1. Definition and Overview

A **Learning Community** (LC) is a cohort of students who share a specific set of clustered learning experiences. Typically, these include paired courses, or a single course, integrated by an academic theme, collaborative learning, peer mentoring, and intentional co-curricular activities, such as service, a common reader, and special programming. Such communities tend to be designed with targeted populations in mind, such as first-years, transfers, or majors.

The primary purpose of learning communities is twofold:

1. A learning community allows for deep learning—either interdisciplinary or within a given discipline—by expanding the learning opportunities beyond the parameters of a single course;
2. LCs foster relationships between people—students, faculty, staff, community members—and allow more opportunities for collaborative learning and community building. Hence, the primary learning outcomes for learning communities include integrative learning and teamwork, in addition to any discipline-specific and/or skills-based outcomes of particular LCs.

2. Best-Practice Guidelines

The minimum standard features of an LC, according to national best practices, are as follows:

- **Linked Experiences**: LCs include either (a) co-requisite sections of at least 2 courses or (b) a single course with substantial engagement with its professional community.
- **Targeted Population**: LCs are designed for, marketed to, and serve specific populations of students, such as first-years, transfers, undeclared, first generation, pre-health majors, engineering majors, etc.
- **Integration**: Ideally, a common theme, purpose, or set of questions integrates the component courses/experiences of the LC and provides an interdisciplinary learning experience.
- **Coordination**: Ideally, the primary instructors/directors of the component courses/experiences that constitute the LC coordinate agreed-upon elements, such as common readings, assignments, activities, or grading rubrics.
Co-curricular Programming: Optionally, learning outside the classroom enhances both the content and skills of the course(s). Co-curricular pieces may include campus activities or workshops, community-based or service learning, activities associated with a common read, field trips to sites relevant to the course, lectures from visiting scholars, etc.

Community-building and collaborative learning: Optionally, opportunities for intentional community-building (student-student; student-faculty-staff; CU Denver-community) and collaborative learning bolster the intellectual and personal development of LC participants.

Other important features common in learning communities include: guided reflection, exposure to diverse perspectives, public demonstration of competence, and opportunities for student discovery.

3. Learning Outcomes for Learning Communities

National best practices recommend that, in addition to meeting the specific disciplinary learning outcomes of the course (and the Core Curriculum, if applicable), LCs will deliver the learning of the following AAC&U Essential Learning Outcomes (ELOs):

- **Teamwork**: Teamwork includes behaviors of members to productively contribute to the goals of a specific group, including individual effort and work, interpersonal communication and behavior, and facilitation of a constructive team climate.

- **Integrative and Applied Learning**: Integrative learning is an understanding and a disposition that a student builds across the curriculum and co-curriculum, from making simple connections among ideas and experiences to synthesizing and transferring learning to new, complex situations within and beyond the campus. Integrative learning is assessed by connections between relevant experience and academic knowledge, connections across disciplines and perspectives, transferability of skills, theories, or methodologies, integrated communications, and reflection and self-assessment.

Ideally, LC course syllabi will reference and use the VALUE Rubrics for these two ELOs (linked to the ELO titles above) and integrate these general learning outcomes into the discipline-specific learning outcomes for the course. The ELO should be expressed in the terms of that discipline or profession and serve the delivery of disciplinary knowledge and skills.

In addition, individual faculty may choose whether or not to incorporate one or more of the other ELOs, as appropriate to the discipline, and integrated into the disciplinary or professional content or used as vehicle for that content. Other ELOs that may be especially appropriate to LCs include: Inquiry and Analysis, Information Literacy, Intercultural Knowledge and Competence, and Lifelong Learning.

This concludes the abbreviated LC best-practices guidelines document. The complete version additionally includes a Suggested Resources or references section and a Sample Courses section.
4. Suggested Resources

For links to recommended scholarly publications about LCs, visit the Washington Center website. Here are the first two listed references of many more:


The Learning Communities Journal (ISSN 1946-0597) is a peer-reviewed journal published by and for faculty and administrators. It also provides a scholarly forum for discussion about all areas affecting faculty and student LCs, and gives community participants the opportunity to share proven, innovative strategies and thoughtful, inspirational insights. Examples of recent articles include:

Difference Across the Curriculum--Learning Communities in Action. Milton Cox, Miami University.

The Impact of Living-Learning Communities on College Algebra. Cheryl Beseler & Ernest Chavez, Colorado State University.

Bridging Faculty Development and Organizational Development: A Faculty Learning Community on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. David Boose & Pat Hutchings, Gonzaga University.


5. Sample Learning Communities at CU Denver

VOICING DIFFERENCE: SOCY 1001 + WGST 1111 (Women & Arts/Media)
This LC uncovers and examines the social influences that define and often regulate our experiences. Integrated assignments & activities: thematic foci on inequality and gender/ethnicity/race; “Doing Gender” written assignment; field trip to the Denver Art Museum; Writing Center workshop.

COLORADO MOVEMENTS: ENGL 1020 + PSCI 1111 (Class Politics in CO)
In this LC, students deconstruct past and present power structures in Colorado and relate them to their own lives and experiences. Integrated assignments & activities: thematic focus on political/social/economic movements in Colorado; shared examination (through writing, performance, and analysis) of political theater, including culminating public performance at Mercury Café; narrative essay on shared subject matter (kairos & history of CO labor politics).