

Spring 2008 Freshman Learning Community Review Results of the Faculty Survey

As part of a comprehensive review of the Freshman Learning Community program, current and former FLC faculty were invited complete a survey regarding their thoughts and experiences about the program. Prior to this, current FLC faculty were interviewed by Dr. Sue Ridlen in focus groups; information from that report helped inform the construction of this survey. Twenty faculty completed the present survey. Of those, 14 (70%) were currently teaching a freshman learning community. Of the six who were no longer teaching in the FLC program, half taught in the program one or two years ago, while the other half taught in the program five to seven years ago. Twelve of the faculty (60% of the sample) had taught in the FLC program just one time; eight (40%) had taught more than once. Six (30% of the sample) of the respondents were teaching in a discipline-specific FLC.

Freshman Learning Community Program Goals

The survey stated four goals of the FLC program: (1) creating a sense of community, (2) developing an interdisciplinary perspective, (3) developing skills in writing and public speaking, and (4) promoting students' academic success. Eighty-five percent of the faculty who responded reported that they agreed or strongly agreed with the goals of the FLC program (10% disagreed and 5% marked it "not applicable").

Forming Community

Consistent with the report by Dr. Ridlen of the FLC faculty focus groups, results from this survey suggest that, for the most part, the faculty give priority to the goal of forming community. Most (80 - 85%) of the faculty believed that for the FLC program to achieve its goals, it is important for students and faculty to stay together for two full semesters. All of the faculty believed that it is important for FLC students to participate in group projects or assignments, and all but one of the faculty agreed they could effectively facilitate group work. All but one of the faculty reported that they designed class activities or assignments to help students get to know each other. Most (79%) said it is important for students and faculty to take trips together, but only about half (52%) of the respondents said it is important for students and faculty to meet informally outside the classroom. Only about 55% of the faculty who responded to the question said they thought it was important for faculty to meet with students to discuss the risk survey. Interestingly, 20% of the faculty indicated they did **not** feel confident about their ability to create a classroom environment that facilitates a sense of community, and these were more likely to be faculty who were not teaching in the program at the time. Also, 25% of the faculty said they could **not** effectively get to know each student as an individual within the context of the FLC program, and these were more likely to be in a discipline-specific FLC. Dr. Ridlen's report mentions the size of the class as being an issue—the larger class may make it more difficult for faculty to get to know their students individually, especially at the beginning.

Interdisciplinary Perspective

A second goal of the Freshman Learning Community program is to help students develop an interdisciplinary perspective. Nearly all (95%) of the faculty stated that it is important for students to study a general theme from different disciplinary perspectives. Eighty percent of the faculty reported they developed assignments or activities to promote understanding of different perspectives of the same topic. Eighty-five percent of the faculty agreed or strongly agreed that both content faculty in their learning community discussed topics in an integrated way, and more experienced FLC faculty more strongly agreed with this than did faculty who had taught in the FLC only once. Ninety percent of the faculty agreed or strongly agreed that they openly discussed differences in their perspectives in class. Many faculty (75%)

believed it is important for both content faculty to be present for most or all of every class, but fewer than (65%) believed it is important that faculty from three different disciplines be part of the community. However, more experienced FLC faculty gave higher importance to having both content faculty and having all three faculty present most of the time than those who were less experienced. Interestingly, while 78% of the faculty said they believed all three faculty should be present for most or all of every class, only 65% of faculty said that this was true of their most recent learning community. General FLC faculty more strongly agreed that all three faculty attended most class periods than did the faculty in the major-specific FLC's. However, this could be due to the fact that one of the major-specific FLC's (nursing) used a "bookend" model where the communication skills were taught in separate sections.

Writing and Speaking Outcomes

Seventy percent of faculty believed it is important to the FLC program that communication skills courses be integrated with content courses, and 80% of the faculty believed they could effectively integrate communication skills and course content. Fewer (55%) faculty agreed that students better learn the fundamentals of writing and speaking because these are taught in integrated way. Less than half (45%) of the faculty agreed that FLC students become better writers because they learn writing in the context of a topic, and 50% of the faculty agreed that FLC students become better speakers because they learn public speaking in the context of the topic. Although many did **not** agree that the FLC experience helps students become better writers, most believed that it did not hinder—65% of the faculty did **not** believe that combining communication skills with content material is too confusing for most students. However, faculty currently teaching in the program tended to agree more with the idea that the combination of content and skills is confusing to students, whereas faculty who no longer teach in the program tended to disagree more.

With regard to teaching and grading communication skills, FLC faculty had different beliefs and followed different practices. While 75% of the faculty agreed that content instructors should help teach and grade communication skills (with experienced faculty expressing stronger agreement than those who taught only once), only 55% of the faculty agreed that the communication skills instructor should help teach and grade the content material. In their most recent FLC, 65% reported that every faculty member participated in teaching both content and skills and that every faculty member graded student speeches, but only 50% reported that every faculty member graded student writing. This may be in part due to the lack of confidence some faculty have in their ability to teach these skills effectively within the FLC program—only 55% of faculty agreed they were confident in their ability to teach writing in the FLC, and 65% agreed they were confident in their ability to teach public speaking in the FLC. This may also be a function of the large class size—several comments and the information from Dr. Ridlen's report suggest that faculty find the classes to be too large to teach writing or speaking effectively. Many (65%) believed that all FLC's should have a standard syllabus for W131 and for S121. Current FLC faculty agreed less with the idea of having a standard W131 or S121 syllabus than former FLC faculty. The more experienced FLC faculty more strongly agreed that there should be standard W131 and S121 syllabi than those who had taught only once.

Study Skills

Although it was not one of the highest rated items, 80% of the faculty thought it important that students are taught skills such as time management, notetaking, testing, and study skills. Seventy five percent agreed that they could teach these skills effectively in the FLC. The same percentage also said that they were able

to effectively teach appropriate classroom behavior. Fewer (55%) faculty agreed they could effectively motivate freshman students to do the work necessary for success. Current FLC faculty were more confident that they could motivate freshmen than former faculty, but many of the comments on this survey and in the focus groups facilitated by Dr. Ridlen demonstrate that most, if not all, faculty are very concerned about student motivation.

Team Teaching and Workload Issues

Of all the skills listed on the survey, faculty were most confident about their ability to teach as part of a team, with all but one agreeing they could effectively team-teach in the FLC program and the strongest agreement coming from those who had taught in the FLC more than once. Most (80%) agreed that every faculty member in their FLC was equally involved in planning the course, though 35% agreed that their team had difficulty dividing the workload equitably (with stronger agreement coming from faculty who are no longer teaching in the program). Nearly 75% said that the rewards of team teaching outweighed the challenges, with the more experienced faculty agreeing more with this statement. However, 85% of the faculty said that FLC could be just as, or even more, effective with two (rather than three) faculty members. Several of the responses to an open-ended question about what one thing might be changed also mentioned reducing the number of faculty from three to two.

There was widespread agreement (85%) that too many extra assignments/activities/assessments have been added to the FLC program. While nearly 74% agreed that it's important for academic advisors to be included in the learning community (with faculty from the discipline-specific FLC's expressing stronger agreement), nearly half (47%) of the respondents said that including academic advisors in the FLC made it more difficult to cover essential course material. Interestingly, current FLC faculty agreed less with that statement than former faculty. Only half of the respondents said that it is important that a peer mentor be assigned to the FLC (again, with stronger agreement coming from the discipline-specific FLC faculty), and only 47% of those who responded to this item said that their peer mentor attended most class sessions.

Many (70%) stated that their team was assembled in enough time for them to decide together which texts to use. About 58% of the respondents agreed that one course reassignment per year is sufficient to permit them to devote the extra time needed for teaching in the FLC program.

Common Reading Text

The faculty were the least enthusiastic about the value of the common reading text. Eighty percent said it was **not** important to achieving the goals of the FLC program that all freshmen read the same book. Only 20% agreed that the common reading text provided learning opportunities that other aspects of the FLC do not; 25% agreed that the common reading text helped students appreciate the value of reading. About 45% agreed that it is important that the author come to campus (with somewhat stronger agreement coming from those who are currently teaching in the program). Just 25% agreed that the common reading text should be integrated into all aspects of the FLC; even fewer (15%) believed that it should be assigned only in the W131 portion of the course. Many of the comments regarding what to change about the FLC program were along the lines of "omit the common book."

FLC Structure

There was relatively strong sentiment that FLC's should **not** be mandatory. Two thirds of respondents said there should be a special FLC just for undecided students, and half of the faculty agreed that all FLC's should be organized by intended majors or careers. Not surprisingly, the faculty teaching the discipline-specific FLC's more strongly agreed with having an "undecided" FLC and having all FLC's be organized by intended majors or careers.

The survey described three different models for organizing FLC's which were suggested by the faculty in the focus groups. Faculty were divided on which model was best. Thirty-five percent preferred the current model of two back-to-back class periods in which the faculty integrate communication skills (writing and speaking) and content (one additional faculty member suggested using the current model with just two faculty members per semester). Slightly fewer (30% preferred a bookend model in which the students were split into two skills sections, with one meeting before the content course and the other meeting afterwards. Just 15% preferred an alternating days model, in which content is covered on one day of the week for two class periods and communication skills are covered on the other day of the week for two class periods. Another model, suggested by two faculty members, involved removing writing and public speaking from the learning community. One faculty member wrote that each team should decide what model it wanted to follow.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In general, the faculty who responded to the survey are supportive of the FLC program and its goals. They enjoy team teaching and feel confident they can do it effectively—especially those who have taught in the program more than once. They are strongly supportive of the FLC goal of forming a community of learners, and they organize their courses in ways which directly support that goal.

Faculty are also supportive of the goal of students developing an interdisciplinary perspective. They believe that both content faculty should be present most of the time and they design activities to promote such a perspective. However, this does not necessarily extend to integrating communication skills with content, which about a third of the faculty did not believe was very important. Many faculty do not believe that integrating skills with content makes students better writers or speakers. Also, a fair number of faculty would like to see a separation between teaching content and teaching writing and speaking (the "bookend" or "alternate days" model), while a few would like to see W131 and S121 removed from the FLC altogether. As well, many of the responses to the question about what support the faculty needed while teaching in the FLC had to do with help teaching the communication skills. They would like to see more consistency across FLC's in how S121 and W131 are taught and they would like to have workshops on teaching writing and speaking.

Most faculty did not believe that FLC's should be mandatory for freshmen. There is concern that the program has grown too fast and lost its focus, though it is hard to gauge how widespread that opinion is because we did not ask about it directly. Clearly they are concerned that the program being asked to do too much. They have not found the addition of a peer tutor/mentor to be particularly helpful. Although most believe having an academic advisor to be an important part of the program, some also felt that advisors took away class time that the faculty needed. Comments in the focus group suggest that faculty and advisors might consider how to organize advisor visits early in the course, so that faculty can predict when the advisors will be coming to class and plan for it. Most importantly, most of the faculty do not find the common reading text to be useful and would like to see it eliminated.

Finally, the faculty are curious about other FLC models. They would like to know what kinds of models are successful elsewhere and what makes them successful. The faculty's keen interest in improving upon the model we have at IU Kokomo attests to their commitment to the success of our freshman students.

Based on these results, I recommend the following:

1. Reconsider the inclusion of the common freshman reading text. The faculty do not see it as helpful, and, in fact, see it as an unnecessary complication. The student survey demonstrated that the students also did not find it useful or interesting. This could help reduce the feeling that the FLC program is trying to do too much and is becoming too complex to be effective.
2. Consider how to make the teaching of W131 and S121 more consistent across sections. FLC faculty and the director should consider whether to create a standard syllabus, whether to create smaller sections of W131 and S121 attached to a larger content section, and what kinds of faculty development opportunities could be made available to faculty who are teaching writing (especially, but also public speaking).
3. Reconsider whether to make the FLC mandatory for all freshmen. The faculty are generally opposed to this. If FLC's continue to be mandatory, it might be helpful to the faculty if they could discuss the rationale for this decision, as they are the ones being asked to make it work for the students.
4. Consider researching other successful FLC models and bringing this information back to the faculty. They want to know that the work they are doing makes a difference, and they are eager to make changes, based on their own ideas and those of others, that might make the FLC program more effective.