

## UNL Learning Communities

### I. Expectations of Sponsoring Academic Units and Faculty

**Academic Units and Faculty Sponsors.** Academic Units decide how to best handle the sponsorship for their respective learning community. By August 1, the unit head should contact the Academic Learning Community Coordinator, Dr. Deb Mullen with the learning community sponsor contact information for the upcoming academic year.

Faculty support and involvement are critical to the success of this initiative. Academic units agree to sponsor the community by appointing faculty/staff to work with the students, to offer one or more sections of the selected co-enrolled course, depending on community size, and to be in a partnership with Residence Life for the development of co-curricular event planning at least twice each semester. It is recommended that:

- The sponsoring faculty/staff should make contact with the community's mentor(s) and RA's the week before classes begin to plan activities and establish mutual expectations.
- Sponsoring faculty and staff are expected to attend the opening banquet, generally held at the beginning of the fall semester. This will be the first opportunity students will have to meet the faculty they will be working with throughout the semester.
- The academic unit and sponsoring faculty engage the learning community students in at least **two co-curricular activities** during the first semester. These should be academic in nature and should allow students to interact with faculty and other professionals from the discipline.
- The sponsoring faculty/staff should submit to both the head of the academic unit and the Academic Learning Communities Coordinator a report by May 1 of the Academic Year that outlines activities of the community, learning outcomes, and forms of measurement.

If the Learning Community Student Mentor(s) and RA(s) do not have contact with the sponsoring academic unit faculty/staff by the Friday before the start of classes fall semester, the Academic Learning Communities Coordinator will contact the department chair to clarify any changes in responsibility. The Student Mentors will:

- maintain contact with the community's faculty to plan activities and establish mutual expectations.
- offer learning community students referrals for developing study skills, time management, dealing with homesickness, etc.
- attend activities offered by the sponsoring academic unit
- keep in regular contact with the sponsoring faculty/staff advisor.

## II. Budget and Allocations

Each student pays a \$95.00 program fee to enroll in a community. The money is used to offset the cost of the program. For planning purposes the budget<sup>1</sup> will be divided as follows:

Recruitment and welcoming materials	10.00
Opening banquet	15.00
Communication with families	10.00
Administrative costs	10.00
Programming	50.00

The funding is held in an account in the Student Organization Financial Services (SOFS) office because the University Learning communities are an official student organization.

Accessing the funds can be accomplished in two ways:

1. Faculty or staff may spend their own money and provide receipts to the Residential Learning Communities Coordinator, who will work with the student organization treasurer to prepare the reimbursement.
2. Prior to the expenditure the purchaser can determine the exact amount of the purchase and work with the Residential Learning Community Coordinator to have a check cut for that amount. Once the item is purchased the receipt must be returned to the Residential Learning Communities Coordinator so she can file it with the SOFS office.

Departments are encouraged to seek outside sources to fund activities.

## III. Formation or Dissolution of a Learning Community

**Formation of a Learning Community.** If an academic unit wishes to investigate forming a learning community, they are requested to contact Rita Kean, Dean of Undergraduate Studies (472-1185) before proceeding with any plans. Learning communities take careful thought and preparation. For proper recruitment, the Office of Admissions needs to have the information about new learning communities by September 1 for recruitment for the following academic year. The Office of Admissions, Division of Housing and Enrollment Management Council will be notified of the unit's interest by the Office of Undergraduate Studies. It is particularly important for the field recruiters to know enough about each community to suggest what may, on the surface, not appear to be a good fit, but in fact be an excellent option.

**Dissolution of a Learning Community.** The sponsoring academic unit has the right to dissolve an existing learning community but must provide the Dean of Undergraduate Studies with the decision to dissolve in writing by August 1 for the next academic year (for example, if an academic unit wishes to dissolve an existing learning community then the DUS needs to be notified by August 1, 2004 for AY 2005-06. The academic unit is expected to meet their

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<sup>1</sup> Please see Appendix B1 – B3 for Travel Planning and Budget Forms

responsibilities for AY 2004-05). The Office of Admissions, Division of Housing and Enrollment Management Council will be notified of the unit's decision by the Office of Undergraduate Studies.

#### **IV. UNL Learning Communities: Responsibilities of Residence Life Staff and<sup>2</sup> Reporting Lines**

The responsibilities of the Academic Learning Communities Coordinator and other Housing Division Staff include the following:

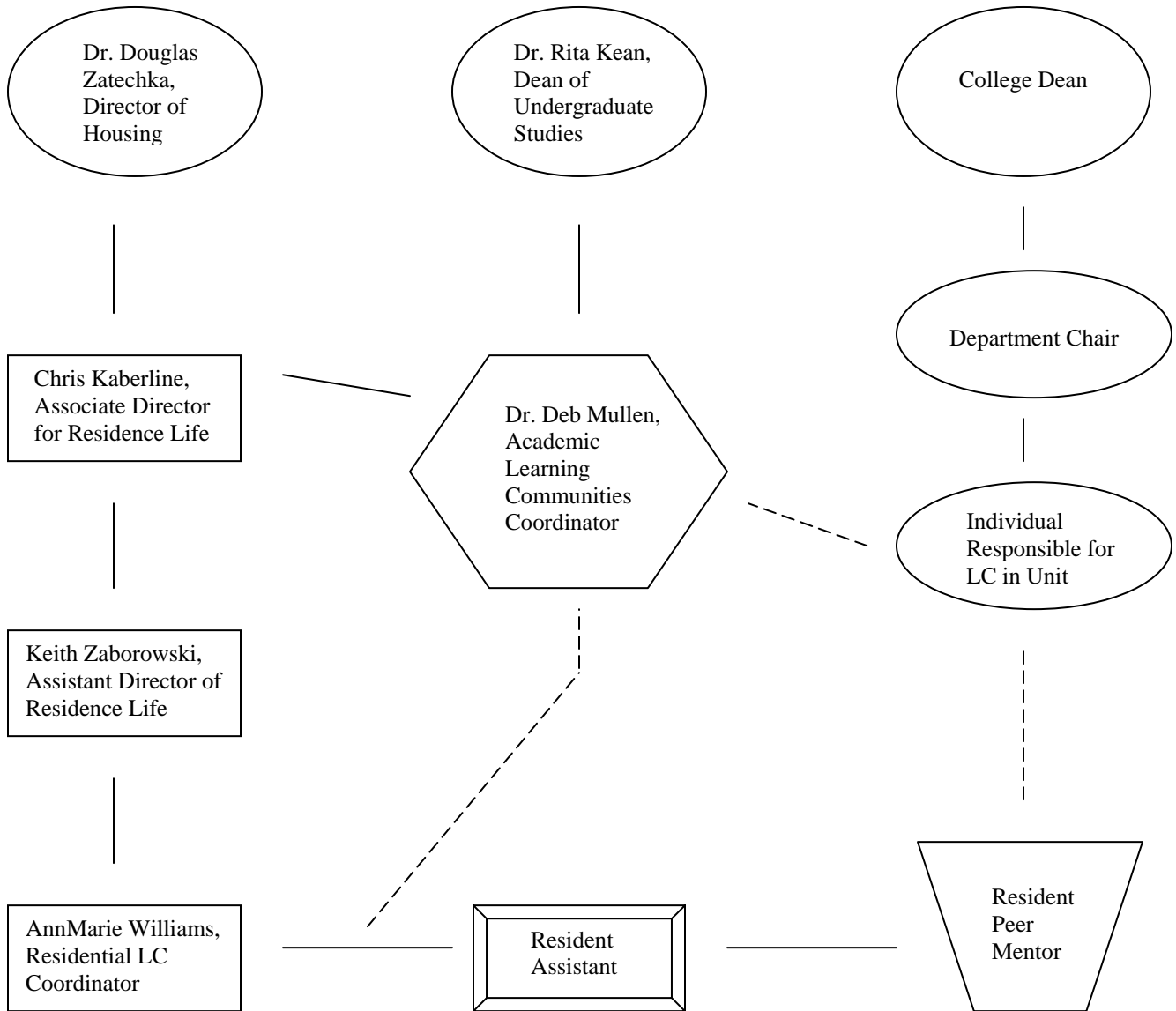
- **The Academic Learning Communities Coordinator** is responsible for working with the Dean of Undergraduate Studies, the Director of Housing, Associate Director of Residence Life, faculty sponsoring the communities, the Residential Learning Communities Coordinator, and the RA's and Mentors who work directly with the students to see that each group has adequate information, resources, and support. She also speaks at Red Letter Days, talks to prospective parents and students, and sends out notices of acceptance into communities. The Academic LC Coordinator will help mentors/ RAs plan weekly learning community building events during the first six weeks.
- **The Residential Learning Communities Coordinator** is responsible for assisting with recruitment, talking with prospective students and their parents, arranging travel, local field trips, banquets, and other programs for all but two of the communities, selecting, training and supervising the mentors and RA's, and performing all of the traditional tasks associated with being a hall director in a 500 student building (adjudicating conduct cases, personal counseling, night duty, departmental responsibilities, conferences attendance, staff meetings, etc.)
- **The Resident Assistants** are expected to support the learning communities through programming with the mentors, providing peer-to-peer counseling, being academic role models, confronting policy violations, managing administrative tasks and paperwork, being responsive to health and safety needs, and attending learning community programs. Remuneration for this position is room and board and \$300.00 per semester. RA's are chosen in a highly competitive process beginning in December and concluding in early March. Vacancies in learning communities are given a high priority for candidate selection. Moving, adding or eliminating communities after this process can leave the Residence Life staff with someone who has been hired for a specific task but no longer has the task. Although they will continue to be RAs they will not have the same job they were hired for.
- **Student mentors** are expected to work with the faculty to support the learning communities via co-curricular programming, lead two hours each week of study time, work with the RA's to plan programs, meet with the Residential Learning Communities Coordinator to discuss specific concerns, and attend programs offered by faculty or staff. Remuneration for this position is \$400.00 per semester. Mentors are in a particularly difficult position. They are hired after RA's and are sometimes RA candidates who

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<sup>2</sup> See Figure 1. *Reporting Structure for Academic Learning Community*

weren't selected. They are expected to support the department they represent, program for the students, and work with the RA's to provide programming in concert with the RA's. If students are struggling in a learning community course, don't like a faculty member, or are dissatisfied with college, the mentor will probably be the first to know. In addition, it has proven true that sometimes a student who is well thought of in the college is not a good housing employee. They may be overly involved in the college, thus not available to students, or they may not be interested in helping students and see the job as a college endorsement of their professional skills, not their ability to mentor others. If a community is dissolved they must be kept on because we have obligated ourselves to them and feel it is unjust to not pay them, so they end up doing non-major or academic focus work.

Figure 1. Reporting Structure for Academic Learning Community



## Appendix A. Academic Year Calendar Recruitment/Enrollment Process

This section outlines the recruitment/ enrollment process. This is offered to help learning community teams understand the timelines and tasks of enrollment

### **August-September 2004. Academic Units considering offering Learning Community for AY 2005-06 must have approval from Dean of Undergraduate Studies.**

- Materials for the 2005-2006 learning communities are developed and printed.  
(*This means new communities must be determined by this time*)
- Calendars sent to High School Counselors along with “Good Luck Letter”
- Academic Learning Community Coordinator attends Recruitment events

### **October, November, December**

- Materials for the 2005-2006 learning communities are sent to Admissions for field recruiters
- Red Letter Days Begin: LC staff conducts 40 minute presentation
- Students who attend LC session receive follow-up letter

### **January**

- Prior to the first round of Housing contracts being sent, the Dean of Undergraduate Studies sends a letter and information to every high school counselor, followed by a letters to parents of prospective students. This round of letters is followed by an optional round of letters from departments to students indicating interest in their area.
- Learning community enrollment forms arrive with housing contracts. The contracts staff forwards the student’s form to the academic learning communities’ coordinator who places the student’s information in a data base. The students are sent a congratulations letter notifying them of their enrollment, followed by a card to the parent.

### **February**

- Learning community forms continue to arrive and are processed as described above. Parent phone calls and requests for visits increase. Considerable time is spent returning phone calls and hosting parents for lunch.
- Learning Community RA’s are hired, and their academic year placement is determined.

### **March**

- Learning community forms continue to arrive. Some communities begin to fill. At this point we begin to speculate regarding our overall success. It’s also a good time to do more recruiting if necessary.
- Mentors are hired, and their room placement is determined.

### **April**

- Near the end of April the names of all enrolled students are sent to the Director of General Studies to begin enrolling students in the proper sections of the courses for the respective communities. Updates are sent about every two weeks after this point.
- Housing contracts staff request a floor plan with each community’s placement.

**May**

- In mid May all LC students are sent a graduation card congratulating them on their high school graduation, informing them that we are looking forward to their learning community participation in the fall.

**June**

- New Student Enrollment begins and adjustments to the communities occur. Students drop out, others enroll. This process occurs on a daily basis. Each day a representative from the Division of General Studies checks who was scheduled to attend NSE, who actually attended, and what, if any, changes occurred in the learning communities. These changes are then communicated to the Housing contracts office so room assignments can be changed and to the Residential or Academic Learning Communities Coordinators so the database can be current and the proper correspondence sent to the student and families. *This is a process that requires precise and timely communication.*

- At the midpoint of New Student Enrollment learning community enrollment must stop. Seats in courses are released to the registrar for general use and beds in the reserved rooms are released for general purchase. Students may choose to dis-enroll in a community, but enrolling in one would be a matter of luck—courses still open and a bed in the proper section of the hall still available.

**July**

- Students receive notice of their room assignment and the name of their roommate. They are encouraged to contact their roommate.

**August**

- Students receive an invitation to the opening banquet.
- Students move in....the fun begins.....**

<b>Appendix B.1</b>	<b>Learning Community Travel: Planning Forms (3 pages)</b>
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The logistics of student travel, even for small trips, can sometimes be difficult the intention of this sheet is to help you plan events for your community. *Please provide copies of these three forms to the Residential Learning Communities Coodinator, Ann Marie Williams.*

Event \_\_\_\_\_

Date(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Departure time \_\_\_\_\_ Arrival to Lincoln time \_\_\_\_\_

Forms of transportation (both to/from the site and at the site) \_\_\_\_\_

Number of students who will attend \_\_\_\_\_

Number of staff who will attend \_\_\_\_\_

### Itinerary

Day	Activity(s)
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

### Food needs

Taken along \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Delivered \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Purchased during event \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Departmental contact (please list just one person) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Housing contact \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Appendix B.2</b>	<b>Learning Community Travel: Estimating Costs</b>
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	Total
Vans _____	_____
Airline tickets _____ tickets @ _____ per ticket = _____	_____
Food _____	_____
Admission fees _____	_____
Public transportation _____	_____
Lodging _____ rooms x _____ nights x _____ per night	_____
Baggage handling _____ #bags x _____ # days	_____
Miscellaneous _____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
Grand total	_____
Cost per student _____	_____
Funding by student _____	_____
Other funding _____	_____



## Appendix D. A Brief History of Learning Communities at UNL

Development of the current initiative began in the fall of 1998 when a Freshman Experience Task Force was assembled by the Office of the Senior Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs. Composed of 23 UNL faculty members, staff and students, the group met throughout the 1998-1999 academic year to examine the issues of retention, recruitment, quality of scholastic experience, and academic acculturation for first year students.

The group's work was characterized by three distinct phases; information, acquisition and assimilation, (including a visit from Dr. John Gardner of the National Resource Center for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition) the emergence of specific principles that would guide the work of the task force, and finally, three committees designed to focus on a specific dimension of the first year experience.

### **The following goals were established for learning communities at UNL:**

“The primary goal of a University Learning Community is to *integrate the social and academic experience* of students through the creation of small communities of faculty, staff and students in which all share an academic interest and participate in co-curricular activities and in which students intentionally co-enroll in at least two courses. The expectation is that these communities will enhance (a) the students' academic achievement and retention, (b) their sense of belonging to the university, and (c) their connection of career or life goals to the educational experience.”

The report continued:

“Each freshman community will have a structure that consists of: co-enrolled courses that meet degree requirements; a common focus which identifies the communities' purpose; sponsorship by an academic unit, including an appropriate partnership with student affairs; co-curricular activities designed to integrate academic and social experience. Each community will function in a way consistent with the following: co-enrolled courses will be selected to further the goals of the community, co-curricular activities to involve students, faculty and staff, especially during weeks one through six, will be designed and implemented by a sponsorship team typically composed of a peer mentor-faculty-staff; registration for co-enrolled courses will be handled centrally; recruitment will involve Admissions, Housing and sponsoring academic units”.

Staffing guidelines for the communities were designed as follows:

Admissions will assist in recruitment, Housing and General Studies will coordinate contracts and sign-up for the residential University Learning Communities; the Registrar will accommodate centralized pre-registration for co-enrolled courses; General Studies will coordinate community development and facilitate communication among communities; and sponsoring academic units, in partnership with student affairs will develop and implement the co-curricular activities.

With time and experience, the initial design of UNL's learning communities has been modified. In 2002, the Academic Learning Communities Coordinator position was created, with the intent to strengthen the linkages between the Divisions of Academic Affairs and University Housing.