

2008 Freshman Learning Community Review: Summary Findings  
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This report summarizes the findings of a comprehensive review of IU Kokomo's Freshman Learning Community (FLC) program. This review consisted of:

- FLC faculty focus groups and a faculty survey conducted spring 2008,
- a student survey conducted spring 2008,
- a study of 2006 NSSE responses by FLC and non-FLC students,
- a retention and student success study conducted by Ty Cruce (UPIRA) of FLC and non-FLC students (3 cohorts, beginning in 2006), and
- a review of recent literature.

**What model is best?**

Our FLC faculty were divided as to what kind of model they preferred. They noted that they would like to see what FLC models are successful at other institutions. My review of recent literature found that LC models vary according to how courses are structured (e.g., linked courses, team taught courses) and how much integration (e.g., common syllabus, coordination of exams and due dates, integrated assignments) there is among the LC courses. Many institutions do not have a single model, as LC courses are suggested by the faculty according to faculty interests.

The literature suggests that, with regard to student learning, LC structure is less important than the strategies LC faculty use to engage students with faculty, with each other, and with the content. The structure becomes important when considering program costs and whether the institution can sustain the LC program over time. Considerations include institutional culture, faculty support for the LC program, and whether there is a system that rewards faculty for their LC work. Our faculty focus groups and surveys show that faculty are enthusiastic and are committed to the LC concept. They enjoy working together and learning from each other. But they also report that they devote a lot more time to planning and preparing, spend more time in the classroom, and spend more time grading for their FLC courses than for their stand-alone courses. The director reported having difficulty keeping the FLC sections staffed, especially now that there are seven FLC sections. The faculty believe that receiving one course reassigned time per year in return for teaching in the FLC is appropriate.

The faculty are also concerned about the large class sizes under the current model, especially with regard to teaching composition and public speaking. The literature suggests that a specific goal of most learning community programs is to put students and faculty into smaller groups, but those that use team teaching (as we do) rather than linked-course models of necessity tend to have larger classes (with about 20 - 30 students per faculty member). Linked courses tend to have smaller classes (about 20 - 30 students each), but those courses still require significant planning time if they are to have a significant level of integrative activities.

**What aspects of learning communities are most important to their success, and how are we doing with regard to those aspects?**

Current research suggests that these factors are most important to student learning and success:

- explicit opportunities, through discussion groups and/or course assignments, for integrating learning across LC courses,
- teaching strategies that focus on active and collaborative learning,
- required out-of-class activities, and
- high expectations for student success coupled with a supportive environment.

Most of our faculty believed that having an interdisciplinary theme was important. The 2006 NSSE study of our FLC and non-FLC students showed that FLC students had substantially higher scores on an Integrative Learning subscale than did non-FLC students. In addition, FLC students scored much higher on the Active and Collaborative Learning NSSE Benchmark than did non-FLC students.

All of our FLC faculty said that assigning group work was important. However, our FLC students did not engage in more collaborative learning than their non-FLC peers, according to our 2006 NSSE results. Research suggests that even experienced LC faculty who refocus on developing integrative (not necessarily interdisciplinary) assignments see benefits for their own motivational level and for improved student learning. Lardner & Malnarich have developed a framework for understanding and developing these kinds of assignments which our FLC faculty might find useful.

Faculty in the interviews expressed concern about how to promote high expectations while at the same time trying to retain students. Some felt the retention goal conflicted with a high expectations goal. The research suggests that an environment which emphasizes *high expectations coupled with support* is related to increased student success. Our student survey indicated that many students felt challenged by their FLC courses, but our NSSE study showed that FLC students did not experience a higher level of academic challenge than did their non-FLC peers, even though national studies of learning communities do show such a difference. Our FLC students did not engage in more higher-order thinking, nor did they engage in more reflecting learning activities. (Note that compared to our NSSE peers, our students in general do not experience a very high level of academic challenge, so this lack of difference between FLC and non-FLC students is not due to an overall high level of academic challenge at IU Kokomo.) On the other hand, FLC students did experience a more supportive environment, and especially more supportive faculty (though this varied according to which FLC section the student was in).

Though our faculty agreed that requiring out-of-class activities is important, many did not believe that it was important to meet with students informally outside of class. In our 2006 NSSE study, our FLC students did not report more out-of-class contact with faculty than our non-FLC students.

### **Does the FLC program improve the skills students need to succeed in college?**

There is no evidence that the FLC program increases students' study or time management skills. Even though FLC faculty said that developing such skills was an important goal, and they felt confident they knew how to help students develop those skills, many FLC students reported that the FLC had not helped them improve their time management or study skills or even their library skills. FLC students did report using information technology substantially more than non-FLC students. FLC students also reported increased confidence in their ability to succeed academically. (One wonders how to interpret this, given the data that suggest that FLC students are not being particularly challenged academically.)

### **Does the FLC program help retain students?**

On the NSSE study, FLC students were no more likely than non-FLC students to say that, if they could start over, they would choose to come to IU Kokomo again. On the student survey, not many said they felt more connected with IU Kokomo because of the FLC program. Both the student survey and NSSE study found no increase in student participation in campus events.

However, the retention study demonstrated that students who participated in two semesters of the FLC program were substantially more likely to be retained into the second year than other first year students. In an

email to me, Ty Cruce, the author of the retention study, said that the impact of FLC participation on retention into the 2<sup>nd</sup> year is roughly equivalent to the impact of a 30 percentage-point increase in percent of need met by gift aid. The FLC did not differentially impact student persistence or GPA according to sex, age, first-generation status, prior academic achievement, or financial aid status.

### **Should the FLC be one semester or two?**

Some research from other institutions suggests that extending the learning community experience can improve outcomes. Our FLC faculty survey and interviews showed that FLC faculty consider the second semester to be important. The retention study suggests that, after controlling for relevant variables, one semester of FLC experience had no impact on GPA or student persistence into the second year. However, students who enrolled in the second semester of the FLC had significantly higher second semester GPA's and significantly higher persistence into the second year (after controlling for relevant variables, including first semester GPA).

The retention study also found that first semester GPA had a substantial effect on whether a student enrolled in the second semester of the FLC program. The author recommends that IU Kokomo consider whether to have another type of intervention for students who do not qualify for the second semester of their FLC to improve their chances of persisting into the second year.

### **Should first-year students be required to enroll in a learning community?**

Faculty were mixed on whether or not the FLC should be required. Some believed there should be a special FLC just for undecided or conditionally-admitted students (though some research evidence suggests this may be counter-productive). Other faculty suggested that the FLC experience was not appropriate for some students (usually mentioning under-prepared students). The LC literature suggests that very few institutions require learning communities for their students. However, some researchers argue that, because LC programs have been shown to be effective, institutions should expand their LC programs so more of their students can be involved. Indeed, many non-residential LC programs are specifically focused on under-prepared students, requiring significant integrative learning experiences, and yet have very good success rates (in terms of GPA, student persistence, number of credit hours earned) for their LC students compared to students in stand-alone courses. So, while there is no evidence that FLC should be required, the evidence is not strong that certain students are not appropriate for this experience. The issue is more whether the campus can sustain a required FLC program over time.

### **Should we have three faculty on a team?**

I could not find LC models or programs with three faculty who were responsible for only two courses each semester. Those programs which had three faculty (either in a team-teaching or linked-course model) involved three courses each semester. According to the student survey, students said that having three faculty helped them see different perspectives, but they also commented that it was sometimes confusing and disorganized. On the faculty survey, most faculty agreed that the FLC could be just as (or even more) effective with two faculty on the team.

### **Should the FLC program include peer mentors and/or advisors?**

According to a national NSSE study of students in learning communities, including undergraduate peer mentors in the LC did not appear to be particularly important to increasing student learning outcomes. Our faculty also stated that including peer mentors often was not helpful.

The evidence is not strong that including an advisor as part of the learning community improves student outcomes. Some FLC sections had better success at integrating advisors into the community than others, according to faculty interviews. The student survey suggested that including advisors did not have much impact; fewer than half of the students said they had established a meaningful relationship with an advisor through the FLC, and those in disciplinary FLC sections were no more positive than those in the general, theme-based FLC sections. Our 2006 NSSE results showed that FLC students were more positive about their experiences with academic advising than non-FLC students, but advisors were not formally integrated into the FLC program at that time.

### **Should the common reading text continue to be a part of the FLC program?**

Most faculty and students disliked having the common reading text and would prefer to have it eliminated from the program. Most faculty believed it was an unnecessary add-on that did not substantially increase student learning or student appreciation of reading. Many faculty and students commented that omitting the book would be the one thing they would change about the FLC program. A possible advantage of having the common reader is that the NSSE study showed that, in 2006, FLC students perceived a greater institutional emphasis on diversity than non-FLC students. However, this may or may not be due to common reader. Presumably, many of the non-FLC students also participated in the common reading program.

### **Is the FLC program overloaded?**

Surveys and interviews of FLC faculty are very concerned about the “extras” being added to the FLC program. On the faculty survey, only about half found the risk survey to be of any value. Faculty did state that too much is expected of the FLC program. They believed that too much has been added to the program at the expense of academic goals. Those who work with LC faculty nationally suggest that it is vital the LC programs keep their focus on evaluating program goals and assessing student learning outcomes.