

Student Success Committee
Report on the Freshman Learning Community Program
February 25, 2009

Background

The Student Success Committee (SSC) was formed in April 2008 to provide background information, research, and recommendations to the IU Kokomo Administrative Council regarding a variety of issues related to student success and retention. Following its work on the recent report on advising (presented to the Administrative Council in fall 2008), the SSC turned its attentions to its study of the Freshman Learning Community (FLC) Program, a program for first-year students in place on the IU Kokomo campus since spring 2000. The following timeline provides a brief overview of the history of that program:

Beginning Fall 1995	Implementation of S104 Freshman Seminar This course helped students make the transition to college. Occasional sections of this course are still being used.
Spring 2000	Pilot one-semester FLC in Environmental Science (E105 and W131)
Fall 2000	Three yearlong FLCs instituted (all yearlong) Each of these FLCs was taught by the same three faculty over the course of the year with an E-course and W131 in the fall and an E-course and S121 in the spring. Each FLC had a different theme. This was a three-year pilot study.
Fall 2003	FLCs show initial successes in retaining students. The Faculty Senate votes to continue the program.
Fall 2003-2006	FLCs continue to evolve with varying success rates for retention.
Fall 2006	The common reading text is added to the program (and to all W131s).
Fall 2007-Fall 2008	FLCs begin to experiment with alternative models. Some FLCs begin to add advisors and peer mentors to the program.
Spring 2008	Study of FLCs initiated (faculty and student surveys, statistical analysis)
Fall 2008	SSC begins study of FLCs

The SSC met during late fall 2008 and early spring 2009 to study the FLC program, including study of evaluations of the program begun in spring 2008. In particular, the FLC subcommittee of the SSC has been preparing materials for study by the entire SSC prior to

presenting this report. The SSC has gathered and/or investigated the following documents, all of which are available to the Administrative Council:

- A summary of FLC faculty focus groups (spring 2008)
- A survey of former and current FLC faculty (spring 2008)
- A survey of FLC students (spring 2008)
- A study of 2006 NSSE responses by FLC and non-FLC students (spring 2008)
- A November 2008 retention and student success study (conducted by Ty Cruce of UPIRA) of three cohorts of FLC and non-FLC students from 2005-2008
- A review of recent literature on FLCs (conducted by Sharon Calhoon)
- A summary of findings of the various studies (prepared by Sharon Calhoon)

The SSC highly recommends Assistant Vice Chancellor Calhoon's survey of the literature and summary of the findings as a good starting place for the discussion of this issue.

In addition to these studies, members of the SSC discussed the program with Interim Vice Chancellor Steve Sarratore (who is also conducting a review of the program); Assistant Vice Chancellor Calhoon; Dean of SOAS and the Director of the FLC Program, Dr. Susan Sciame-Giesecke and Coordinator of the American Democracy Project Kathryn Widman (concerning the ADP's sponsorship of the common reading text). The SSC investigated the Foundations of Excellence program (FoE) through reviewing print materials, attending conference presentations, and participating in a webinar about the program. In addition, four faculty members on the SSC are current or former faculty in the FLCs. Finally, FLC faculty members received the summary findings and were invited to provide additional comments.

Recommendations

As the SSC reviewed the available materials, several recommendations emerged as receiving majority support from the committee. **The SSC supports adopting the following five recommendations:**

- 1. At this time, the FLC Program should continue in some form as a yearlong program.**

The Cruce report (UPIRA) suggests that the FLCs are having a positive impact on student retention, both from fall to spring and from fall to fall. In addition, the impact of the FLCs intensifies during spring semester. Students who re-enroll in spring semester begin to show gains in GPA and persistence above both non-enrollees and the non-participant control group into the following fall. This impact does not occur at a significant level until students participate in the second semester of the FLC. This suggests that a one-semester program would not be as effective. It also suggests that early interventions in fall semester among that population of students who eventually do not re-enroll in the FLC program might be successful. Students could be targeted for extra help or, alternatively, moved into a different course in the spring (S104, for example).

2. **For the FLCs to continue to attract faculty and successfully integrate and deliver successful learning experiences, the program must have a director and funding for faculty development.**

Director

The Dean of SOAS has successfully supported and directed the FLC Program since its inception, but with her recent appointment as Interim Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs for the next two years, the SSC recommends appointing a different director for the program. The director ideally should be a faculty member with experience teaching in the program. Alternatively, the director could oversee all first-year programs; however, the director's immediate focus should be on the revision and development of academic programs related to the FLCs.

Faculty Development

Integrative learning as defined in the scholarship on FLCs (see the Calhoun report) must be a hallmark of the FLC program for it to be successful. Faculty in the program must work together to design a curriculum that connects learning in the component courses and coordinates assignments, activities, and the book program (if it continues). This type of faculty work requires time and development activities. Ideally, faculty in the program would participate in a week-long summer development program coordinated by the Director of the FLC Program and by teaching specialists in the CTLA (Center for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment). Faculty would receive stipends to participate in this workshop. In addition, faculty must continue to coordinate their efforts throughout the course of the year. This type of faculty development can be exciting and regenerative for faculty and is important for developing the type of integrative learning activities that the research suggests are one of the key components of any freshman learning community. The SSC recommends using DoE funding in the coming year to support this work. The SSC recommendations concerning the use of DoE funds is forthcoming.

3. **The FLCs should be simplified in design to reduce cost and to focus on the most important goals of the FLCs.**

Cost

Determining the actual cost of the FLCs has been difficult. However, committing three faculty members to each community (6 cr. per semester) appears costly, especially considering the concomitant costs for faculty reassignments in the traditional course model. The SSC recommends reducing the number of faculty in each learning community to two per semester (please see the discussion on p. 5 concerning models for the FLCs). Further costs include the time that advisors devote to the community and the costs for peer mentors. A survey of the literature on FLCs finds that most programs using three faculty members connect them to larger student cohorts or to 9 credits per semester rather than 6. In fact, the recent survey of the research on FLCs was unable to find any examples where three faculty members were teaching a FLC with a total of 6 credits.

The use of course reassignments (one per year for faculty in traditional FLCs), while justified because of the time commitment for faculty, has put undue pressure on

departments to find alternate staffing for courses in the various programs and has resulted in the need to provide overloads for faculty. This time commitment has also had an impact in terms of faculty sustainability. While certain FLCs have continued to have a stable core of faculty, other sections have had significant turnover due to the intensity of teaching the course, to its heavy workload, and to conflicting demands to teach other courses in the faculty members' disciplines. Changes made to the FLC program must encourage faculty to remain in the program for several years.

Clearly, an increase in student retention pays dividends that help offset program costs, but the SSC believes that the important elements of the FLC program that have achieved these gains can be retained with a simplified curriculum design.

Course Goals

The FLCs accomplish many laudable goals, including establishing a sense of community among students, improving basic communication skills in writing and speaking, helping students approach a topic from different perspectives, and facilitating the academic skills that enable a transition from high school to college.

While the SSC is sympathetic to the fact that the FLCs provide an ideal venue in which to study the experiences of first-year students, we believe that the courses have taken on too many responsibilities, confusing students and complicating the design of the courses. We recommend re-evaluating the responsibilities of the course to focus on those that are most essential. Advisors, peer mentors, librarians, and IT personnel could all make important contributions to the course, but these contributions must be prioritized.

We also recommend re-evaluating the need to include specifically interdisciplinary experiences as opposed to integrative learning experiences. The literature on FLCs differentiates between these two concepts and suggests that the integrative experiences are the most central to the goals of the FLCs (see the Calhoon review of the literature for more information on the distinctions between these two concepts).

4. **The learning communities, particularly if they are to continue to teach writing and public speaking, must be small enough for these activities to be effective.**

Ironically, by making the learning communities as large as they are (from 45-55 students), we have strayed from the strengths offered by IU Kokomo. We must strive to maintain our ability to offer small class sizes and opportunities for faculty to work with students in appropriately-sized courses, particularly in basic skills. We encourage any new model for the FLC to consider very carefully the optimum class size for all courses taught in the learning communities.

5. **Funding of the FoE (Foundations of Excellence) will provide a framework for studying not only the FLC Program but all first-year programs.**

The Foundations of Excellence in the First College Year (FoE) program is a national program in which consultants from the Policy Center on the First Year of College assist the participating campus in conducting a rigorous self-study of all first-year programs. This program would provide assistance from consultants experienced in helping

campuses review their first-year programs. The only drawbacks that the SSC sees are the cost of the program (\$36,500) and the time commitment (campuses on average commit the time of approximately 82 employees).

The SSC recommends adopting the five items listed above. The items in the second half of this report represent areas needing further discussion.

Areas for Further Discussion

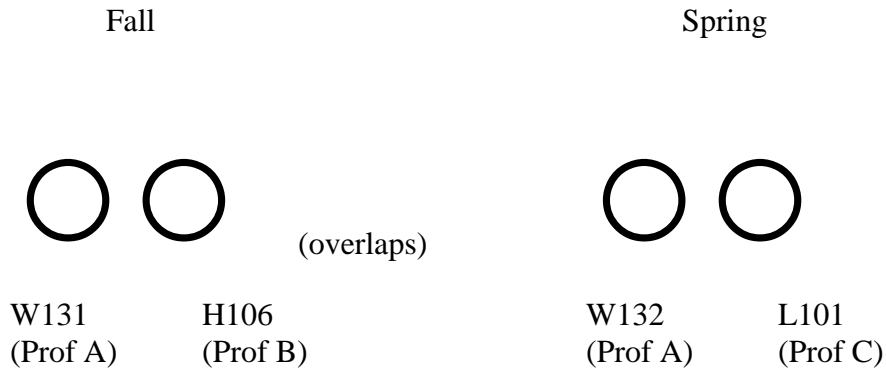
1. Which model is best?

Discussions about the most appropriate model(s) for the FLCs have dominated many of the committee's deliberations. Our research indicates that several models could be successful and that we do not necessarily need to adopt one model for all sections of the FLCs. Dr. Calhoun's review of the literature identifies four categories of FLCs. Our current traditional model falls into the category of team-taught FLCs and appears to be among the most costly. We recommend moving either to the paired or linked-course model or toward the "bookend" model with two faculty instead of using either our current three-faculty team-taught model or three-faculty bookend model. We believe that this question requires a great deal of further discussion.

Whatever model is adopted, we need to have options that will encourage full-time resident faculty to continue to participate in the program. Listed below are several possibilities suggested by members of the committee, presented here not as recommendations but as examples for discussion:

1. A Paired Course (dyad) Model

- Two linked courses taught by a faculty member in each course
- Each faculty member teaches one course and the curriculum and assignments are integrated
- At least one faculty member remains with the FLC throughout the year
- Faculty members who teach only one course throughout the year should work to integrate their course with the other two faculty members and provide a modicum of overlap (visit the other course 2-3 times to provide a transition)
- 24-30 students enrolling for 6 cr. (3 for each course) per semester
- Yearlong community

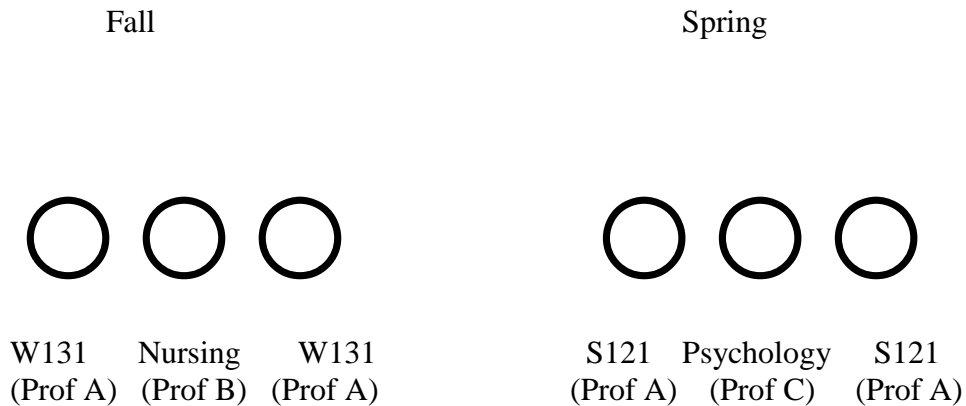


Advantages: provides discipline specialists, smaller sections, no reassignments, would allow faculty to develop “specialty” courses around their interests

Disadvantages: needs integration, may not provide enough sense of community

2. Bookend model (for a larger section)

- One larger section “bookended” by two sections of a communications course
- One faculty member teaches the larger central course and the second faculty member teaches two sections of the communications course
- At least one faculty member (and perhaps two) stay with the FLC throughout the year
- Allows for teaching required courses in the major
- 48-50 students in central core; 24-25 students in each of two smaller sections
- Yearlong community



Advantages: provides smaller sections of communications courses, allows for grouping students by major and teaching required larger-section courses, no reassignments

Disadvantages: central core course is large; needs integration

3. Team-taught model (using two faculty)

- Two courses taught by two faculty over two class periods
- Both faculty are present for both classes
- Both faculty would assist in grading papers and speeches
- Both faculty would remain with the community throughout the year
- Both courses integrated
- 35-40 students

Fall



Prof A and B
E103/W131

Spring



Prof A and B
E105/S121

Advantages: Closest to current model, more chance for integration, both faculty stay in FLC, more opportunity for interdisciplinary approaches, smaller than current model

Disadvantages: less discipline-specific teaching, both faculty must commit to being in the classroom for both sessions and sharing grading responsibilities, may need reassignments

2. What is the role of advisors and peer mentors?

In theory, the presence of advisors and peer mentors would seem to add a positive dimension to the FLCs. However, the national literature finds that the presence of either the advisor or the peer mentor has no significant impact on the success of FLCs. Early findings in our research at IU Kokomo suggest that the impact of having peer mentors and advisors in the FLCs has not been assessed completely. One approach might be to integrate occasional scheduled visits by advisors at key times in the semester for them to get to know their advisees, to help students navigate registration, and to help with curriculum planning. The advisors may also be able to help identify at-risk students early in the semester in order to increase the overall persistence rate of students into spring semester or to identify alternative interventions (like S104) for students who, in the past, have not re-enrolled for spring. One suggestion is to attach a one-credit course to the learning community to deal specifically with the role of the advisor and the peer mentor.

3. What is the role of the common reading text?

The use of the common reading text has proven to be one of the most debated issues in our study. Often, both faculty and students in the FLCs have been confused by the use of the text in conjunction with the themed courses in the FLCs, have found the use of the book to add an extra burden to the workload, or have not understood how to integrate the text into the course. If we continue to use the text as part of the FLCs, clearly we must do a better job of helping faculty understand how to use the text. We must also clearly articulate the goals of the program, the criteria for choosing the book, and the constraints upon our choices, particularly in terms of the limited amount of money available to sponsor the author's visit. We might also reconsider the use of the common reading text for our freshmen and ask individual FLCs to incorporate books that are directly relevant to the course being taught. Other suggestions include not limiting the text just to freshman, but making the book central to a semester-long or year-long theme around which activities could be planned. The text could therefore be used across a variety of courses throughout the curriculum. This question requires further discussion. If the use of the book is discontinued, the money from ADP used to sponsor the text would be reallocated to other ADP projects. We see the three alternatives as 1) continuing with the common reading program but incorporating improved faculty development to help integrate the text into the course and develop assignments, 2) putting the program on hiatus for a year while the issue is being studied, or 3) discontinuing the program.

Conclusion

As we approach potential changes to the FLC program, we need to consider whether certain observations about the current program clearly allow us to make immediate changes. What are the next steps? The FLC as it moves into the future needs to be sustainable, cost-effective, challenging for our students, successful in continuing to retain students, consistent in meeting its goals, and appealing to faculty. A new director and increased development money will be essential in charting a direction for the program. If the campus decides to proceed with the FoE initiative, we will be making a commitment to continued revision and changes, not only in the FLC program but in the first-year experience as a whole.