

## Ten Years Later: Reflections on the Founding of the International Learning Community

(Remarks Prepared for the Opening Convocation of the ILC, Sept. 12, 2002)

I'd like to thank Ruben for inviting me to speak at this year's opening convocation and to welcome you all at the start of the new academic year. This is a special year for us, as we are celebrating the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ILC. To mark the occasion, Ruben has asked me to share my recollections of its founding. To do so, I'd like to sketch a brief history of learning communities on campus and to mention several earlier programs which, in one way or another, served as building blocks for the ILC.

But first, let's begin by asking, just what IS a learning community? What did we mean by the term ten years ago, and what meaning does it have for you today ?

My notion of a learning community was always a rather simple one: A learning community is a place where you can strengthen learning through community and build community through learning.

In a learning community, education doesn't stop when the bell rings. Debating ideas over dinner; practicing a foreign language with your roommate; becoming friends with someone from a different culture; getting to know faculty outside of class—these are some of the ways that you can build connections between your classroom hours and your after hours in the ILC.

By the same token, roundtable dinners, student-faculty conversations, and special events planned throughout the academic year can all contribute to the creation of a purposeful community.

The following characteristics, I think, are essential for any successful learning community:

1. A residential component
2. A common focus
3. A set of common activities for students
4. The involvement of faculty

Today there are eight such learning communities on campus geared to a variety of interests; but that wasn't always the case.

Let me take you back 85 years to 1927, when the first residential learning community appeared at the UW-Madison. It was located in Adams Hall, where your home is today, and it was called the Experimental College. It may well have been the first program of its kind in the United States. Its founder was Alexander Meiklejohn. As you pass through the gate to Adams Hall, you may have noticed a plaque on the wall honoring Meiklejohn and his college. I'd like to tell you a little about it.

-Meiklejohn was a philosopher, though he wasn't much of a diplomat—he was fired as the President of Amherst for his radical views on education;

-He came to Wisconsin in 1926 with the idea of establishing a new experiment in living and learning: a residential college.

-The students jokingly referred to themselves as “Guinea Pigs” in the experiment. They were all men (because in those days you couldn't have men and women living in the same dorm).

-The college differed in many ways from the rest of the campus: it had its own faculty, and some of them lived in Adams Hall with the students; all classes were held in the dormitory.

-The college also had its own curriculum, which focused on the history and ideas of western culture, starting with the Greeks

-All the students took all the courses. Essentially they spent their freshman and sophomore years immersed in the program, after which they transferred out to the College of Letters and Science to complete a major. Meiklejohn defined his college as “a group of people, all of whom are reading the same books.”

-So you had everyone in the program living together and studying the same subjects, with conversations carrying over into the dining hall and throughout the dormitory later in the evenings.

-The experiment was radical in other ways, too: there were no tests or grades. Instead, faculty wrote individual evaluations of each student at the end of the year based on that student's intellectual growth.

-Meiklejohn's goal was to produce better informed citizens with critical thinking skills who would develop an interest in lifelong learning.

Did it work? Yes, it did.

-The students loved the Experimental College, but it lasted only 5 years. Why it failed is an interesting story, but I'll leave that for another occasion. Suffice it to say that some of its features were difficult to sustain and that Meiklejohn made a number of enemies on campus who, when the time came, were glad to see him go. And it would be more than 60 years before the University of Wisconsin would see its like again.

Even so, the Experimental College set the pattern for residential learning communities of the future. It lowered the barrier between the classroom and the residence hall. It introduced the goal of integrating undergraduate education with student life.

Now, if I may interject a little of my own history, I became aware of Meiklejohn's experiment in the early 1980s when I chaired a committee to revise the Integrated Liberal Studies Program. I did not know at the time that ILS had started as an offshoot of the Experimental College. The Experimental College had closed during the Depression. Integrated Liberal Studies came into being after the Second World War—but it was the brainchild of several faculty who years earlier had taught in the Experimental College.

Its aim in fact was to recreate the curriculum of the college through an integrated set of courses tracing the development of Western Culture. However, in key respects, ILS differed from the Experimental College: the

program didn't have a separate faculty, its grading practices were traditional, and it didn't have a residential component. The students lived wherever they lived and took courses just as they would from any department.

Still, the program enjoyed a reputation for excellent teaching and was popular for the next 30 years. Then it ran into trouble. There were various reasons for its decline, including the retirement of the founding faculty, all within a few years of each other. The upshot was that the dean of Letters & Science recommended closing ILS. A committee was appointed to review the situation, and then another committee was appointed to see if the program could be reinvigorated. Somehow I became its chair. It was 1981, and at that time, I was a young, idealistic, associate professor of English. I had just gone through the grueling tenure process, and I was looking for something different to do for a year while I tried to catch my breath.

Well, I never did catch my breath, but we succeeded in revising the program and finding new faculty to teach in it, and, I am happy to say, the program continues to this day. But that is not why I am telling you this story. Here's why:

When the alumni of the Experimental College heard that the ILS Program was in danger of closing, they became very active in supporting it. They wrote letters to the dean and visited the campus to lobby those of us who were revising the program. That's when I first learned about the Experimental College—first hand, from its former students, who were now old men. And the more I heard from these impassioned alumni, the more interested I became. I couldn't get over the fact that after half a century, they were still passionately excited about what had happened in their freshman year in college. Surely that was extraordinary.

Getting to know those wonderful old codgers changed my life. From that moment on, I became intrigued by the notion of residential learning communities. Why not try the idea, or something like it, again? Unfortunately, the time wasn't yet ripe. My colleagues in the new ILS Program felt they had enough on their plates as it was, and the folks in housing weren't drawn to the idea yet, either. And so a decade passed.

Things changed in the 1990s, thanks in part to then Chancellor David Ward. Ward had asked the Division of Residence Life how it was contributing to the academic mission of the university. As a result, a group began meeting

in 1993 to consider ways of enhancing student services in the residence halls. Several faculty were added to the committee in 1994, and out of those deliberations came the blueprint for the Bradley Learning Community. Bradley was, and remains today, a program for first year students; its focus is on the transition from high school to college life. When Bradley opened in 1995, it was the first residential learning community on campus since the closing of the Experimental College in 1932. I served as director, and many of the faculty fellows in that first year were drawn from ILS.

It's interesting to note that while we were planning Bradley, we discussed the Experimental College, but the committee never contemplated giving Bradley a separate curriculum—that idea seemed impractical at the time, and it still does. Instead, during the first years of the new experiment, we tried different models for faculty-student interaction. We offered special courses; we held office hours in the dorm; we reserved seats in our regular classes for Bradley residents. The results were mixed. What seemed to work best was the Roundtable dinner format, combining a social occasion with discussions as faculty and students shared a communal meal. That model since has been exported to other learning communities, including the ILC.

Which brings us to the present. You now have a thumbnail sketch of the relevant campus history prior to the creation of the ILC. Here's what I recall happened next.

Based on the positive response to Bradley, the folks in housing began to explore other designs for residential learning communities. I had several discussions on that subject with Kay Reuter-Krohn from the Division of Residence Life. She and I had worked closely together on Bradley, and now, as it happened, I had become an associate dean of international studies. It wasn't long before we started talking about a learning community with an international theme.

There was already a fledgling program in existence called the Global Village, but it was limited in scope. It housed about 30 international students in a small dormitory called Merit House. Gwen Drury from Residence Life had set up the program, and Joe Elder was its faculty adviser. Now, Joe and I were old friends. We had been colleagues in ILS and Bradley, and we had collaborated on setting up the Global Cultures Program. We were both enthusiastic about learning communities.

And that was the genesis of the ILC: Kay, Joe, and I began meeting in 2001. The first plan on our drawing board didn't fly. The idea was to expand the program in Merit House, but the other residents, who were mainly graduate students, resisted the idea of moving out to make room for undergraduates. In the end, that was fortunate: we never would have had room to grow had we stayed in Merit House. After a number of meetings, we dropped that idea and started thinking along new lines.

With the encouragement of Paul Evans, the Director of Residence Life, we decided to move the program to Adams Hall, to rename it The International Learning Community, and to follow the model that had worked for Bradley. By the way, when I told the remaining alumni of the Experimental College—those few who were still living then were well into their nineties—that there was going to be a new learning community in Adams Hall, they were delighted.

Originally we had four goals for the ILC:

- 1) To attract both domestic and international students.
- 2) To promote study abroad.
- 3) To involve faculty who would provide educational opportunities.
- 4) To focus on cross-cultural learning.

Notice that I didn't mention anything about language programs under those goals. So, how did the current language houses become a distinctive feature of the ILC? Frankly, it happened because of a lucky coincidence.

During the planning year, we learned of an independent effort by the German Department to establish a language floor for its students in one of the residence halls. But at the time, the German Department didn't know about the ILC, and the ILC didn't know about the German Department's plans.

It was logical to combine efforts and propose a partnership, and that's what happened. Chalk it up to serendipity.

And so the International Learning Community opened in 2002 with 63 students, six faculty fellows, and one language house. The original faculty included Ruben Medina (Spanish), Joe Elder (Sociology). Harold Scheub

(African Languages and Literature), Alda Blanco (Spanish), and Herb Wang (Geography). Venkat Mani directed the Stockwerk Deutsch. Our program coordinator was Armando Mejia, and our residence life director was Cindy Havens.

Now, ten years later, the ILC has doubled its number of students, doubled its faculty fellows and house fellows, and increased its language immersion programs from one to seven: German, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, Russian, Arabic, and Nordic languages; next year, I understand the program will add Portuguese. In our first year, we attracted only a handful of international students; this year about 30% of the residents are international students, which brings us closer to one of our original goals.

Although I retired from the university in 2005, it has been very gratifying for me to watch the program grow and prosper under the leadership of Ruben Medina and to witness the participation of new faculty in the ILC. I'd also like to take this opportunity to thank Kay Reuter-Krohn and Paul Evans for their continued support over the years. That support has been invaluable.

So congratulations and happy tenth anniversary to all of you in the ILC! It occurs to me that The Experimental College, as important as it was, lasted only 5 years—we've already doubled its longevity, and I hope that the ILC program will continue to serve students for many years to come.

This evening, when you return to Adams Hall, take a look at that plaque commemorating the Experimental College, and give a thought to the faculty and students of a bygone era who paved the way for the learning communities of today.

Thanks to Meiklejohn's experiment in Adams Hall, The University of Wisconsin occupies a unique position in the history of learning communities in America. That history is still being written, and you—the students, faculty, and staff of the ILC, are a part of it. Good luck to you all, and have a wonderful year!

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