

# **Evaluating Strengths, Opportunities and Pedagogical Practices in Freshman Learning Communities**

## **Student Learning and Success Focus**

Our Planning Project seeks to better understand the problems and their causes with the goal of proposing program changes that could bring about more effective and innovative ways of teaching and supporting our students. We believe the first step in bringing about change is to better understand the situation our students are in, the problems they are encountering, and their needs. A good two-thirds of our project was devoted to conducting research aimed at better understanding the factors that motivate our students and the challenges and obstacles they face. We were especially eager to hear the experiences of our first generation, international and at-risk students and those taking remedial courses, as these students are most vulnerable to the academic challenges at Cal State East Bay, and are most likely to drop out or be academically disqualified as a result.

The Freshmen Learning Communities currently incorporate a number of high impact educational practices, some of which, such as first-year seminars, writing-intensive courses, service learning, and collaborative assignments, are recognized and promoted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). While this provides a supportive framework, the evolving needs of our freshmen population must be re-

The members of our faculty group are uniquely qualified to contribute in this area. Three of us have taught in the Freshmen Learning Community in the disciplines of Music, English, General Studies, and Communications. We have been involved as a faculty group in investigating issues surrounding active and engaged learning for more than a year. Our research has included in-depth group study of important contemporary works on higher education methodology, including Fink (2003), Michaelsen, et al. (1982), and Arvidson and Huston (2008), and the application of our findings in our classroom teaching experience. We presented our findings at the *15<sup>th</sup> Annual CSU Symposium on University Teaching* at CSU Pomona in April 2012.

### **Background**

The Freshman Learning Community was implemented at Cal State East Bay in 1998 to provide freshmen with “cluster” courses grouped thematically in the humanities, natural

fostering a culture of learning, and has improving student retention and engagement. Our freshmen represent a broad demography, and many of these students are from vulnerable populations, such as those needing English and math remediation, a large under-represented minority population (57%, 2012), first-generation college students (55%, 2013), and those who receive Financial Aid (80%, 2013).

With the support of a PEIL grant (AY 2012-2013), our faculty research team investigated how well the cluster fulfilled the learning needs of the freshman student population. Along with identifying significant strengths, this research also identified weaknesses that appear to add to the challenges faced by many of our first-year students. We identified factors inhibiting student learning through personal interviews and focus group sessions with students, faculty, and university leaders, and analysis of university data.

## **Research & Findings**

We spent significant time in the course of our project collecting the opinions, ideas, and experiences of the primary “stakeholders” in the Freshman Learning Community, namely, the students. We did this by means of a series of focus groups and individual interviews. We also met with participants in the FLC Peer Mentor Student Leadership course on four occasions, asking them for suggestions and other forms of feedback on our project plans.

With the assistance of our Peer Mentors, we conducted five freshman focus groups. In each, we invited students toCo(t)-o.SeIn

## Student Focus Groups and Interview Results

An analysis of the written feedback, focus group discussion, and student interviews (193 total) yielded these top areas of feedback presented in order of frequency (areas with the highest amount of feedback are listed first).

### #1: Students expressed frustration with the cluster format

<p>Approximately 75% of the comments were negative.</p> <p><u>Lack of understanding</u>: "would like more understanding," "would like description," still confusing," "want to take classes I need," "not really explained in orientation and what getting into," purpose still confusing," and "complicated";</p> <p><u>Don't like block scheduling</u>: "don't like, "difficult" "horrible," and "forced schedule";</p> <p><u>Don't like cluster format</u>: "don't like format," "complicated format," and "pointless";</p> <p><u>Limited choice of cluster</u>: "can't change cluster," "some feel like in wrong cluster," "feel stuck," "why can't international students have a choice?";</p> <p><u>Limiting</u>: "want to meet new people," and "want to pick own classes";</p> <p><u>Scheduling problems</u>: "would like more flexibility with scheduling," "difficult for commuters," and "time gaps."</p>	<p>Approximately 25% of the comments were positive.</p> <p>"Like block scheduling," "helpful to me," "good experience," and "feel awesome";</p> <p>"I loved that classes were already assigned and that we got first pick."</p>
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Peer mentor assistants noted in their interviews with freshmen that those who indicated they were less prepared for college tended to be more positive about block scheduling; conversely, those who felt more prepared generally found this structure to be limiting.

### #2 Students found academic advising to be inadequate

<p>Approximately 70% negative</p> <p><u>Need more advisers/advising</u>: "Lines ridiculously long," "need more information," "want more help choosing classes," "more one-on-one," "more information about what it takes to be a sophomore," "want more on academic requirements," "information difficult to access," "advising not timely," "GE requirements unclear," "need to add more advisers," "advising sort've a mess," "mistakes waste my money," "international students don't get enough help";</p> <p><u>Difficult dealing with holds</u>: "holds slow and hard to remove," "difficult getting resolved," "frustrating";</p> <p><u>Poor Service</u>: "hoped academic advising would be more helpful and involved," "rude at times," "need people who care about our problems," "difficult to speak to."</p>	<p>Approximately 30% positive</p> <p>"It was good," "excellent," "helpful," "they do a great job," "like how advisers help me get off academic probation."</p> <p>(There were several comments stating Educational Opportunity Program counselors were very helpful and checked in with students frequently.)</p>
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**#3 Students expressed frustration with Financial Aid**

<p>Approximately 90% negative</p> <p><u>Poor service:</u> “Long lines,” “slow,” “rude,” “mean,” “different answers to same question,” “insensitive,” “should be more helpful,” “poor explanations,” office unorganized,” “mix-ups, and “no-one seems to know what is going on”;</p> <p><u>Books too expensive:</u> "Ridiculous," "teachers don't use”;</p> <p>"Dealing with financial aid is very discouraging with constant mistakes with fees, not enough staff to help you, and “some staff members don't care about your well being."</p> <p><u>Poor understanding of Financial Aid process:</u> “had to learn on own,” “unclear,” “poor understanding,” “confusing,” and “should be easier.”</p>	<p>Approximately 10% positive:</p> <p>“People in the office very helpful,” “FA is going a great job,” and “understand better now.”</p>
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**#4 Students spoke positively about their classroom experiences**

Approximately 75% of the comments were positive:

Good learning experience: “Very interactive,” “engaging,” “learning experience meaningful,” “loved,” “great,” “best part of the university,” “really good,” “very engaging depending on class,” “really organized,” “overall amazing,” and hands-on learning for bio labs really helpful”;

Supportive professors: “a lot of support by professors who are attentive,” “friendly, and seem to be into the subject,” “instructors are terrific,” “understanding and helpful instructors,” “ I feel comfortable,” and

**#5 Students found the cluster experience to be valuable**

<p>Approximately 77% of the comments were positive: <u>GS course of value:</u> Of the comments made GS, 70% were positive. “GS good for study groups and class preparation,” “GS Course is valuable,” “GS class has been the most helpful,” “academic advising in GS is a Godsend,” “GS was the most significant contribution,” “my GS teacher has made the most significant connection,” “love GS and open forums,” “not ready before entering campus, but now GS has helped me to understand the importance of studying,” “GS offered a lot of helpful information on registration,” “I love my GS class,” “GS classes cover all of the topics essential for freshman year,” and “GS class very helpful learning to adapt to college life and study skills.”</p> <p><u>Built community and friendships:</u> “like sense of community,” “am making friends,” “ like a huge family,” “like the cluster and like the idea of a cluster,” “liked the overall experience,” “my cluster classes have connected to create a greater knowledge of my community," and "I was not really prepared before entering- now more confident because cluster helped me make friends”;</p> <p><u>Connections:</u> “did not see connections immediately, but did over time,” “like connection within classes,” and “interested in the same topics and goals as other students.”</p>	<p>Approximately 23% of the comments were negative: <u>GS Course not of value:</u> “GS waste of time,” “pointless, useless,” “repetitive,” “can do on own,” “too many assignments,” “not getting all of the information possible” and “learned nothing but how to play roulette;” “I feel like GS is both helpful and a waste of time.”</p> <p>“Library is unnecessary - already being taught in other classes”;</p>
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**#6 Students found the remedial English and math classes to be valuable**

Approximately 68% of the comments were positive and included comments such as, “good quality instruction,” “help offered by faculty,” “more help offered than regular classes,” “enjoyable,” “learned a lot,” “saw a lot of improvement in writing,” “teacher was helpful” and “provided support”; Approximately 32% of the comments were negative and included, “instructors were rude”, “unsupportive” “disrespectful,” “unprepared,” and “poor class structure.”

**#7 Students appreciated the diversity on campus**

“I love the diversity,” “got a different perspective,” “we have a well-rounded campus full of diversity,” and “I get a different perspective.”







**Interviews with the university leadership**

Three university leaders were interviewed for this project for their broader perspectives on the strengths and opportunities of the Freshman Learning Communities, especially as they relate to institutional and system-



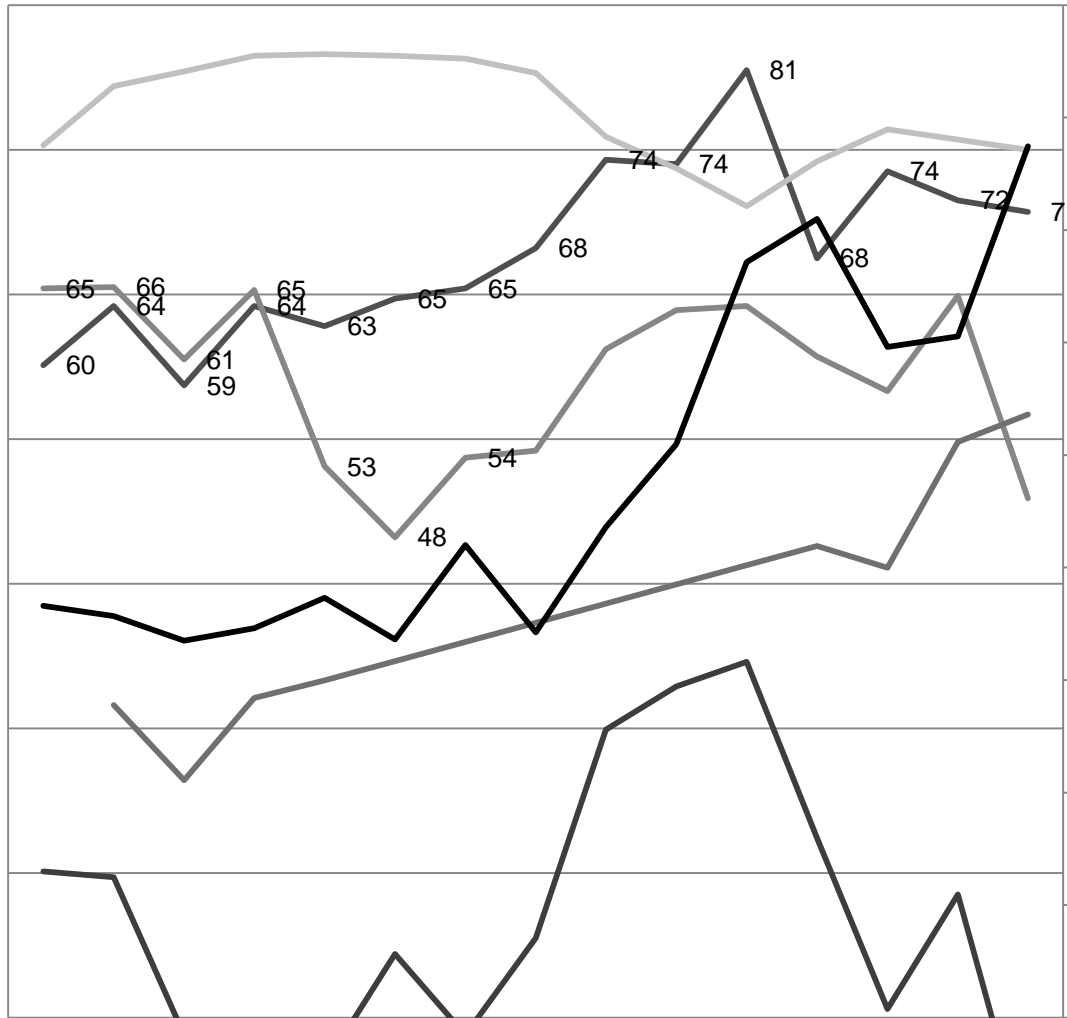
of these practices such as intentionally linking courses and contextualizing course curriculum through faculty development investments. The strengthening of several key best practices is included in our recommendations.

A valuable outcome to note about first year seminars (General Studies) was that two elements most related to students intention to persist were that the courses covered study skills and health and wellness.

### **Preliminary Findings**

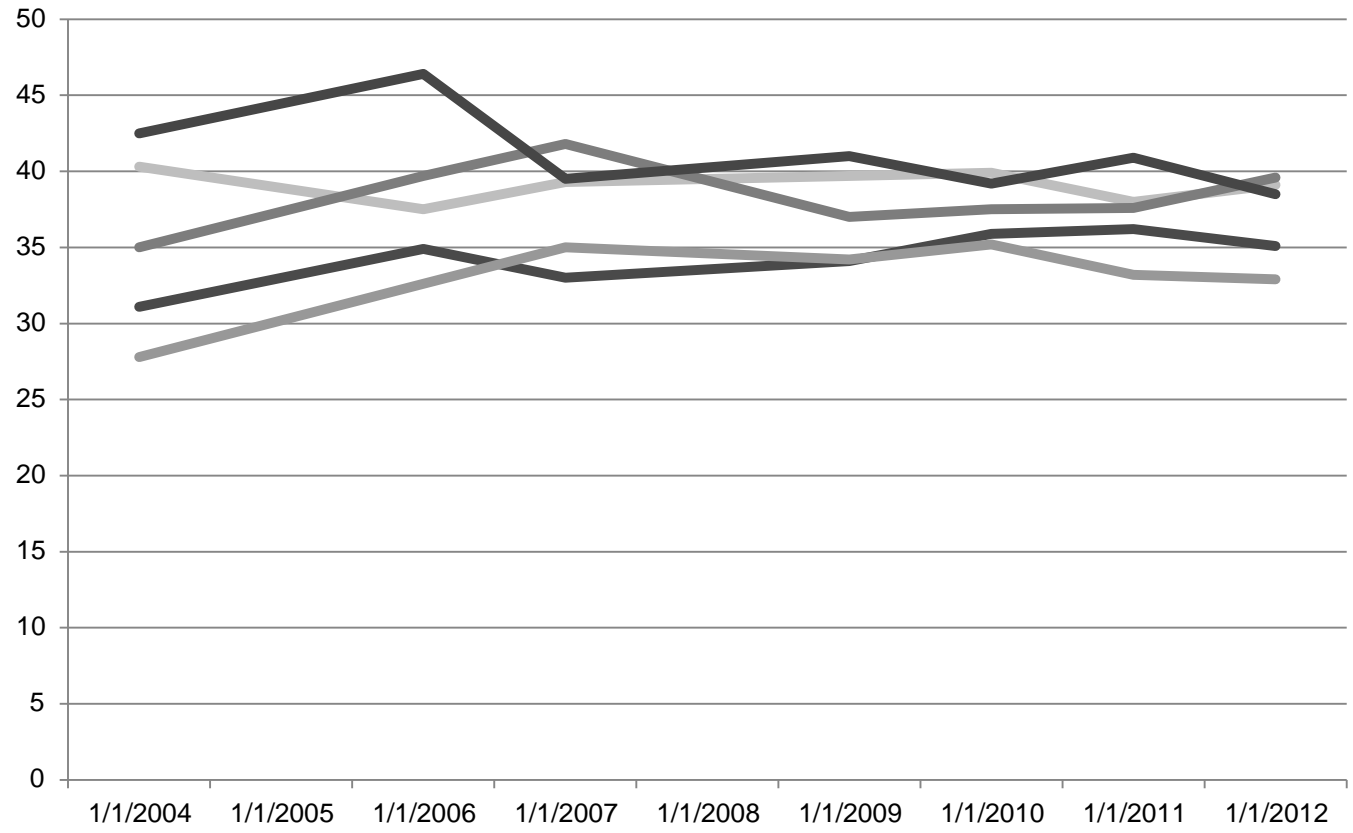
Our preliminary findings suggest that there is a correlation between funding for faculty collaboration and student retention. Data from CSUEB Planning & Institutional Research reveals that when faculty received cluster-collaboration funding, from 1998 to 2005, freshmen retention into their second year increased, reaching a high of 82% in 2003.<sup>[1]</sup> Following the removal of this funding, second-year retention declined to a low of 71% in 2008.

PEIL CHART 1: FRESHMEN ENTRANCE DATA, 1998



Source: CSU East Bay Institutional ePortfolio Data: <http://www.csueastbay.edu/ira/>

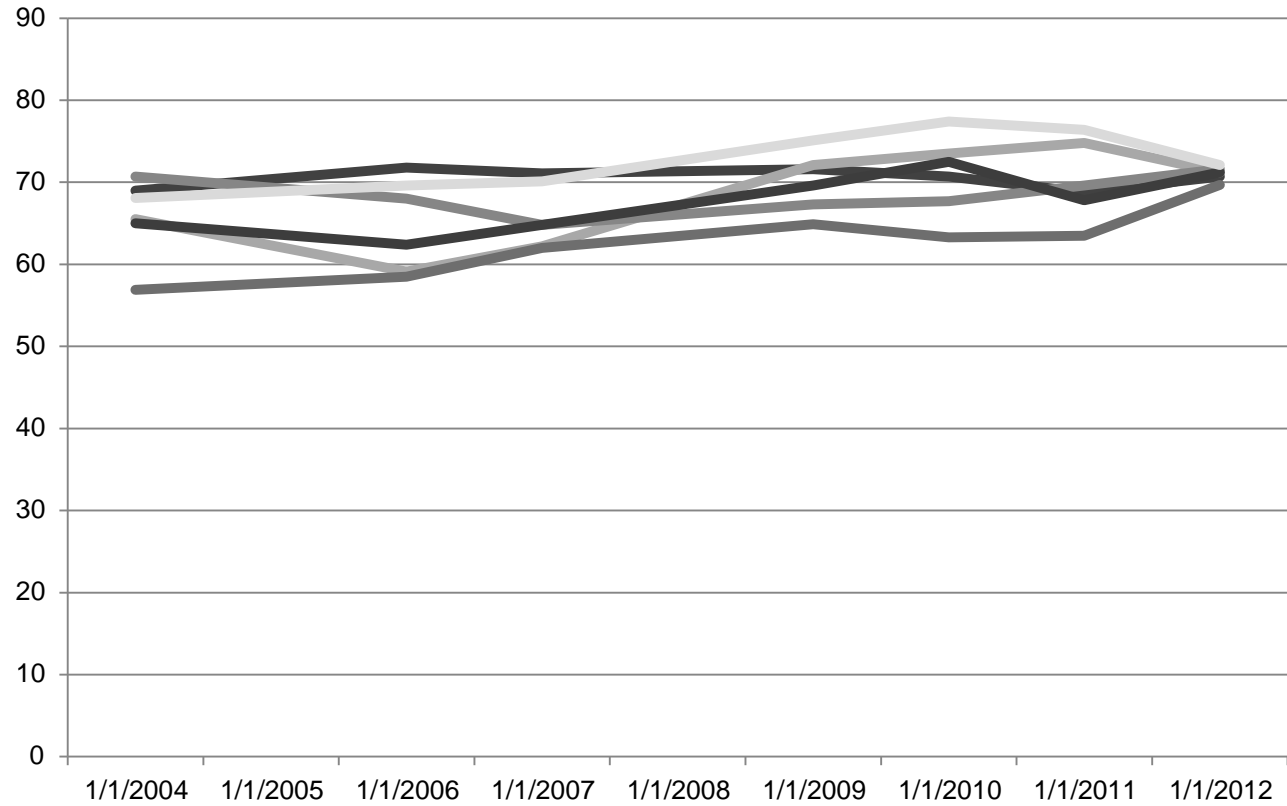




	1/1/2004	1/1/2006	1/1/2007	1/1/2009	1/1/2010	1/1/2011	1/1/2012
Hours of out-of-class study	31.1	34.9	33	34.1	35.9	36.2	35.1



PEIL CHART 3: STUDENT SATISFACTION SURVEY 2011-2012 2004-



	1/1/2004	1/1/2006	1/1/2007	1/1/2009	1/1/2010	1/1/2011	1/1/2012
24. General Studies feel connected	69	71.8	71.1	71.6	70.7	68.8	70.7
25. GS - integrated	65.5	59.1	62.2	72.1	73.5	74.8	71.2
26. Composition - integrated	70.7	68	64.8	67.3	67.7	69.6	71.6
27. Speech - integrated	56.9	58.5	62	64.9	63.3	63.5	69.7
28. GE - educational development	65	62.4	64.8	69.6	72.5	67.8	71.2
29. Satisfied quality	68.1	69.6	70.1	75.1	77.4	76.4	72.1

## NOTES ON PEIL CHART 2: STUDENT SATISFACTION SURVEYS I, 2004-2012

Data from the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) from 2004 to 2012, which freshmen take at the end of their first year at CSUEB, was provided to us from CSUEB's Planning and Institutional Research (the years 2005 and 2008 were not included in these sets).

The data point to changes in the number of students responding to the following questions:

1. Hours on out of class academic work.
2. Worked on project integrating ideas.
3. Worked harder due to instructor feedback.
4. Worked with others on class project.
5. Number of texts read.

## NOTES ON PEIL CHART 3: STUDENT SATISFACTION SURVEYS II, 2004-2012

Data from the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) from 2004 to 2012, which freshmen take at the end of their first year at CSUEB, was provided to us from CSUEB's Planning and Institutional Research (the years 2005 and 2008 were not included in these sets).

The data point to changes in the number of students responding "Strongly Agree" and "Agree" to the following questions:

1. My General Studies courses helped me feel connected to other students.
2. General Studies classes were well integrated with other courses.
- 3.

PEIL White Paper:

**Additional Recommendations Based on our Literature Review**

- x **Help students express their views** about their academic, social, cultural experiences, with a focus on the obstacles and challenges they face, through focus groups, interviews, course assignments, and workshops.
- x **First Generation and low-income alumni could serve as role models:** invite them to talk about their experiences and to advise students about opportunities and transitions into and through higher education.
- x **Educate/inform faculty and administrators, and staff about first generation and low-income students.** An excellent source of education could be information given by such students. The information students give could be compiled in a handbook, and copies of it could be distributed to faculty, administrators, and staff to work collaboratively on student-development.
- x **Set up programs** and workshops aimed to increase understanding among various groups of students.
- x **Faculty, administrators, and staff work to encourage, inform and assist students engage in educational activities,** such as those sponsored by National Resource Center. Here is an example: “The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and

respective campuses. The fellowship covers the participant's conference registration fee, but no travel or lodging expenses.”

## References & Resources

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<sup>[1]</sup> Freshman Learning Community Report. Amber Machamer, Office of Planning and Institutional Research. March 2013. Data sets.