

# Politics Across the Curriculum: Teaching Introductory Political Science Courses in Learning Communities

David E. Leaman ([d-leaman@neiu.edu](mailto:d-leaman@neiu.edu)) ■ Northeastern Illinois University

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## INTRODUCTION

In my first experience teaching in a learning community, I worked with two faculty colleagues to integrate my introductory American government course with their English composition and freshmen seminar courses. One of the special activities that term was our visit to the Cook County Jail, organized by my criminal justice colleague who was teaching the freshmen seminar in our learning community. As we sat in the waiting area before our tour began, one of the jail officials asked our group of first year students: “So what class are you in?” One of our students immediately answered, “We’re in a learning community!” bringing a smile to the faces of all three of us professors. I no longer remember what our student added by way of explaining to the prison guard what a learning community is. But when she was finished, the friendly jail official chuckled: “Yeah, we have a learning community here too.”

Since that first learning community (LC), I have taught introductory American government in four other LCs. Of these five LCs, two followed the model of my first experience – a three-way linkage of American government with an English composition course and the college study skills-oriented first year seminar – and two others were a U.S. government/English composition two-course combo (without the first year seminar). My fifth LC, for a cohort of pre-education students, combined U.S. government with an introductory sociology course. At my institution, as at many others, most students in American government classes are not political science majors or minors (although a few may become so after taking the class). Instead, most students take American government to meet general education or other graduation requirements. Thus, American government courses are shaped by both political science and general education goals. In this article, I address three questions related to the teaching of general education introductory political science courses, such as American government, in learning communities.

First, addressing a concern of some instructors, how do the content and assignments of introductory political science courses change when they are part of LCs? In this section, I compare topic coverage of my LC and non-LC American government courses; discuss a few of the joint writing assignments that I have developed with my English and freshmen seminar LC colleagues; and note the effects of LC collaboration on the exploration of political themes across the required LC course readings.<sup>1</sup> Second, what do political science instructors (and departments) gain from participating in LCs? Here I outline both general and specific benefits for political science instructors who collaborate in LCs. Finally, what are some of the outcomes for students who participate in LCs? In this final section, I review LC program assessment findings from my campus, and note similar findings from various other institutions, that measure the benefits of LCs for student persistence, participation, and learning. I also report the results (limited at this point) of pre-tests/post tests and a short “citizenship” exercise that were administered in several of my LC-integrated American government courses.

My conclusions are that while LCs reshape, and may sometimes reduce, the traditional content of introductory political science courses, the changes are not as visible or dramatic as one might imagine while the gains of LC collaboration are clear. First, LCs provide a valuable means for advancing the academic development of students, as numerous assessment studies

indicate. Second, for political science instructors, LCs broaden and enrich the study of politics as they help to spread the study of politics across the curriculum. This spread of the study of politics occurs both in the literal institutional sense of linking political science courses and instructors with courses and instructors in other departments and programs. But it also refers to the less tangible intellectual conversation that occurs among instructors and students within LCs. As I discuss below, this multi-directional conversation can have the effect of more fully recognizing the pervasiveness and meaningfulness of politics in all spheres of human activity (including language and education) and of expanding the study of politics beyond a focus on formal political institutions and processes. Thus, the LC movement provides an opportunity for political science instructors to further explore and illuminate what Lane (2004), in a very different context, calls the “wider shores” of politics. Before addressing my three main questions, however, I need to briefly follow up on my student’s exchange with the prison guard by trying to explain what LCs are. In this next prefatory section, I will also comment on the participation of political scientists in this pedagogical movement.

### **LEARNING COMMUNITIES AND THE PARTICIPATION OF POLITICAL SCIENCE**

LCs are part of the curriculum at more than 400 institutions across the spectrum of U.S. higher education (Smith, 2001). The Washington Center for the Improvement of Undergraduate Education at Evergreen State College – a major leader in the contemporary LC movement – offers an inclusive and concrete definition of LCs:

“[C]urricular learning communities are classes that are linked or clustered during an academic term, often around an interdisciplinary theme, and enroll a common cohort of students. A variety of approaches are used to build these learning communities, with all intended... to build community among students, between students and their teachers, and among faculty members and disciplines (Washington Center, 2004).”

While this definition does not specify pedagogical innovation, some scholars are quick to emphasize the opportunity that LCs offer to practice fresh approaches to teaching and learning. Love argues, for example, that LCs “shift the focus to student learning outcomes;” “allow educators to rethink the ways by which students are taught;” and “can become a lens through which the experiences of students at a particular college can be understood.” Educational practices that are frequently integrated into LCs include problem-based team projects, service learning, and field trips. Love credits political philosopher Dewey, among others, for developing ideas about participatory, experiential, and collaborative education that inspired the LC model and movement (Love, 1999, p. 4-5).

As political scientist Thies (2005) has outlined in his superb overview in the inaugural issue of *Journal of Political Science Education*, there are multiple types of LCs. Two earlier excellent articles by political scientists who have taught American government in LCs – both published in *PS: Political Science and Politics* (and both also reviewed by Thies) – demonstrate how LC models may vary relative to institutional context and other factors. In the first model (Sanders 2000), American government was one of a cluster of courses (in this case, paired with two different sections of a freshmen seminar) taken together by a relatively small cohort of students (in this case, thirty-six total students).<sup>2</sup> In the second model (Huerta, 2004), American government was a large lecture course linked with smaller sections of English composition and a first year seminar.<sup>3</sup> At Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU), the institution where I teach,

LCs have taken the form of course clusters in which the same cohort of 25 or fewer students have taken two or more courses integrated around a common theme. Thus, the NEIU model is a bit more similar to the Drake University model than it is to the Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi model. However, my discussion in this article is directed to political scientist instructors in all types of contexts who are interested in how LCs, in whatever form, might advance their institutional and personal teaching goals.<sup>4</sup> In so doing, I am following Thies’s advice to political science instructors involved in LCs to contribute to the growing conversation about LCs among political scientists (2005, p. 134).

Political scientists seem to have been moderately involved in the contemporary LC movement. At the five LC conferences that I have attended, political science teachers were among the participants at each one.<sup>5</sup> Also, the lunchtime keynote speaker at two of these conferences was political scientist Richard Guarasci, a national leader of the LC movement. My analysis of the one adequately informative participant list available from one of these major LC conferences – the 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Learning Communities Conference in Chicago, Illinois on November 7-9, 2001 – suggests that the involvement of political scientists in the LC movement may be comparable to that of our colleagues in sociology/social work, history, and philosophy with each of these disciplines representing four to five percent of the total 160 discipline-identified participants at this conference. (Based on the data from this conference, social science disciplines that *may* lag a bit behind in LC movement participation are economics, anthropology, and criminal justice.) The discipline that seems to be the most involved in the LC movement – with an impressive twenty-five percent (40 of 160) of the participants at this conference – is English. Teachers from speech /theater departments – nine percent of the participants at this conference – also appear to have above-average involvement in the LC movement.

In the growing attention to teaching and learning in political science, learning community pedagogy has only become a major topic during the last decade or so. In Kehl’s analysis of the scholarship on teaching and learning in political science from 1990 to 2001, LCs are not specifically identified in the discussion of “six transformative trends” in political science instruction, although LCs are known to support several of these trends including “democratic and civic education,” “innovation in teaching strategies,” and “the continuing importance of diversity” (Kehl, 2002). An indicator of the increasing involvement of political science in the contemporary LC movement over the last decade is the publication of the three previously mentioned articles by Sanders (2000), Huerta (2004), and Thies (2005). LCs were also among the topics discussed at both of the first two APSA Conferences on Teaching and Learning in Political Science (Alter and Gershkoff, 2004 and Botteron and Harkness, 2005).

## **CHANGING CONTENT, INTEGRATED ASSIGNMENTS, AND WIDER READING OF POLITICS**

As noted, some instructors are suspicious of LCs because of the concern that collaboration will result in sacrifice of some of their traditional course content. These concerns are warranted. LCs *do* change course content although, in my case, the changes were not terribly dramatic. A comparison of the first four American government courses that I taught as part of LCs (what I will call AG-LC courses) with the four stand-alone American government courses that I taught during the same period (what I will call AG courses<sup>6</sup>) indicates, for example, that the major exams in my courses followed the same format and included the same general content regardless of whether or not the course was part of an LC.<sup>7</sup> Still, changes do occur in LCs. In this section, I first note a change in the topic coverage in my AG-LC and AG courses that

resulted from my LC participation; second, I will discuss a few integrated writing assignments that were developed in my LCs; and, third, I will comment on how LC collaboration affected the exploration of political themes across the required readings of different courses within the LC.

During my first experience teaching American government in an LC, I ran out of time to adequately cover all the scheduled course topics. This led me, the next time that I taught American government in an LC, to reduce the core course topics in one fifteen-week semester from fifteen to twelve. Eliminated were the chapters on electoral campaigns, the federal bureaucracy, and civil rights and liberties. This was painful. Still, I did make an effort to integrate some of the content of these chapters into other related chapters. For example, I presented some of the campaigns information during our discussion of the textbook chapters on voting and political parties. Some of the bureaucracy material was integrated into our discussion of the chapter on the presidency. Key civil liberties and rights cases were introduced during discussion of the Constitution early in the course and further explored during our discussion of the Supreme Court. Other instructors may have chosen different chapters to eliminate or combine. This is an instructor's choice based on cost-benefit assessment and personal teaching strengths and passions. What is significant to me is that once I decided on the "reduced" course content for my AG-LC course, I ended up doing the same thing in my future stand-alone AG courses. In other words, my experience in the LC convinced me that what students gained from greater depth on core topics, and from more integrative writing assignments and class activities, more than compensated for the slightly reduced topical coverage. I suppose that what I say to students who ask about the required length of papers could also apply to the trimming of my course topic coverage: quality matters more than quantity.

One of the most significant effects of my LC participation on the content of my American government courses is on writing assignments. But here too the changes are not as great as one might imagine – while the value added in terms of more extensive and integrated writing seems fairly clear.<sup>8</sup> On some occasions during heavy teaching load semesters, I have only assigned one paper in my AG course. Typically, however, I have assigned two papers in my AG courses, one of which required some documented research. This general practice did not change in my AG-LC courses. What has changed is that the second, and final, documented papers in my AG-LC courses have in every case required more intellectual synthesis than was the case with their AG course counterparts. In all five of my LCs, the final paper was a joint assignment that counted for each of the LC courses and that required students to integrate and cite sources and ideas from the various courses and texts that were part of the LC. In all cases, this final paper went through several writing steps. While my AG writing assignments also have proceeded through multiple steps, another difference in the AG-LC courses was that at least one other instructor was also reading and commenting on paper outlines and rough drafts.

Each of the joint writing assignments in my LCs was developed with my teaching partners: our collaborative response to the LC theme we had agreed upon. Thus, each bear the distinctive mark of the particular LC of which they were part. In my first LC, "Identity, Community, and the Struggle for Meaningful Democracy," we required students to write a 7-10 page paper that began with a detailed *description* of an experience in their life that related in some way to the LC theme and texts. In their *analysis* of that experience, we asked students to utilize at least three of the texts from at least two of the courses that made up the three-course LC. After completing drafts of their papers, students shared their papers with other students in the class. What made this assignment different from what I would have assigned in my stand-alone AG class was, first, the focus on a personal experience as a starting point for the paper;

second, the length of the paper (my AG final papers typically being 4-6 pages in length); and, third, the peer-review and discussion of student papers within the class. My English colleague in this LC was the one who led the peer review process during his class time; had I not been in an LC, this step in the writing process would not have occurred.

What made this assignment especially valuable in my view was the requirement that students analyze, and form an argument, about their personal experience that utilized several course texts. This assignment, and the help we three instructors offered along the way, encouraged and enabled students to identify and think analytically about both the “political” and “literary” dimensions of their own life experiences – that is, to cross political science/English disciplinary boundaries as well as the traditional divide between the “personal” and the “political.” Our first year students were asked to take up this intellectual challenge even as they learned how to develop a paper in stages and to properly document their sources of information. These are favorable outcomes for general education courses like American government and English composition and also provide a solid foundation for any of the students who may later choose to take additional courses in political science.

In one of my later LCs, “Becoming Students and Citizens,”<sup>9</sup> we asked students to write a final “proposing a solution” paper about a local or national issue that was of special concern to them. For this assignment, composed by the Writing I instructor, students were asked to identify a clear *problem*; to make an argument about the *cause(s)* of this problem; and to propose *locally-based solutions* for their problem with a concrete and relevant *audience* in mind. Paper topics ranged from how to limit road racing among teens in a Chicago suburb to how to increase voter turnout in elections. The reading and commenting on the first drafts of these papers was shared by the LC instructors with the English instructor reading all the first drafts and the other two instructors each reading half the drafts. At the suggestion of the English instructor, students were able to request their second faculty reader based on the subject of the paper. The concluding step in the process was formal student presentations of their papers with all the instructors present during the final class period. A distinctive feature of this assignment (that typically has received less emphasis in my stand-alone AG courses) was the focus on defining an *audience*, a step in the writing process that took on special significance with the multiple faculty readers of the paper and the final oral presentation to the entire LC.

In a later LC, “Democracy and Education,” we asked students to theorize about democracy and education by addressing a concrete education-related problem and taking thoughtful positions in the debates about different forms of literacy and different types of democracy. This final writing assignment built upon weekly LC discussion questions linking politics and literacy (such as “What is the difference between elite and popular democracy and how does this relate to elite and popular literacies?” and “How do current trends in the U.S. economy affect literacy and democracy?”) as well as earlier overlapping writing assignments in the English and American government sections of the LC.<sup>10</sup> One of the earlier writing assignments in my AG-LC class was a migration and multiculturalism essay based on Gonzalez’s *Harvest of Empire* (2000 and 2011) that I had first developed in a stand-alone AG class. What made the final joint writing assignment in this LC distinctive was the degree to which it allowed and encouraged students to build upon topics and informal and formal writing exercises that they had been working on from the beginning of the LC. Of course, none of the joint LC writing assignments reviewed here were perfectly developed or implemented. But all were products of a process that gave more time to writing than was the case in my regular AG

courses and that challenged students to make intellectual connections across their different courses.

Regarding these intellectual connections, the LC “cross-over” of both writing and reading assignments has consistently challenged both students and instructors to more carefully consider the “politics” that is part of every day life in all spheres of society. As I will discuss next, the combination of required readings in the American government and English courses of the LCs have prompted students (and me) to more fully appreciate and consider the “political” nature of personal identity, language, the educational system, among other topics. In this way, LC collaboration has helped to extend the study of politics in my introductory American government courses beyond the traditional heavy emphases on government institutions and formal processes. This wider reading of politics corresponds, to Lane’s challenge to political scientists and political theorists to pursue a less state-centric study of politics, what she calls the “wider shores” of politics (2004):

“[I]f we accept the fact that political experience is present in everyday human relationships, then the field of political science . . . expands in interesting ways. Individuals, with all their idiosyncrasies, replace abstract, neutral citizens; a wide assortment of human behavior, from the high-spirited to the underhanded, replaces the right to vote; and individual self-government replaces state-centered hierarchical control. Such a viewpoint replaces an abstract and skeletal political system with fully defined political people, participating in environments that, while having no direct relation to the state and its institutions, are nevertheless political . . . .” (Lane, 2004, p. 460).

I would suggest that political scientist instructors who are interested in exploring these “wider shores” of politics – as well as those who are interested in promoting civic engagement among their students – can benefit much from LC collaboration.<sup>11</sup> In the process, we contribute to spreading the study of politics across the curriculum.

As with topic coverage and writing assignments, my participation in LCs did not significantly alter the reading assignments developed in my stand-alone AG courses. Required course books in my AG courses have typically included a standard American government textbook and a second supplementary “non-traditional” text that has usually been journalistic and/or civic action-oriented in nature.<sup>12</sup> The effect of LC collaboration was instead the wider and fuller exploration of political themes especially as my own required course readings interacted with my English colleagues’ assigned texts. Let me discuss two specific examples of this required reading “cross-fertilization” from two of my LC experiences. (In the three LCs that I do not discuss in this sub-section on reading assignments, my American government supplemental texts – Kozol’s *Amazing Grace* (1996), Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed* (2001), and Featherstone’s *Selling Women Short* – all provided the basis for lively discussions and integrated writing assignment options within the respective LCs.)

In my first three-course LC, the supplementary text that I assigned for “my” class was Kingsolver’s (1989 and 1996) journalistic account of a little known case study of women’s involvement in labor mobilization during the 1980s: *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983*.<sup>13</sup> One main text used by my English colleague in that LC was *Push* by Sapphire (1996), a novel about a semi-literate young woman facing multiple individual and societal challenges (that was later made into the movie, *Precious*). The combination and interaction of these two books concretely illustrated for students how politics is imbedded in

personal relationships and how political struggle can take different forms. The activist women in  *Holding the Line*  were mostly wives of male miners and the community they formed with each other was personally transformative even if the final political outcome of their mobilization was mixed. While the fictional  *Push*  is less overtly “political,” like  *Holding the Line* , it focuses on a long struggle for empowerment against overwhelming odds. Both books highlight the resources – in these cases, literacy and collective action (among others) – which oppressed individuals and communities can utilize in their struggles. While students in my stand-alone AG courses are also introduced to some of these same themes (in the textbook chapter on social movements, for example) the combination – and vivid story-telling – of  *Holding the Line*  and  *Push*  in that first LC permitted comparisons, connections, and greater overall emphasis on these particular political themes. As noted earlier, student papers also responded to and referenced these readings.

In a later LC, my supplementary text was Gonzalez’s  *Harvest of Empire*  (2000 and 2011) and the texts used by my English colleague included Hirsch’s  *Cultural Literacy*  (1988) and O’Hearn’s edited collection,  *Half and Half*  (1998) (as well as the student choice of Sapphire’s  *Push*  [1996] or Rodriguez’s  *Hunger of Memory*  [1983]). In this LC, my English colleague helped students to focus on the politics of language by evaluating different types and functions of literacy. This emphasis on language directly related to Gonzalez’s chapter on the “English-only” versus multilingualism language debate in the U.S. While I had used the Gonzalez book several times previously in my stand-alone American government (and other) courses, in this LC I was able for the first time to engage Gonzalez’s arguments about contemporary language (and cultural) debates knowing that students had additional troves of knowledge and insight from their readings of Hirsch and O’Hearn.<sup>14</sup> The exploration of this political theme is especially valuable and interesting in the teaching context of Northeastern Illinois University given that approximately one-half of NEIU students speak English as a second or other language.

## **REASONS FOR MORE POLITICAL SCIENTISTS TO JOIN UP**

Why should more political scientists get involved with learning communities? As it happens, Thies (2005, p. 130-132) has directly addressed this question, so a large part of my discussion below (outlined, researched, and drafted before I read the Thies article) is a reinforcement of what has been previously well-argued. My first set of rationales for political science involvement in LCs is not specific to our, or any other, discipline. Participation in LCs makes sense for instructors, first of all, because LCs make it more likely that their students will stay in class, participate more, and learn more. As the special issue of  *Peer Review*  devoted to LCs stated, “The broad appeal of learning communities is easily understood from the research, which presents mounting evidence of their positive impact on student retention, achievement, and involvement” (Tritelli, 2001, p. 3). Love reviews some of the findings that support this conclusion (1999, 3), and I will report on some of the findings from the NEIU LC program assessment in the next section. A second general argument for faculty involvement in LCs is the professional refreshment they provide for experienced professors and the faculty development opportunity that they offer for all instructors (Eby, 2001, p. 31; Pastors et al., 2004, p. 42; Huerta, 2004, p. 295; and Thies, 2005, p. 131-132). In my particular case, participating in LCs has strengthened my relationships with outstanding teachers and “politically-oriented” colleagues outside my department; reminded me of the benefits of peer consultation for both faculty and students; educated me about other disciplinary languages; and accelerated my

progress in incorporating learning technologies such as Blackboard and discussion boards into my classes.

But political scientists also have three particular reasons to consider participating in LCs. First, political science courses in LCs are likely to significantly shape the themes and content of the LC of which they are a part. As the Drake University, Texas A&M-Corpus Christi, and NEIU models suggest (and as Thies's review supports), introductory political science courses in LCs are often combined with courses like English composition and first year seminars. While cross-fertilization in LCs alters each linked course and can enrich all participants, the content-heavy nature of political science courses is likely to strongly affect the appearance, substance, taste, and nutrition of the LC hybrids. The theme titles of my five LCs illustrate the influence of political science content on the integrated LCs: "Community, Identity, and the Struggle for Meaningful Democracy," "Class, Gender, and Politics," "Becoming Students and Citizens," "Democracy and Education," and "Researching Democracy in the United States." Even when political science is teamed with courses other than writing or college study skills, political content appears likely to be the "first among equals" in developing LC foci. For example, in the final LC of the nationally renowned four-LC sequence for first year students at the New Century College at George Mason University, the LC combining four social science credits, three literature credits, and one fine arts credit was titled "Self as Citizen" (Eby, 2001, p 28).

At the same time, the influence of political science content in LCs should not be overstated or over-prized. Indeed, I would suggest that if the disciplinary language of political science were to become hegemonic in an LC, the benefits for political science instructors would greatly decline. This leads me to the second benefit of LC participation for political science instructors: the opportunity to learn about politics from colleagues and discourses in other disciplines. Through my collaboration with English colleagues, I have learned that the field of English composition (or at least one of the dominant currents within that field) – far from being solely focused on the teaching of writing "skills" – has a disciplinary language all its own. This discourse – centered on literacy and the politics of literacy – has broadened my own understanding of politics and has assisted me in my long-time interest in extending my teaching of politics into other important areas of social life. Thus, my experience of LC collaboration has demonstrated to me that LCs have the potential to be a positive-sum game for all parties involved if the faculty partners, to use Eby's terms, are willing to develop "disciplinary self-awareness" and to "become learners" of the languages of other disciplines (Eby, 2001, p. 29).

Finally, since LCs are often structured to help freshmen students with basic skills such as writing, political science instructors gain from participation in LCs because it allows them to give more effective and coordinated attention to teaching these skills than is the case when we teach political science content courses on a stand-alone basis. As Huerta (2004: 295) and others have noted, when political science courses are teamed with English composition and/or college study skills courses, it means that political science instructors are receiving professional assistance in helping students with library research, outlining, drafting and revising papers, source citation, etc. At the same time, such collaboration also allows political science instructors to have some influence on tailoring the teaching of these skills to the needs and norms of social science. So, once again, the effects and benefits of LC collaboration are multi-directional. My acquisition of new methods for teaching writing through collaboration with LC colleagues on joint writing assignments may be similar to the experience of political science instructors who develop "unconventional and creative writing assignments" in political science courses that are part of "writing across the curriculum" or "writing in the disciplines" programs (Sherman and

Waismel-Manor, 2003, p. 755). I might add, as a final note, that since political science instructors in LCs have assistance from their partners in teaching skills such as writing, it may mean that on occasion more (rather than less) time is freed up for teaching political science content and for further heightening the demands of the course.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, some LCs succeed more than others just like some stand-alone classes succeed more than others. One of the special problems of LCs is the tendency, noted in an article by a sociologist who has taught in LCs, of student cohorts to build such strong communication networks with each other that the instructors become “outsiders” and the LC “may inadvertently create conditions that potentially retard the students’ academic development.” This dynamic seemed to occur in one of the five LCs in which I have participated that revolved around a cohort of pre-education students who stayed together in multiple linked courses over several consecutive semesters. Given the emphasis on student participation in LCs, some instructors are more capable than others of making them successful (Jaffee, 2004). Also, as Eby suggests, LCs may not work well for teachers who are deeply and defensively invested in the discourses and boundaries of their discipline (Eby, 2001, p. 29-30).

### **STUDENT ADVANCEMENT?**

To repeat an introductory note, this article aims to contribute to the growing conversation among political scientists about LCs by offering a question-directed report of my experiences as a political science instructor who has participated in LCs. In this final section, I will briefly address the important question of assessment. The initial assessment of LCs at my institution emphasized broad program assessment – conducted by NEIU political scientist (and former Acting Dean of NEIU’s College of Arts and Sciences) Charles Pastors – rather than the assessment of individual LCs. Unfortunately, because of non-comprehensive administration of pre-tests/post-tests in my department, I do not have the data to make a systematic comparison of student outcomes in my AG courses taught inside and outside LCs. Thus, in the first part of this section, I will report on the results of LC program assessment at NEIU. In the second part, I will note the results (limited but positive) from standard pre-tests/post tests administered in two of the AG-LC courses that I taught and offer a few suggestive observations on student outcomes in another of my AG-LC courses based on a simple pre- and post- “citizenship” survey that was conducted in that LC-integrated class.

According to Shapiro and Levine’s review (2001) of LC assessment findings at six colleges and universities around the nation, LCs promote “achievement and retention,” “intellectual and social development,” and “student involvement”. What were the findings at my institution? Pastors’ analysis of the NEIU LC program was based on pre- and post-surveys of NEIU students who participated in LCs during the 2002-2003 and 2003-2004 academic years. This survey included a long list of questions related to student engagement and academic development. In addition, semester-to-semester student tracking analysis of student enrollment conducted by NEIU’s institutional studies director compared students who took general education courses, such as American government, as part of LCs and students who took general education courses, such as American government, outside LCs. On the critical matter of student persistence (sometimes called student retention), this tracking analysis has demonstrated – consistent with the findings at other institutions – that students who took general education courses in LCs were more likely than the average general education student to persist as full-time students to the next semester and to the following academic year (Pastors et al., 2004, p. 41).

But, besides helping to keep students in school, what are the effects of LCs on the academic development of students? While the findings here are tentative and limited, what we have learned from Pastors' analysis is encouraging. In the fall 2003 surveys of comparable students in matched LC and non-LC general education courses, LC students self-reported being two to seven times more likely than non-LC students to have "studied with others; participated in class discussions; coped with test anxiety; sought feedback from instructors; evaluated opinions and facts; took notes; and improved writing, reading, and decision-making skills (Pastors et al. 2004, 41)." These findings – especially the group study and class participation items – correspond to Huerta's findings at Texas A&M-Corpus Christi (2004: 294). LC students at NEIU also rated themselves more highly than did comparable non-LC students on "understanding faculty expectations" and "succeeding in other courses generally" (Pastors et al., 2004, p. 41-42).

In a separate preliminary analysis of NEIU students within LCs, Pastors' comparison of "first (family member) in college" students with "non-first in college" students indicates even greater self-perceived gains among "first in college" LC students on important items such as "academic ability," "confident in my research skills" and "know how to study effectively" (Pastors and Leaman, 2005). This tentative finding of benefits for first generation college students suggests the valuable role LCs may play for institutions like NEIU that have a large proportion of "first in college" students and for the broader goal of further democratizing American higher education.

Regarding political science learning in my particular AG-LC courses, the assessment data again is limited but positive. Results of the department's standard multiple-choice pre- and post-tests administered in my first and fourth AG-LC courses indicate that student knowledge of the American political system increased by taking these courses.<sup>16</sup> In the first AG-LC course, average student scores increased by 15% over the course of the semester and in the second AG-LC for which there is data, the increase was 20%. Encouragingly, since the questions on this pre-post assessment instrument are focused on the "nuts and bolts" of American government institutions and formal political processes, these increases indicate that students in LCs are gaining knowledge about traditional topics of American government courses even as the LC extends the study of politics well beyond the content covered in this multiple-choice test.

One of my goals as a teacher of American government is to encourage students to think about the meaning of "citizenship" and the possibilities of participation. This goal became the central focus of the third LC in which I participated, "Becoming Students and Citizens." In that LC, my colleagues and I administered a short pre- and post-written survey that first asked students to rate themselves on a scale of 1-5 (1 being "not at all" and 5 being "perfectly") on how well they thought they understood the concept of "citizenship" in four different areas: their government, their personal life, their being a student at NEIU, and their neighborhood. Second, students were asked – in an open-ended question – how they would define citizenship.

Not surprisingly, the results of this survey showed that students at the end of the course thought of themselves as more knowledgeable about citizenship in all four areas. As the teacher of American government in the LC, what was most encouraging in these results was that the biggest jump in student self-assessment of their knowledge of citizenship was in the area of government (from a mean of 2.95 to a mean of 3.77). The other nearly as big jump was in the area of being a student at NEIU (from 3.05 to 3.86). These results not only reflected the two-part theme of the LC, "Becoming Students and Citizens," they also suggested that "government" had not become a secondary focus within the LC even though students were constantly crossing and

blurring disciplinary, local/national, and personal/political boundaries. Responding to the open-ended question about how they would define citizenship, only two of the twenty-two students on the entry survey made mention of political participation and/or government (even though “government” was one of the specified areas in question 1). On the exit survey, by contrast, at least nine of the students made specific mentions of political participation and/or government in their responses.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH**

First, as suggested in the previous section, one area for future research for political scientists teaching in learning communities is comparative assessment of student outcomes, both knowledge acquisition and writing skills, in stand-alone political science courses and in political science courses that are part of learning communities. At my own institution, the learning communities program has evolved into an innovative, multi-disciplinary First Year Experience (FYE) program that engages students on Chicago-related themes across many subjects. My research in this article suggests the importance of systematic assessment that compares the performance of students in political science FYE courses with first year students in other introductory political science courses. Second, this article’s discussion of teaching politics across the curriculum is intimately bound up with even broader discussions, at my institution and across American higher education, of more integrative general education. As political science teachers and other educators participate in reforms of general education, I expect that the lessons and conclusions of this article can make a positive contribution, and can also spawn future research about the role of political scientists in promoting integrative liberal education.

## **CONCLUSION**

Involvement in learning communities locates political science instructors and departments on the side of those who are promoting more integrated and socially engaged liberal education. The very act of teaching political science courses in LCs has the desirable effect of helping to spread the study of politics across the curriculum. As I have discussed, my experience teaching introductory American government in five different LCs has not required or led me to make dramatic changes in my course topics, tests, and texts. In fact, political science content has always deeply shaped the organizing themes and content of the LCs in which I have participated. At the same time, the combination and interaction of my political science readings and assignments with those of my LC teaching partners has offered both students and instructors greater opportunities to more fully explore the pervasiveness and significance of politics in different areas of human identity and activity. So, the spread of the study of politics flows in multiple directions.

The wider reading and study of politics also has the effect of shining more light on the possibilities for political action in both formal institutions as well as in other arenas of every day life. In this way, the goals of greater learning and of greater democracy are joined in the LC movement. Keeping in mind Theda Skocpol’s challenge to political scientists in her 2003 APSA Presidential Address to actively participate in “civic revitalization” (Skocpol, 2004, p. 12-13), political scientists have more than one good reason to increase their involvement in the movements toward more integrated education.

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> The Sanders LC, made up mostly of Honors students, also had a residential component as most of the students were intentionally clustered in the same student housing area (Sanders 2000, 207, 210).

<sup>3</sup> As Huerta reported, this LC model has had both a “Tetrad” version (including another large lecture course like U.S. History) and the more successful “Triad” version that was the focus of the article (Huerta 2004).

<sup>4</sup> While LCs are usually inter-disciplinary and are often oriented to general education (as in the Sanders, Huerta, and NEIU models), Botteron and Grove (2005) demonstrate that LCs can also link courses within a particular discipline as in their pairing of Research Methods and Comparative Politics within the curriculum of their political science department. According to Botteron and Grove, their LC was motivated by the formidable challenge of teaching research methods to political science undergraduates.

<sup>5</sup> Two specific examples of LCs involving political science courses at the first LC conference I attended (the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Learning Communities Conference, Chicago, IL, November 17-19, 1999) were presented by faculty from McKendree (Lebanon, IL) College and Brookhaven (Farmer’s Branch, TX) College.

<sup>6</sup> Two of the four stand-alone AG courses I taught during this period were limited to Honors students. While this introduces a new variable, I include them as AG courses in part because the sizes of these Honors courses were in fact more comparable to my AG-LC courses. The two “regular” AG classes, on the other hand, were roughly twice as large (approximately 40 students) as the AG-LC classes and the AG Honors courses.

<sup>7</sup> Sanders similarly found that his participation in an LC did not dramatically change the content of his introductory American government course (Sanders 2000, 208).

<sup>8</sup> While I have not administered a formal comparative assessment of writing products in my AG and AG-LC classes, I have a strong impression that the overall quality of the final essays in the AG-LC courses was higher than in the two regular AG courses that I taught during this period. I am less certain of this difference when it comes to the two AG Honors courses that I taught, so it is possible that the difference in writing quality is as much the result of class size and the starting point of students as it is of the LC effect.

<sup>9</sup> One way that we instructors tried to reinforce the integrated theme of this three-course LC was to relate the college study skills concept of “internal vs. external locus of control” with the notions of “active vs. passive voice” in Writing I and “participatory vs. elite democracy” in my American government class.

<sup>10</sup> Referring to this overlap and integration of course themes and assignments, one student wrote at the end of the learning community, the American government “class was fun when we could connect it to English.”

<sup>11</sup> Examples of learning communities spreading the study – and democratic citizenship emphasis – of politics across the curriculum can be found in the early history of the LC movement and in diverse higher education locations. One of the historical LC models oft cited by current LC advocates – the Meiklejohn Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin in the 1920s – “looked at the roots of democracy and issues facing twentieth-century America (Smith 2001, 5).” As Smith states, “Early learning communities... were concerned with the role schools play in preparing students for responsible citizenship” and the resurgence of the movement in the 1960s and 1970s

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was influenced by the civil rights and women's movements (2001, 7). Another analysis by scholarly advocates of LCs (neither of whom are political scientists) cites political theorist Benjamin Barber's discussion of "communal" and "community-based" citizenship education in *An Aristocracy of Everyone* as a strong rationale for LCs (Oates and O'Connor 2001, 13). The emphasis on civic engagement is at the center of various learning community programs, including the Michigan Community Scholars Program (Schoem 2001).

<sup>12</sup> For my argument on the pedagogical benefits of using journalistic, testimonial, and literary texts in all kinds of political science courses (not just introductory general education courses), see Leaman (2005).

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, my knowledge of Kingsolver's first book  *Holding the Line*  came from a conversation with a different English colleague. Kingsolver, of course, has since become much better known as a novelist.

<sup>14</sup> Sanders (2000, 211) also reports on the benefits of the interplay of readings in different LC courses.

<sup>15</sup> Sanders (2000, 208) argues that participation in LCs can in fact allow political science instructors to ratchet up the intellectual demands of their course (2000, 208) and Thies (2005, 131) suggests that some students may, happily or unhappily, agree.

<sup>16</sup> Pre-tests/post-tests have not been comprehensively administered in my department which is why I have results from two, but not all, of my AG-LCs.