

CCSJ's Learning Community Program

What is CCSJ's Learning Community program?

The **Learning Community Program** is one of the major elements of CCSJ's **CORE** (Centering on Retention and Enrollment) **Initiative**. It is the main component of a General Education student support structure which also includes *an orientation course* for all incoming freshman (*College Survival*) and *a General Education capstone course* that assesses the success of their general education.

The Learning Community Program provides first-time freshman with the extra academic and social support needed to ensure success in college. The program has three main elements: 1) an academic structure of linked courses and supplemental instruction; 2) a mentoring program of faculty and staff who closely monitor student progress; and 3) a calendar of cultural and social outings.

1) **The Linked Courses.** Each learning community consists of a group of 20 students who move together through a set of three linked courses per semester. Professors with linked courses work together to build interconnected learning units and assignments. They collaborate closely, designing ways to reinforce and enhance one another's individual class goals.

CCSJ's *Supplemental Instructor Program* provides some Learning Community courses with a supplemental instructor. The supplemental instructor is a student who has already completed and excelled in the chosen course. On a weekly basis, this "model student" attends class, helps the instructor field student questions, and leads out of class study sessions.

2) **The Mentor Program.** Each student in the learning community is assigned a specific mentor. The mentor contacts students regularly, monitoring their progress. They help students overcome the variety of obstacles to doing successful college work. Through periodic meetings with the learning community instructors, the mentors keep instructors apprised of the home, work, and life challenges that the student faces.

3) **The Social Calendar.** At the beginning of each semester, each CCSJ Learning Community plans a calendar of enriched co-curricular activities, including educational, cultural, and social events. These activities provide students with opportunities to build relationships with professors and make friends with other students in enjoyable group settings.

What are the benefits of a Learning Community?

With the other components of the colleges CORE or General Education Program, the Learning Community program helps insure the student's success in college. Specifically,

the program provides students with opportunities for a deeper understanding of the subject matter of the students' courses in a supportive learning environment. In traditional college programs, each course that a student attends is made up of a different mix of students. At a commuter college such as CCSJ, the change of classmates makes it difficult for students to develop a supportive community.

The Learning Community Program helps students develop the sense of community necessary for academic success. It provides a sense of belonging to the college and to other students who share the common goal of learning. There are several specific benefits of the program:

- Enriched social and learning environment
- Enhanced intellectual and social development
- Opportunity to form strong bonds with peers and faculty
- Increased student involvement and motivation
- Access to shared cultural activities
- Service learning opportunities in the community
- Increased tolerance and respect for other students

ACADEMIC PROGRAM OF LINKED COURSES

For their first and second semesters all full-time, day students are automatically enrolled in the Learning Community Program. The Learning Community linked courses for the fall and spring semesters include the following:

Fall Semester

RLST 110A Social Justice
ENG 103A Rhetoric and Composition I
CMIS 115 Computer Literacy

Spring Semester

RLST 130 Introduction to Religious Studies
ENG 104 Rhetoric and Composition II
MFA 150 Speech Communication

The fall semester of linked courses teaches students the self-management and study skills, the fundamentals of academic writing, and the basic computer literacy needed to succeed in college. The spring semester provides students with basic research writing and oral communication skills and introduces them to the role of religion in the search for life's meaning.

Content links between these courses vary according to the participating instructors. All instructors have the responsibility to prepare and deliver course content to students using

a variety of effective teaching methods and to assess student learning both as the course proceeds (formative assessment) and at its conclusion (summative assessment).

In each of CCSJ's Learning Communities, instructors also have several additional responsibilities:

- to **develop and execute specific and substantive “content links”** between learning community courses and attend linked courses when appropriate.
- to **use supplemental instructors effectively** in the classroom and **help the supplemental instructor plan useful study sessions.**
- to **attend regularly scheduled Learning Community meetings** where instructors can brief mentors about particular student problems and mentors can in turn brief instructors about student issues effective classroom performance
- to help **plan and participate in the learning community's social calendar** of enriched co-curricular events.

The **Supplemental Instruction Program** is an academic support program that increases student's performance and retention. The program provides **peer-assisted study sessions** to aid students in traditionally difficult academic courses. The weekly study sessions are led by a supplemental instructor, a “model student” who helps students to master course content and to practice effective study skills.

The supplemental instructor is a student who has excelled in the course and is thoroughly prepared to share what he/she has learned about studying effectively. The supplemental instructor does not re-lecture or introduce new material; rather, he/she attends all scheduled classes with the students for that designated course. The supplemental instructor is a “peer facilitator,” who structures and leads study sessions for one learning community group.

Supplemental instructors must meet several criteria:

- The student must currently be **enrolled at CCSJ.**
- The student must possess a cumulative **3.0 GPA.**
- The student must have **already completed the course** and received a **grade of “B”** or better.
- The student must display an ability to **work well with people.**
- The student should be involved in no more than **two other extracurricular activities.**

A Supplemental Instruction Session is an **out-of-class study session** provided for some linked courses to improve understanding of the course material and students grades. A SI session is an opportunity for the student to review lecture notes, clarify difficult concepts, discuss ideas, and study for a test as a group. During the study session, the supplemental

instructor models a variety of study strategies (e.g. note taking skills, graphic organization of material, effective questioning techniques, vocabulary acquisition skills, and test prediction and preparation).

If a student is struggling or has the potential to slip beneath the bar for achieving a satisfactory grade (C), faculty should **require** the student to attend supplemental instruction study sessions. All sessions will normally correspond with class lectures; depending on group size, sessions can also be individually tailored to the student.

MENTORING PROGRAM

CCSJ's CORE or General Education Program is committed to providing students the extra support needed for college success. The centerpiece of this support is the **Learning Community Mentoring Program**. The mentoring program helps students adjust to and succeed in college by providing them with guidance, support, and a greater understanding of/linkage to the resources and opportunities available to them.

Mentors include staff and faculty of the college who are assigned a designated group of students because they have an understanding of the purpose of the Learning Community and their role as a mentor and because they have agreed to assume this role.

Mentors are expected to:

- 1) Meet with their mentees on the scheduled orientation day to introduce themselves, describe their role, disseminate/exchange contact information, get to know their mentees, and set the time frame for the first follow-up contact.
- 2) Review their mentees' portfolios to obtain general background, assessment, and educational information that may be helpful in guiding them.
- 3) Help mentees complete all items on the Orientation Checklist (see attached) by the first week of class, if they did not do so during the formal orientation period
- 4) Make contact with mentees bi-weekly during the first month of the semester to "touch base" on their adjustment to the college and/or to assist with any issues they may be confronting. Contact can take the form of a phone call, email, or face-to-face meeting depending on the needs, schedule, and desires of the mentees and mentor.
- 5) At a minimum, meet face-to-face with the mentee at the end of each month during the first semester to "check in" on their progress/challenges in their program (courses, peers, life, etc.); offer guidance, support, referrals as needed; and remind them of upcoming co-curricular activities in the college that may be of interest to them. Additional contacts may be arranged based on the needs of the mentee and mentor.

- 6) Retain brief notes (1-2 lines) on the nature of their contacts with their mentees for reference, and in the event a transfer to another mentor is required.
- 7) Attend Learning Community meetings to provide a brief update on the status of their work with their mentees.
- 8) Participate in an end of semester debriefing/evaluation session to reflect on the mentor role/component of the LC program.
- 9) Maintain a linkage with their mentees during the second and third semesters when the potential for drop out is high.
- 10) Celebrate successes with mentees.

Mentor-Mentee Reassignments. In the event there appears to be a better “fit” between a mentor and a mentee than those assigned, changes in assignments can be made. The assigned mentor and the new mentor need only communicate with each other about the need for a change and coordinate the transfer process.

The transfer process involves confirming the change with the new mentor, sharing relevant information that has transpired to date (including the student’s portfolio), and notifying the person who made the original assignment of the change.

THE LEARNING COMMUNITY SOCIAL CALENDAR

The **Learning Community Social Calendar** is a calendar of enriched co-curricular activities that helps build a sense of community and belonging among students, faculty, staff, supplemental instructors, and mentors. It provides the social support students need to weather difficult times in their first year of college.

Under the leadership of a Social Calendar Coordinator, faculty and mentors develop the calendar at the beginning of each semester. Calendar activities vary, ranging from simple communal lunches in the college’s Black Box Theater lobby and barbecues on the college’s lawn to more adventurous outings to local social and church missions and field trips to Chicago-area plays, art museums, and cultural events.