Conceptual Framework
Themes of a Learning Community

It is part of the human condition that we strive simultaneously to be self-sufficient individuals and effective members of larger social communities. Although we value personal autonomy, we are ultimately social creatures who need each other not only for companionship but also to bring meaning to our lives. It is through our connections with others—our shared decision-making, our common purpose, and our support for each other's growth—that we satisfy our needs as humans.

A growing body of research supports the view that learning occurs best in communities. A learning community is a special kind of community that is created through a culture of collaboration and continuous improvement, and comes into being when everyone involved in the learning process shares a commitment to learning. Because the concept of learning community has been used in many different contexts, it must have a specific meaning before it can be a unifying theme. Our learning community is characterized by the following elements:

- Integration of Ideas
  - Members of a learning community look beyond the traditionally subject-oriented curriculum and think about the interrelationships among and between subject areas. They work with a variety of fields of study and search for unifying themes that cross disciplinary lines. There is an emphasis on explaining realities and bringing differing kinds of knowledge to bear on dealing with actual problems.

- Cooperative Endeavors
  - In a learning community knowing and learning are viewed as communal acts, and members are encouraged to assist each other to learn and grow. There is a commitment to engage all learners cognitively and emotionally in acquiring knowledge that is globally relevant and personally meaningful. In the process, members create a cohesiveness that encourages personal responsibility and commitment to the group and its goals.

- Respect for Diversity and Individual Worth
  - A learning community embraces diversity with respect to ideas, abilities, viewpoints, experiences, learning styles, and cultural backgrounds. Diversity is valued because of the inherent worth of each individual who brings his or her strengths to the community. The ethics of caring and mutual respect are viewed as essential for supportive learning environments that enhance each member's self- concept and foster risk-taking, creative collaboration, and excellence.

When people gather to transmit knowledge and share ideas in an institution such as a university, unity is created that can result in learning of the highest order. Teachers and learners assume many roles, often shared, often overlapping, always interdependent. They respect each other in those roles. The community of learners is aware of each other's background, and values how it contributes to the whole. Ideas, too, are valued for their diversity. People delight in their opportunities to gain knowledge cooperatively, regardless of age, physical or intellectual abilities, cultural heritage, or interest. They discover together the connections among separate subject areas and among people, ultimately coming to understand the importance of continuous improvement in a global society.