A PARADIGM SHIFT from teaching to learning occurred in 1995, which changed the traditional emphasis on the instructor to emphasis on the student. This movement sparked new interest in creative strategies to engage students at multiple levels to encourage deeper learning. Mission statements, success criteria, teaching structures, learning theory, productivity, and roles were reevaluated to place the student at the center of each process. This transformation in higher education has enriched the learning experience for students as learning communities have evolved. These communities are designed for students and faculty (academic and clinical) to engage in collaborative activities to facilitate student learning. This report defines learning communities and discusses their development and role in athletic training education.

**Definition of Learning Communities**

Learning communities are defined as collaborative, active groups of people who promote involvement in academic and social activities, both inside and outside the classroom. Learning communities can be comprised of students, faculty, administrators, and other academic personnel who share a common interest. Members of a learning community are informally bound by what they do together and by what they have learned through mutually-mediated activities. These commonalities bind these communities through shared knowledge and shared responsibility.

Inherent in the transformation from a teacher-centered to learner-centered framework is an understanding that assessment is essential to the success of a learning community. Defining the success of a learning community goes beyond statistics relating to outcomes; it includes the intangible evolution of the members of the community. Active emotional and intellectual engagement is essential to successful learning communities. Creative learning environments that encourage collaboration and connections of concepts to real world applications should drive learning communities at all levels. Although difficult to assess by traditional means, the outcomes of these activities are more powerful than the score achieved on any exam or quiz. Reflective essays, service-learning projects, and critical thinking activities can easily be utilized as learning outcomes. Such nontraditional activities are the essence of a learning community.
Student Learning Communities

Student learning communities, which have been around for many years, include curricular learning communities, classroom learning communities, residential learning communities, and student-type learning communities. Curricular learning communities evolve as students who are co-enrolled in two or more classes create cohorts, whereas classroom learning communities emphasize more cooperative activities through specifically designed pedagogical strategies in one particular course. Residential learning communities are rapidly increasing in higher education as a result of institutional concern about retention and recruitment. Some institutions facilitate creation of living-learning communities in residential facilities, where students with common academic program enrollment share living and study spaces to encourage student-student mentoring. Such residential communities may have faculty participation to encourage faculty-student contact. Student-type learning communities are often designed for specific groups of students, such as honors students or students with disabilities.

Student learning communities have academic and social implications that add value to the entire college experience. Such learning communities focus on integration of the academic and social aspects of student learning and removal of barriers that hinder success in higher education. Substantial research on the value of student learning communities exists in the literature (Table 1).

Faculty Learning Communities

Faculty learning communities have emerged over the years to serve similar purposes as those of student learning communities. As communities of practice, faculty learning communities evolve from issues that are important to people. Such communities fulfill many functions, including information exchange and interpretation and competency and identity development. Boyer contends that all universities and colleges are learning communities that encourage purposeful, open, and disciplined practices. The connections built through these communities encourage faculty to become deliberately engaged with one another while facilitating purposeful engagement with students.

Although different faculty learning communities have very specific foci, their long-term goals are usually similar. Nourishing the scholarship of teaching, broadening the evaluation and assessment of teaching, encouraging reflection, and creating awareness of the complexities of teaching and learning are the common threads that bind most faculty learning communities.

Types of faculty learning communities include First-Year Student Experience, Psychology of Learning, Faculty and Future Faculty, and Teaching and Learning in Large Classes. Faculty learning communities that address issues relating to faculty and student retention transcend many disciplines. Several qualities are necessary to develop a sense of community within the faculty learning communities (Table 2).

Clinician-Based Learning Communities

Clinicians can benefit from learning communities for the same reasons that faculty and students derive benefit. The term “communities of practice” is used interchangeably with learning communities; the concept is applied to the needs of clinicians. Research has demonstrated that the majority of valuable knowledge is transferred throughout an organization implicitly. Through informal face-to-face communication and small group collaboration, organization members conduct cognitive processes of narration, collaboration, and social construction. Through these processes, they develop a shared repertoire where the community’s memory is embedded. Clinicians are active participants in gaining community memory and add to it when sharing their own experiences with other members of the community.

Clinical learning communities, or communities of practice, seem to develop naturally among clinicians whose work setting involves social interaction. Clinicians benefit from belonging to a community of practice when faced with challenges, and they add to

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**Table 1. Summary Research on Student Learning Communities**

| Students tend to form their own self-supporting groups outside of the classroom. |
| Students are more active in classroom learning even after the class is over. |
| Participation in a learning community impacts the quality of student learning. |
| Appreciation for the role of citizenship in the educational process is enhanced. |