Dear Colleagues:

I am pleased to extend an invitation for proposals to create Learning Communities for the coming academic year. Learning community experiences are particularly positive for first-year, early transfer, and minority and disadvantaged students who frequently have difficulty in transitioning from high school or other situations to college-level instruction and expectations. At the same time, as we sometimes forget, these very same students are also coping with finding their way independently – and often suddenly – in a world removed from their customary, and family-supported, home life. They are also increasingly effective as second or third-year communities in assisting students to transition to second and third-year coursework – where first-year levels of support disappear – and better integrating with their majors.

Generally speaking, learning communities nation-wide have a number of shared characteristics, including the ability to:

- Assist students in creating and utilizing academic and social network systems.
- Deliver academic support of various sorts in a more systematized, and often more focused, manner.
- Organize students and their faculty into units that more readily promote learning, skills acquisition, student achievement, and a propensity towards life-long inquiry and enrichment.
- Focus on learning outcomes in a manner less-often achievable in stand-alone courses.
- Better integrate curriculum so as to address various needs and opportunities.
- Permit greater interaction amongst faculty, particularly across disciplines and specializations.
- Create a community of scholars (students and faculty) and a sense of belonging that research and surveys (NSSE, for example) tell us is desired by students, and which also contributes to academic and institutional success.

As you no doubt already know, learning communities may be structured in any number of ways.

- Two or three traditional undergraduate courses linked together to support issues of academic preparedness and enhanced skill sets. An English composition linked with a Speech Communications course, for example.
  - Communities, however, are not to be linked to First Year Seminar.
  - Second-year and upper-level communities are especially encouraged.
- Two or three classes linked by a topical theme such as environmental, race and/or gender or social/ethical issues
- Two or three classes linked by curricular or intellectual connections, while sometimes also addressing preparedness: calculus plus chemistry, for example, or engineering plus humanities. Research has shown, incidentally, that anything that genuinely assists students in mastering mathematics – especially through application in areas of students’ interest (engineering or physics, for example), is not only good for retention, persistence and – most importantly - graduation, but also assists in recruitment (as success rates
become known), and is especially beneficial to minority and disadvantaged students in a tech-driven employment world.

In light of the above – and not least of which the benefit to be derived in various ways by faculty - I genuinely encourage you to consider creating a learning community with one or more of your colleagues for next Fall. Communities are to include courses that already exist in the catalogue, and are listed on the Fall schedule. No one instructor should teach more than one aspect of the community. The proposal form may be accessed from the Academic Affairs website under the “Documents” link.

As noted above, proposals involving innovative opportunities geared towards second-year students are also encouraged.

If you have any ideas or questions about learning communities, I am happy to discuss them with you, or you may discuss them with Tricia Saft of Academic Affairs.

The initial deadline for submitting Learning Community proposals to Academic Affairs (Tricia Saft) for Fall is Friday, April 10.

As always, thank you for all that you do for our students, the university, and our wider community.

James Callaghan
Vice-President for Academic Affairs