



News Release

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WESTERN ONE OF 19 SELECTED FOR NATIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES PROJECT

St. Joseph, Mo. — Oct 8, 2003—Missouri Western State College was one of 19 colleges and universities selected to participate in a National Learning Communities Project last June at Evergreen State College, Olympia, Wash.

Nine faculty and staff members from Western attended a five-day residential institute to begin the process of strengthening the learning community initiative on campus. Western's team created a plan to develop faculty and staff committees on learning communities. Committees were formed in the areas of faculty and staff training, integrative freshmen seminar, peer mentoring, assessment and marketing.

The progress of the plan will be evaluated on Oct. 30-31 by two facilitators from the Learning Communities Project. Corly Brooke, associate vice provost of the center for teaching excellence at Iowa State University, Ames, and Lee Williams, director of Watauga College at Appalachian State University, Boone, N.C., will visit Western.

The learning communities group from Western includes Dr. Jason Baker, assistant professor of biology; Bill Church, instructor of English; Dr. Dan Cox, assistant professor of government; Dr. Diane Gorcyca, professor of speech; Dr. Mitch Haney, assistant professor of philosophy; Dr. Martin Johnson, dean of liberal arts and sciences; Robert Klostermeyer, acting dean of student development; Kristi Schulte, assistant director of housing and residential life; and Victoria "Y" Wacek, assistant professor of teacher education.

At the institute, the team from Western got a first-hand experience of living with a learning community and the social life that comes with it. For the duration of the institute, all of the females slept in the same suite, all of the males slept in the same suite and the entire learning community ate all of its meals together.

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“Our experience demonstrated to each one of us personally what a learning community can offer,” Dr. Gorcyca said. “Our growth over those five days was tremendous.”

There were over 35 facilitators who led the learning communities project, including Vincent Tinto, a well-known educator from Syracuse University, Syracuse, N.Y.

Church had the opportunity to be in a session led by Tinto. During that session, he said he saw the power of working in a learning community. Group members first individually jotted down topics that each felt passionately about. After revealing each person’s topics, the group selected one of the topics and began discussing possible disciplines and courses that would guide student exploration of the topic.

“[Tinto] had caused a group of teachers to connect at a common problem or question about which they felt passionately,” Church said. “Suddenly, I realized why [learning communities] have gained momentum and popularity. They can invigorate teachers, motivate students and connect everyone involved in a meaningful and shared learning experience.”

The National Learning Communities Project was led by the Washington Center for Undergraduate Education based at Evergreen State College, an international leader in developing innovative interdisciplinary programs. A clearinghouse for learning community approaches, the Washington Center directed the project under the auspices of a \$1.7 million grant from The Pew of Charitable Trusts.

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Missouri Western State College is a four-year public institution providing a blend of traditional liberal arts and professional degree programs. The college offers student-centered, high quality instruction that focuses on experience-based learning, community service, and state-of-the-art technology. Western is located in St. Joseph, Mo. and is committed to the educational, economic, cultural and social development of the region it serves.

