comfort zone.” All instructional team members extolled the collaborative features of their work. When instruction fell behind schedule because a class needed to move more slowly, others lent time and support to recalibrate the content in relation to the other courses or in relation to scheduled tests. In addition, difficult teaching days with particular students or classes—encountered in any instructional experience—were met with sympathy and a round of supportive strategies. There was a shared understanding that each faculty member had a different orientation to their subject area and practice. Instructional teams either respected that difference—reinforcing the sense that students would need to experience diverse teaching orientations—or they determined that they would work as one to reinforce a uniform practice for their classes. Instructional team members would also attend special sessions of classes other than their own. Thus, students became very much aware that the entire instructional team moved with one voice to guide and support them.
Dialogue about Curriculum and Pedagogy

The instructional teams fostered dialogue about curriculum and pedagogy—a dialogue that does not regularly happen among faculty of the same disciplines, much less among faculty of different disciplines, and certainly not among faculty and support staff.

Instructional teams are sites of pedagogical sharing and discussions on a practical and theoretical level, the aim of which is to encourage active and effective student learning. One faculty member expressed the sentiment that the opportunity to discuss teaching in the instructional teams makes the teaching more interesting and effective. He commented that when there are multiple perspectives on teaching issues, the outcomes are better: two (or three or four) heads are better than one.

The description of pedagogical techniques below gives examples of how the instructional team meetings were workspaces for faculty.

**Peer review:** Most students had little experience with a peer review process beginning with learning how to self-reflect to working in a team. Instructional teams tried multiple ways to define and effectively implement peer reviews while also creating opportunities for students to hear “authentic feedback” on their student projects from field experts. This was particularly the case for mid- and end-cycle presentations. One instructional team revised peer review of student presentations by restructuring the format for presentations and by changing the arrangement of the room. Peer review forms distributed mid-cycle were moved online for the end-cycle presentations. In addition, the end-cycle room set-up had a clearly marked center for peer reviewers (with computers) and a clearly marked center for the outside panel. In this way, the tone set was one of a professional setting with clearly defined roles.

**Classroom arrangements:** Instructional teams held concrete discussions about the classroom space and the table/desk configurations. The college purchased tables that can fit together in small group arrangements and with wheels so they can be easily
moved. One faculty member described how she arranges chairs in a circle so everyone
can look at the speaker and to prevent distracting behavior in the back of the room. She
also leaves a chair in the middle of the circle for unexcused late comers (to make them
uncomfortable).

**The flipped classroom:** Some instructors occasionally used the method of “flipping”
class work and homework so that students could work on assignments in class with
instant feedback from the instructor as well as from peers; this also helped develop the
capacity of students to analyze the work of their peers critically and provide useful
feedback. In general, the art of “revision” is one of the most difficult to teach, and
flipping the class helped students develop their capacity to revise their work.

**Group work:** Group work occurred in all classes and in many different ways. Rather than
being permanent, groups were flexible according to the faculty member’s goals for
his/her students. Flexible grouping is a form of differentiation allowing for
heterogeneous grouping as well as homogeneous grouping. Such groupings can be a mix
of common grouping of interests, skills, abilities, and/or products. The instructional
teams discussed how to divide students into groups and how to use the groups
effectively to enhance learning. One faculty member described how she chose members
intentionally and did not let students choose their own groups. Another changed groups
after each test; for the last half of the semester she put them in project groups. A
writing teacher changed groups after each assignment. A math instructor used group
quizzes: in groups, students discuss the answer and the process together, but each
person has to hand in his/her own paper. Faculty from other disciplines expressed

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26 Generally, differentiation is approached as a problem when discussing pedagogy. Differentiation in
the educational literature is most often associated with students with disabilities or gifted students.
It is widely recognized that both groups have a wide range of abilities that require attention.
Tomlinson (2000) is frequently cited as describing differentiation as “… attending to the learning
needs of a particular student or small group of students.” Differentiation is the opposite of tracking,
in which students are locked into a group for a particular curriculum. Differentiation not only uses
flexible grouping but may allow for different points of entry into a content area, and/or the
application of different processes within a content area and/or different products emerging from the
content.
interest in trying this. Reasons for when and how to use each group arrangement can include the following: to distribute weak and strong students or shy and outgoing students; to prevent cliques; to allow students to see and hear different perspectives; but always to encourage collaboration.

**Assignments across the curriculum:** Faculty adjusted due dates for papers or assignments after learning of due dates in other classes or important testing dates, especially the CUNY math exam. Some processes improved from fall to spring. For example, in the spring, faculty made clear that the final assignment for Critical Issues was actually a combination of prior assignments from both CI and QR pulled together into a paper that would reflect students’ understanding of every aspect of the curriculum. Faculty worked at reducing the number of big projects assigned and then broke down the final project assignment into discrete smaller assignments that when merged (and worked on) would comprise the final major project. What stayed constant was the emphasis on writing across the curriculum and the promotion of quantitative reasoning within assigned projects; the latter reinforced the utility and important role of mathematics in contemporary society.

**Technology information literacy and ePortfolio:** Instructional team instructors also used technology (PowerPoints, Twitter, Infographs, etc.) in their teaching and other classroom practices such as presentations and laboratory activities. Info Commons (IC) faculty worked in instructional teams to support classroom content and promote information literacy skills. Online biblioguides were designed to be responsive to curriculum content, and information literacy skills were taught and promoted. Bibliographic and other related software developed to support student writing was made available alongside other online sources, multimedia tools, and library books, all of which were routinely updated and made widely available. The IC, in fact, became the most prominent gathering place for students’ academic meetings and social gatherings. As a result, IC faculty became acquainted with the students and were able to contribute to the problem-solving discussions of the instructional team.
Early on, ePortfolios were introduced to faculty and students as a primary online depository for academic work and interests as well as a primary source of information about courses. Students comfortable with an online environment gravitated to this arena more easily than others within their peer group. Online student participation did, however, increase over the course of the year. As with students, individual instructional team members tapped into ePortfolios in different ways. The most basic level was a posting of the syllabus and related assignments with the addition of details and/or changes primarily for students. A few faculty members made more extensive use of this platform by creating faculty-only spaces filled with their interests, thoughts, and teaching strategies in an open invitation to a deeper collaboration with their peers.

Nearly all instructional team members made frequent and timely use of texting as routine reminders or as more targeted outreach to students. They sent text messages at all hours of the day into late evenings and in academic, social, and/or emotional support of their students.

Extra-classroom and college-wide activities: An important aspect of the learning strategies, fueled from ideas germinating in instructional teams, were the many out-of-classroom activities undertaken to reinforce the syllabus. Examples include Math Meet-Up, National Day of Writing, Book Night Giveaway to residents of an area of Brooklyn hit by Hurricane Sandy, Studio Showcase, LABSS Professional panels in which volunteers talked with students about their work, and field experiences, such as visits to sites in New York City where various immigrant groups first lived. Faculty also provided students with a multitude of ways of engaging disciplines with relevant materials appealing to youth interests, such as rap music, and through unique cultural experiences.

When faculty and staff attended Assessment Days, students participated in Community Days, which include on-campus workshops and off-campus service activities hosted by partners from around New York City. According to President Evenbeck, “In keeping with our commitment to experiential learning and our goal of using the city as an extension
of the classroom, the Community Days are an integral part of the curriculum.”

These activities gave students other venues to develop their skills while building community within the college and connecting the curriculum to the world outside of the classroom.

**Formative Assessment on the Micro and Macro Level**

From the outset, the notion of assessment was integral to the conception of the college. The concept paper called for an assessment that would “help build a community of teachers and learners”:

“A radically innovative educational restructuring requires a thoughtfully designed and carefully implemented multilevel and multifaceted accountability plan, with a variety of data appropriate to sophisticated assessments of student learning and development, faculty teaching and curricula, and the paramount institutional goal—the timely attainment of degrees. Ultimately, data will be used right from the start in ongoing formative assessment to help build a community of teachers and learners who are increasingly able to examine and understand the efficacy of their own work, how to improve it, and how to share their insights with peers.”

This initial concept, embodied in the creation of the Center for College Effectiveness, is realized regularly by the instructional teams’ focus on student work and by Assessment Days that are built into the semester (at the halfway point and at the end point). In the classroom, peer reviews supplemented faculty reviews of student work. Self-reflection was an important component of nearly all course work as was the active application of learning outcomes into the syllabus and classroom.

**Focus on student work:** In the spring semester, over a number of weeks one of the instructional teams looked at examples of students’ work. The assignments brought in by the writing faculty, the CI faculty, the QR faculty and the SSA included:

- A baseline writing assignment on immigration
- A synthesis essay to pull together what students knew about their immigration topic thus far (using class discussion, an interview, and a reading)

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27 Email message to GCC community.

28 Concept Paper, p. 43.
- A synthesis essay written by a student explaining and analyzing a graph
- Examples of how students filled out a four-part template analyzing a graph
- From LABSS, two draft resumes (one strong and one weak), a letter applying for a job, a resume, and a thank you letter after an interview

Initially the impetus for sharing student work was to acquaint team members with what was being done in each class and to get a sense of the range of student work (examples usually exemplified strong, weak, and middle range work). However, the discussion did that and more:

- It gave the team members a fuller sense of what went on in different classes.
- It helped (especially newer) faculty members think about how to formulate and structure assignments.
- It led to discussions about how the curriculum is presently integrated or how it can be more tightly connected.
- It was an exercise in norming as the presenting member explained his/her reason as to how the paper was graded and then others indicated how they might have evaluated the paper; in addition, it led to a discussion of the philosophy of grading.
- In helped everyone think about how to look at students’ work and give students feedback.

In instructional team meetings and college-wide Assessment Days the progress of each student was evaluated and a determination made as to whether a student needed recuperation\(^{29}\) and whether the student could manage taking additional general education courses and introductory courses toward their major in the Fall II or Spring II semester.

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\(^{29}\) “Recuperation” refers to the college’s plan for supporting students who do not pass a course for any reason and for students who need further work in their academic skills. These courses (and sometimes workshops) are given in both of the six-week semesters in the fall and spring.
**Student self-reflection:** In one of the Reading and Writing classes and in Composition I sections, students wrote self-reflection essays at the mid-term and as the final essay of each semester. This faculty member said she “**wanted them to be low-stakes and for them to take the time to think about their progress (or lack thereof) and to make some new goals for themselves.**” On this first semester mid-term reflection, the instructor asked some very specific questions about the student’s understanding of the subject matter (e.g., conscious consumption), the student’s individual work, and the student’s participation in group projects. She also asked students to reflect on learning outcomes for the course:

- How has this project and some of your other course work in City Seminar helped you grow as a learner and a scholar in each of these areas?
- Which outcomes do you consider your strongest? Why?
- Which outcomes do you consider the most challenging for you? Why?
- How can you focus on improving your areas of work during the second half of City Seminar I?

For the mid-term self-reflection during second semester, she asked again about the subject matter of the class, immigration (also the topic of City Seminar); she also asked students to reflect on their progress as a reader and as a writer, the final question being: “Do you feel you are writing at the level of a college student?” Describing how the process worked, the faculty member\(^\text{30}\) explains:

*It seems that each time I asked them to do one of these essays there was some push back (only a little) but then they got very quickly into them. I could see them thinking in class, and I would often stop and chat quietly with a student while s/he was writing about their progress. I remember two students specifically: Z and I had a conversation on how he had become somewhat stagnant mid-term of spring and that helped propel him to write a really amazing final paper where I saw voice in his writing for the first time. X and I talked about how much she loathed writing in September and avoided her assignments (did them all late), but how in the spring her writing had gotten so good that I always confused her essays with one of the stronger writers in the class.*

\(^{30}\) Email message cited with the permission of Lori Ungemah.
Of the uses and value of self-reflection for a teacher: not only is it “very interesting to see themselves through THEIR eyes instead of my own,” student reflection essays provide feedback for revision of the curriculum, the assignments, and faculty expectations. And it is most important for the student to really see her/his work and to take responsibility for the assessment of her/his own progress over time. While student self-reflection might have been used more regularly in writing classrooms, other faculty, including the math faculty, used self-reflection as well. ePortfolio was a useful tool for self-reflection as all the student’s work was housed there and it allowed an easy exchange of drafts between student and faculty. However, use of ePortfolios varied and was uneven among students and among the faculty during the inaugural year.

**Learning outcomes in the classroom:** One of the goals of the college’s assessment plan is to use the Learning Outcomes for GCC developed earlier by faculty as part of an Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) workshop on institutional learning outcomes (see Appendix B). The goal is to use these learning outcomes to assess institutional progress—i.e., a random sample of how well students progress over time on signature assignments. The Learning Outcomes are also meant to be used by students and faculty to gauge how well their work addresses the learning goals developed by the college. To begin testing the Learning Outcomes with students, one faculty member used a peer review form for one of the outcomes. The peer reviewers were asked to describe the outcome in their own words and then discuss how well the student whose work they were reviewing met this outcome. This form was introduced into the instructional team so that other faculty could use it if they wished.

**Talking Across Instructional Teams and to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) Community**

During this first year, the four instructional teams tended to talk mainly among themselves, similar to the way departments in other colleges tend to talk among themselves---the difference being that the individual house conversations are among
faculty from various disciplines, graduate students, Student Support Advocates, and librarians (and sometimes Peer Mentors).

**CUNY Annual CUE Conference, Transformation in Teaching and Learning Research and Evidence-based Practices:** On May 10, 2013, two of the houses, including faculty, a graduate student, an SSA, and a statistics faculty member not in a house, participated in a panel discussion, “Talking Across Disciplinary Boundaries: Creating a Collaborative Educational Culture Through Instructional Teams,” at John Jay College, CUNY, at the CUE (CUNY Undergraduate Education) Conference. The presentations were divided into three parts: 1. The history of planning and the GCC model; 2. How the instructional team allowed to respond to student needs; and 3. The impact of the instructional team on students.

An overall reaction among the participants was reflected in some of the faculty’s comments: “We were so pleased to hear from the other house as the houses do not really talk to each other. It was a much needed opportunity to share with each other our best practices. One wondered how we can work on ‘cross-pollination’? Imagine if we had the space for that kind of dialogue across the institution.”

This has opened up discussions on how to talk “across the institution,” and in addition, on how to talk beyond the institution by planning “our own conference, based on College Teaching, a conference to showcase the best practices that college professors are using in their classrooms to further their students’ success, a conference based on sharing the practices of teaching.”

A concern expressed about the planning for the second year is that the instructional teams will be reshuffled. One compelling reason is the addition of new faculty, who, of course, should have the benefit of the experience of faculty who taught in the inaugural

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31 Email messages among Provost Jose Luis Morin; Ariana Gonzalez-Stokes; Alia Tyner-Mullings; Karla Fuller; Claire King; Lori Ungemah; Rebecca Walker; Caitlin Irish; Naveen Seth; Nicole Saint-Louis; Randolph Moore, and Rejitha Nair.
year. Clearly, team members will miss the depth of understanding achieved by the end of the first year; however, looked at another way the mixing of the teams with new faculty and new leaders will result in some cross-pollination and a sharing of what was learned across GCC in the first year.

Concluding Thoughts

In sum, the instructional teams demonstrate most of the positive aspects of learning communities. Although a rigorous evaluation remains to be done, at least from the faculty perspective, there is clear support of the instructional teams as being invaluable for a new institution where people need to get to know one another and develop a new curriculum. Instructional teams enable members to work on the mechanics and pedagogy of interdisciplinary teaching; to define and put in practice learning outcomes and develop mechanisms for assessment; to plan their own scholarship related to SOTL; and, most of all, to support student retention and learning and the vision and mission of Guttman Community College. This report adds to the growing evidence that learning communities are valuable for faculty, as well as for students, by increasing their enthusiasm for teaching, through the sustained and positive interactions experienced with teachers of other disciplines, by increased emphasis on pedagogy, and by the satisfaction received from the better writing and thinking that students demonstrate, among other things.

32 Students tend to be more successful when they are able to develop a meaningful academic relationship with faculty (Endo and Harpel 1982; Kuh 2001; Lamport 1993; Pascarella 1980). Freshman Learning Communities (FLCs) are organized to foster these conditions (65) . . . . There is now considerable evidence that FLCs enhance student retention rates and academic performance (Baker and Pomerantz, 2000/2001; Hotchkiss, Moore, and Pitts 2003; Johnson 2000/2001; Pike, Schroeder, and Berry 1997; Soldner, Lee, and Duby 1999/2000; Tinto 2000), student engagement (Zhao and Kuh 2004), and student motivation and cognitive development (Stefanou and Salisbury-Glennon 2001), from David Jaffee, “Peer Cohorts And The Unintended Consequences Of Freshman Learning Communities,” College Teaching 55 (2), (2007), 65-71.

33 See Taylor et al., Learning Community Research and Assessment: What We Know Now.
Chapter 3. Going Forward: Moving from the Inaugural IT Experience

The inaugural year of GCC’s instructional team experience will continue to be captured in multiple ways. Numerous products were generated by the instructional teams, the individual participants, and their students. The instructional team design and its implementation\(^{34}\) allowed for open and fluid border-crossings between the academic side, student support services, and the Information Commons. The instructional team created a safe space for exploring the nuts and bolts of implementing the curriculum and experimenting with pedagogy and classroom strategies. In addition, the instructional team created mini-arenas for the orientation of newer colleagues, the sharing of professional expertise and skills, and the development of ongoing professional learning.

Perhaps less obvious was that simultaneously the instructional teams were building a new culture that took as its departure point the GCC mission statement. During the year, each instructional team unpacked the underlying meaning of the college mission and philosophy and tackled differences in values and beliefs, negotiated new norms, and created processes and procedures to support their collaborative efforts. In essence, instructional teams were engaged in constructing new customs and traditions out of older and more familiar ways of working to create a culture\(^{35}\) more aligned with the GCC vision.

Thus, the year-long instructional team process of creation, experimentation, accommodation, adjustment, and recalibration on multiple levels weighed heavily on each member of each instructional team and on the teams as a whole. Weekly face-to-

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\(^{34}\) Most of this foundation-building occurred during the 12-week cycle of each semester as the 6-week cycle (Fall II and Spring II) did not benefit from this ongoing collaborative body.

\(^{35}\) Organizational culture is often viewed as a combination of explicit structures and processes combined with underlying value systems, perceptions, and assumptions (Dennison & Mishra, 1995; Schein, 2006). The conventional view of organizational culture suggests a more static system when, in fact, organizational culture is a dynamic ethos—shaped and reshaped by the tensions between traditions and novelties (McLean, 2005; Killingsworth, 2012).
face meetings were frequently supplemented by online communications and daily encounters both scheduled and unscheduled. The environment was dynamic and challenging for everyone involved, but deep within this environment was the surfacing of important issues or dilemmas that were acknowledged and addressed, and will continue to be the center of further deliberations.

Naming makes more visible the invisible; it is a useful tool for defining and situating the present and can help frame issues for collective resolutions. Naming also serves as a basis for reevaluating understandings to address changes over time. Below is an initial inventory (or naming) of issues or dilemmas drawn from instructional team discussions and from interviews with key players.

**Instructional Team Issues and Dilemmas**

**The Students:**

**Expectations:** Can assumptions about expectations be made more explicit for students and for new instructional team members?\(^{36}\) How can instructional teams more effectively manage student expectations of college and the expectations of faculty/staff of students in or prior to Summer Bridge and throughout the first semester? What worked and what did not work? What additional and/or ongoing strategies might be considered for students and for the instructional team members so that expectations are made sufficiently explicit?

**Academic Skill Levels:** A significant proportion of instructional team time during the first semester was spent understanding and addressing student needs and academic skills. What relevant information about students might help faculty proactively address student needs in the initial semester? For example, there was a debate as to whether instructional teams should know how students tested in the CUNY standard

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\(^{36}\) Observations and interviews captured moments when expectations clashed with assumptions held by students and by faculty: these included perceptions of the college, or student skill levels, or student reactions to teaching strategies, etc. In some instances, the response was to directly engage the assumptions or to move more slowly.
assessments. Instructional team members surfaced different skill issues over the course of the two semesters and were often scrambling for ways to adapt the curriculum to address these. This became even more significant when students learned mid-stream that they had to pass CUNY-wide assessments at a critical juncture during the freshman year. This is also a pertinent issue for English Language Learners (ELLs); those with a formal education in their native language could benefit from one set of strategies, and those who had interrupted formal education in their native language would need another set of strategies to bring their language skills up to speed. Having prior knowledge of these students’ formal education might help to identify curriculum and pedagogical needs proactively. Will more upfront information about student academic abilities be useful and, if so, in what ways?

**Student Assets:** How and when were student assets identified this first year? This typically happened within the LABSS curriculum but was not frequently a discussion topic within the instructional team as a whole. Instructional team discussion about students focused most often on student socio-emotional needs as the teams worked hard to help students succeed and persist. One example of this occurred when asking students to identify and tap into their networks, family, and friends for selected assignments, especially in the EoW curriculum. What are other ways in which students’ assets can be tapped and used as the basis for teaching and learning?

**Varying Abilities:** Accommodating students with diverse abilities drew strength from the support and expertise of social work faculty, the Student Engagement office, Single-Stop staff, and later, the Wellness and Accessibility Office. Specific types of varying abilities benefited from having the full weight of the law and university-wide regulations to help define appropriate services and accommodations. This is particularly the case for students with disabilities and veterans. However, this level of authority and institutional
support does not exist for English Language Learners. Thus, coherently addressing the needs of ELLs remains an open-ended challenge.\textsuperscript{37}

**Recuperation:** Individual faculty and the instructional team play an important role in determining which students will need additional time to master course outcomes. However, since instructional teams did not meet during the Fall II and Spring II semesters, it left faculty who had taught the students in their houses feeling at a loss since they could not provide continuity in their connections to them. How could communication between recuperation faculty and instructional team faculty be facilitated to further student progress?\textsuperscript{38}

**The Curriculum:**

**Meaning of Interdisciplinary Integration:** For the instructional team the first year was exploratory in many ways, including how to integrate curriculum into the City Seminar. The approaches to integration varied across houses and it is important to understand and learn from these varied approaches. How are the faculty supported in integrating the curriculum, and how might the lessons learned from the first year be shared among current and incoming faculty? What other possibilities for integration might be examined and introduced?

**Mathematics and the Natural Sciences Faculty:** Because of the scheduling of Statistics, some of the QR and statistics faculty could not routinely participate in instructional team meetings. When they were able to attend, they benefited from and contributed to instructional team deliberations. Ultimately a strong recommendation at the end of the

\textsuperscript{37} This challenge surfaced on a number of occasions in instructional team discussions. Professional development to address ELL needs was provided over the course of the year. However, no conclusive overall direction or strategy other than the existing, free-standing voluntary program (CLIP) to build English language skills prior to full-time entry has been proposed. CLIP is exclusively for students whose scores are extremely low in their reading and writing tests. They are defined as English as Second Language (ESL) students of which there were none at GCC during its first year.

\textsuperscript{38} Since many of the Fall II and Spring II instructors were adjuncts, time needs to be built into their schedule for such communication, an issue under consideration by the Provost, as mentioned previously.
year was to make a concerted effort to integrate mathematics faculty into the instructional teams since everyone recognized that mathematics in the first year is a critical aspect of preparation for students’ majors and careers. Instructional team discussions focused much less on how natural sciences fit into the first-year curriculum, although the sustainability theme in the first semester lends itself to these disciplines. The complementary nature of mathematics and the natural sciences was reinforced by having some of the QR courses taught by faculty in the natural sciences. In general, the collective experience of integrating social sciences and the humanities was greater than with mathematics and science. This is an issue that needs further exploration.

**Professional Development and Learning:** Faculty and staff are hired because of their talents, interests, and support of the model. How can these assets be tapped in professional development that addresses important, pressing teaching and learning issues that cut across instructional teams? Such professional development should engage the rich resources within the faculty as much as possible and also be related to practices in a meaningful way.

**The Challenge of Differentiation in Instruction:** All faculty practiced differentiation in instruction and assessment; they addressed the range of academic skills in many ways and by frequent use of flexible grouping. How can instructional teams more effectively differentiate the curriculum by taking into account the range of interests, talents, and skills students bring and without sacrificing attention to those with fewer skills or higher-level skills? What are the potential roles of Graduate Coordinators and Peer Mentors in supporting skill-building? How can Graduate Coordinators and Peer Mentors reinforce differentiation practices in their work with students?

**Scaffolding:** Scaffolding is a tool frequently used in differentiation. Scaffolding of assignments to respond to a range of academic preparation for the curriculum was routinely used by faculty and was a frequent point of instructional team discussions. There were concerns that students would become dependent on these scaffolds or that
more skilled students were impatient with the scaffolds; a persistent question was how and at what point should scaffolds be withdrawn. Puntambekar and Hübscher describe scaffolding in the following way:

A key element of scaffolding is that the adult provides appropriate support based on an ongoing diagnosis of the [student’s] current level of understanding.

What diagnostic tool or tools have faculty used to help determine the point at which scaffolds can be removed for specific groups of students? In bolstering student confidence in their academic identities, how can faculty ratchet up expectations over the course of the first year in preparation for the majors?

Issues in Assessment: Some student presentations suggested that students failed to find the time to review and edit their work, and other student presentations suggested language patterns of ELLs. Each situation requires a different kind of response and resources. Should mid-cycle and/or end-cycle student products demonstrate language that is largely error-free in spelling and grammar? At what point must this be part of the assessment?

Instructional Team Processes and Procedures:

Instructional Team Agendas: In addressing weekly issues, instructional teams were challenged by the need to balance the time devoted to addressing student issues and pedagogical issues. This, of course, was necessitated by the need to respond in a timely manner to issues that students presented. How might instructional teams keep this balance in mind as they try to address both student needs and the discussion of curricula synchronization, improvements, and teaching strategies? Are there additional ways the instructional teams can document the experience and the depth of instructional team deliberations for future professional staff?

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Adjuncts: The instructional team model relies on a core full-time faculty/staff team to implement the first-year experience. However, adjuncts have been and will be hired to fill gaps in staffing. How can instructional teams support adjuncts and other part-time professional help in this model and, at the same time, gain value from their experience and work at GCC in instructional team deliberations?

Transitions for Fall I and Spring I to Fall II and Spring II: Transition periods are always complicated and fraught with difficulties, and these were no different. It was poignant to hear about the level of emotional investment expressed by many of the faculty as well as the depth of knowledge they had developed about each student that they wanted to share with faculty teaching in Fall II and Spring II. What is the relationship between the instructional team functions in Fall I and Spring I with the Fall II and Spring II experience when the instructional team is not in operation? How can the dedicated time devoted to assessment days at the culmination of Fall I and Spring I include time to help the transitions to Fall II and Spring II?

Student Advisement: What is the faculty role in advising students about choosing majors? Given their knowledge of the academic requirements of the majors, faculty felt they should have had a greater role than they did in the first year. How can this role be coordinated with the roles of SSAs, Graduate Coordinators, and Peer Mentors?

College-wide Processes and Procedures:

Staff Engagement in the Academic Side: The Concept Paper encouraged the participation of staff (other than Student Success Advocates), including those in charge of the many non-teaching functions at the college, in instructional teams to address the traditional split between faculty and staff; however, workload issues prevented this from happening. Student confidentiality was another factor. Yet, a few of the
instructional teams did reach out to staff at strategic moments.\textsuperscript{40} Are there more opportunities for staff to be engaged with instructional teams?

**Decision-Making:** To what degree are staff choices understood by the instructional teams?\textsuperscript{41} Should organizational dilemmas be more widely known and discussed? Although the administrators and staff are ultimately responsible for these decisions, can there be more of a shared understanding of the choices that need to be made, especially those that have a direct bearing on teaching and learning?

**Institutional Knowledge Building:** How can the college best capture the wealth of experience and knowledge generated? Only a portion of this rich archive of materials and knowledge generated is captured in instructional team minutes, ePortfolios, and materials distributed at college-wide meetings. Are the selected documents sufficient? Are all areas being documented? What are the multiple ways that learning can be shared across the institution? What has been most effective and/or efficient thus far? How might that change over time and why? How can dissemination of information be done routinely and more effectively?

**Class Schedules:** Are there ways that the 8 a.m. schedule can be reconsidered as the college grows? This subject was discussed frequently in instructional teams given the late arrivals and poor attendance in 8 a.m. classes. What alternative schedules can be designed as more faculty and staff are brought on board?

**Institutional Communications:** Real-time communication helps groups move forward and lessens uncertainties. Examples include hiring projections and timetables, requested and approved equipment purchases, or reports on college visits and projections of enrollment. Is there a way to routinely share current and prospective

\textsuperscript{40} One instructional team engaged the facilities director in the sustainability curriculum. Students interviewed him, and he and others were invited and participated in student presentations mid-term and at the end of Fall 1.

\textsuperscript{41} Often lost from view is the role of CUNY Central in delimiting the range of decisions the college can make. In addition, flexible spending is not a characteristic typical of government funding streams.
institutional data, information, and other highlights? Could information be centralized with a brief e-bulletin distributed between scheduled assessment days?

**Conclusion**

The college’s dedication to discuss issues related to students’ success and persistence and to the curriculum and pedagogy within instructional teams is one of its most important characteristics. The questions and suggestions presented in this report grow out of what is already a successful initiative and are intended to capitalize on the strengths of this unique college-wide structure. The instructional team experience in the first year provided an important test site for new learning about students, curriculum, and teaching. The challenge is how to capture this learning and build on it.
Appendix A: Ascending Steps of Learning Community Goals

Appendix B: LibGuide—Sustainability at CUNY Campuses

Sustainability at CUNY campuses

Guide Information
Last Updated: Dec 12, 2012
Guide URL: http://nycc.cuny.edu/comparativehistory/sections/GreenInitiatives
Guide Index

Home

How does CUNY help?
This is a list of CUNY sustainability initiatives:

- The City University of New York Sustainability Project
  http://www.cuny.edu/about/resource/sustainability.html
- City College-CUNY Green Task Force
  http://www.cc.cuny.edu/office/ttaff/green/green_task_force.htm
- John Jay Let’s Get Green Initiative
  http://www.jjay.cuny.edu/pagapgreen.php
- Hunter College-Hunter Green
  http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/huntergreen/copy_of_green_initiatives
- Lehman College Sustainability
  http://www.lehman.cuny.edu/administration/sustainability/
- Center for Sustainable Energy, located at the CUNY Bronx Community College
  http://www.csbe.cuny.edu/
- Brooklyn College Sustainability page
  http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/web/about/initiatives/initiatives/sustainability.php
- CUNY School of Law Sustainability page
  http://www.law.cuny.edu/about/sustainability.html
- CUNY Graduate Center Sustainability page
  http://sustainability.gc.cuny.edu/
- Laguardia Community College Sustainability
  http://www.laguardia.cuny.edu/sustainability/

The world as we knew it
Sustainability means living in our society while renewing our resources at a rate equal to which they are consumed and to take into account the future of our generations and how we manage to not to deplete our resources or cause pollution at a rate faster than the earth can regenerate them.
Colleges Go Green

Colleges are becoming a large part of the sustainability movement.

The Institute of Sustainable Cities - The City University of New York
Community Colleges: A Vital Resource for Education in the Post-Carbon Era
The College of Sustainability Report Card
Green Water Bottles Come to a Michigan College
Thinking Outside of the Bottle

The Afterlife

The 'Afterlife' refers to the recycling of products that we as a society consume. Other terms that can be used interchangeably with 'Afterlife', are life cycle of a product and post-consumer recovery.