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A View From Melrose

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Creating learning communities

The new academic year is off to a fine start, and I'm getting to know the new class. I try to have lunch with students in Dillin Hall at least once a week, but in the early fall I go more often. It's refreshing and invigorating to talk to our students; they are, after all, the reason Linfield exists.

Even following the renovation of the dining hall last year, some patterns persist. The football players sit on the west side; the cross country team is on the east. The German table attracts not only a German professor, but a biologist, historian, former administrator and students. They follow a critical rule together: only German spoken here. When I go to Dillin, I simply get a plate of food and look for a table of students.

Recently I sat down at a table of six and immediately recognized Tika Zbornik '17, whom I first met as a freshman in our iFOCUS pre-orientation science program. After Tika introduced me to her friends, I realized that I was at a table of student scientists, five sophomores and one freshman, majoring in biology, chemistry and physics. In fact most of them had first met each other in the iFOCUS program, and it was clear that they were passionate about research. They were eating together because they were friends – and they had work to do. They are a classic example of what we call a “learning community,” a group of students (and sometimes professors) who share an interest, learn to work as a team and become lifelong friends. Yes, they are first-semester sophomores, and they are already passionate about their field.

Another day I sat down at a table with three first-year students. Soon the table became full, and still more chairs were pulled alongside until there were nine of us. These students had met through Linfield's “First CLAS” pre-orientation program. As with iFOCUS, these students came a week early to explore a particular interest, in this case, community service and leadership. They were from all over the country – Hawaii, Colorado, Montana, Oregon, California and Washington. Male and female; African-American, Asian-American, Latina-American and Anglo-American; majoring in everything from nursing to creative writing. And they weren't crowding the table because I was there; they had become close friends thanks to First CLAS, and this was clearly an informal reunion.

Throughout our college's history, we have had a strong sense of belonging and of community. With our pre-orientation programs, we are strengthening our culture and consciously creating learning communities that will extend through and beyond our students' academic careers. Such an opportunity has always been special, but it is increasingly rare in today's secular, online world. All people – especially young people – crave the chance to create and live in community. It is just one thing that sets us apart at Linfield. And it's gratifying to see community – and communities – forming all across our campus, in labs and playing fields, in rehearsal halls and classrooms, and in Dillin Dining Hall. 🍂

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– Thomas L. Hellie
President