The growing body of research examining factors influencing the success of first-year students indicates that two of the most reliable and powerful high-impact practices are the first-year seminar and the learning community (e.g. Brownwell & Swaner, 2010; Kuh, 2008; Laufgraben, 2005; Levine, 1999). This report describes how Cal State San Marcos is combining the first-year seminar (GEL 101) with the learning community model to form “first-year student learning communities” that meet the needs of a variety of student populations. In particular, the paper will describe the success we have had using a learning community model for students who are undeclared and are in the process of choosing a major.

The First-Year Seminar at Cal State San Marcos (GEL 101):

Offered through First-Year Programs, General Education Lifelong Learning 101 (i.e. GEL 101) is a 3 unit semester-long course certified to meet the lower-division Area E requirement in Lifelong Learning and Self-Development. Enrollment is restricted to students with freshman standing and the curriculum is designed to support personal development and a successful transition from high school to the world of higher education. Approximately 80% of first-time freshmen take GEL 101. The GEL program maintains very strong and supportive partnerships with a wide array of units within Student Affairs, including Student Academic Support Services, Student Life and Leadership and Undergraduate Advising Services. The course includes information literacy instruction facilitated by librarians, and career development curriculum facilitated by advisors from our Career Center. Data provided by Institutional Planning and Analysis (IPA) reveal that first-year students who complete GEL 101 are more likely to be retained and ultimately graduate.

First-Year Learning Communities at Cal State San Marcos

Although there are many ways to define and structure first-year student learning communities, The Cal State San Marcos First-Year Council (FYC) has put forth the following recommendations as stated in the First Year Council 2010-2011 annual report: “FYC revised its definition of a ‘first-year learning community’: Four essential curricular criteria are (i) curriculum linked by a common theme, (ii) a set of
clearly articulated student learning outcomes reflecting that theme, (iii) faculty collaboration on
development of syllabi that speak to that theme, and (iv) co-curricular activities and community
partnerships to experience the theme outside the classroom. Highly desirable/suggested elements
include (a) Partnerships with residential life (housing) and student life; and/or (b) First-Year college
success course as the home-base for the learning community.”
(http://www.csusm.edu/fycouncil/Annual%20Reports/index.html)

In 2004, First-Year Programs initiated partnerships to begin building first-year student learning
communities that linked GEL 101 with at least one other lower-division GE course. At the present time,
we have four learning communities that are offered in the Fall semester to new first-year students.¹

- Launched in 2004, the San Marcos Experience learning community (SME) block enrolled
students into GEL 101, Principles of Written Communication (GEW 101) and, Critical Thinking
(Philosophy 110). Curriculum and co-curricular activities focus on the theme of civic engagement
and campus life. SME is a residential learning community and therefore enrollment is restricted
to students living in our student housing.

- In 2007, we developed the First-Year Business Learning Community (FYBLC), in collaboration
with the College of Business Administration. Students in this learning community are block
enrolled into GEL 101 and Business Law (BUS 202). Enrollment is restricted to students who
intend to major in Business Administration. Curriculum and curricular activities focus on
academic and career planning for business majors and curricular activities that foster
networking with business faculty and local leaders in the business community.

- Launched in 2010, the Global Learning Community, in collaboration with the Office of Global
Education, block enrolls students into GEL 101 and U.S. History 1877 - Present (HIST 131). Half of
the class enrollment is reserved for international students. Curriculum and curricular activities
focus on global awareness and cultural literacy.

Undeclared Learning Community

From 2005 through 2012, approximately 20% of CSUSM incoming first-year student population listed
their major as “undeclared”. Data from IPA show that many undeclared first-year students remain
undeclared as sophomores. In addition, there are students who begin their first term having declared a
major but who are actually undecided and will ultimately change their major within the first two years at
CSUSM. Although being undeclared does not automatically mean a student is at risk, the Graduation
Initiative Steering Committee has identified a need on our campus to provide more intentional support
to these students. Undeclared students should be provided with resources to engage in self-exploration
and research that guides their choice of lower-division GE courses, and ultimately results in a wise
choice of major that leads to a satisfying career/life path. This type of approach to academic planning
should also help reduce the probability that undeclared students will complete lower-division GE
courses that are unnecessary for the major they ultimately choose.

¹ Although they are not linked to another LD GE course, we also offer specialized GEL 101 sections for Athlete (launched in
2007), EOP and SSS students.
In Fall 2011 we launched the Undeclared Learning Community (ULC) for the express purpose of serving the needs of our first-time first-year students who are undecided about choice of major. The curriculum and co-curricular focus is on academic and career planning, facilitating choice of major and involvement in campus life. Students are block enrolled into GEL 101 and Oral Communication (GEO 102). As is true for other learning communities, recruiting for the ULC was conducted by Undergraduate Advising Services advisors during the Summer 2011 and 2012 First-Year Student Orientations. The ULC is built to have the capacity for two cohorts of 30 students each and a total of 57 students enrolled in the Fall 2011 ULC and 55 students enrolled in the Fall 2012. As shown in Appendix A, the student learning outcomes and curriculum for the ULC represent a partnership between First-Year Programs, the Career Center, the General Education Oral Communication program, and Undergraduate Advising Services.

**Major and Minor Fair**

One important component of the ULC is a co-curricular project whereby ULC students participate in the planning and delivery of the Career Center’s “Major and Minor Fair” that is open to the entire university community. Organized by the Career Center, support for the Major and Minor Fairs was provided by First-Year Programs, Student Academic Support Services and the four Colleges and represents a significant cross-campus/cross-division effort to serve the entire undergraduate student population. In an effort to educate more students about academic options (i.e. majors and minors, and other academically related department opportunities), each College provided representatives, including faculty, student services professionals and academic advisors from every department. Informational tables, representing the various departments and degree programs, were set up in the event area outside of Kellogg Library.

An assessment of the 2011 and 2012 Major and Minor Fairs, conducted by the Career Center staff, indicated that the faculty and advisors who participated valued the opportunity to share department information and talk directly with students about degree options. In addition, the ULC students who assisted with the planning and delivery of the Fairs were afforded an opportunity to gain more in-depth knowledge of major/minor options and develop leadership/service skills. In addition, non-ULC students who attended the Fair found it to be helpful for learning more about major and minor options and that it should be offered again.

**ULC Pre/Post Survey Results**

Instructor and student feedback from the Fall 2011 and 2012 ULC cohorts indicate that the ULC is a successful model for educating undeclared students about their academic options, facilitating choice of major and encouraging engagement in campus life. Results of a Pre-Survey, administered at the beginning of the semester, indicate students were very open to exploring major and career options. Their thoughts about choice of major ranged from “very undecided” to “I have an idea” indicating that our recruiting process for the ULC yielded a group of students who were both undecided about their academic plan and motivated to research major and career options. Most students responding to the end-of-term Post-Survey reported that they had decided on a major. Among those who had not chosen a major, nearly all reported that they “had the tools to do so in the near future.” The findings indicate that by the end of the Fall semester the vast majority of ULC students had developed clarity on their academic plan and agreed/strongly agreed that the ULC provided an
environment to explore major and career options. Nearly all respondents rated their overall experience with the ULC as very helpful/helpful.

**One-Year Continuation Rates**
An additional positive outcome of the first year of the ULC was the substantial increase in the 1-year continuation rate for the Fall 2011 ULC students. Compared to all undeclared students and all first-time freshmen, the ULC students had a much higher 1-year continuation rate. Continuation rates for the Fall 2012 ULC cohort will be available in Oct. 2013.²

² Data about one-year continuation rates for the San Marcos Experience and the First-Year Business learning communities can be found in Appendix B.
The Future of Learning Communities at Cal State San Marcos

Plans for Fall 2013:
Our most recent WASC task force, our Foundations of Excellence® (FoE) task force, and our Graduation Initiative Steering Committee (GISC) have recognized the value of our GEL program and our first-year learning communities and encouraged our campus to strengthen our efforts in this area. In response to these recommendations we are doing the following for Fall 2013:

1) Based on our assessment of the ULC we are expanding the ULC to four cohorts.
2) We are adding two new learning communities; a Health and Wellness (HWE) residential learning community and a Chemistry/Biochemistry Learning Community (CBLC) for students intending to major in chemistry and biochemistry.

Challenges to growing our learning communities:
1) The mechanics of block enrolling students into linked courses. For Fall 2013 we are piloting the use of a co-requisite model to link learning community course sections during the registration process.
2) The need for resources to create high quality professional development for instructors who teach first-year students, particularly for those who teach GEL and related learning community sections.

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3 Pg. 33-44 of the WASC Educational Effectiveness Report- January 2009
http://www.csusm.edu/wasc/reports/wasc_eer_final_03_09_links_removed.pdf

Pg. 2 of the Foundations of Excellence Executive Summary http://www.csusm.edu/fycouncil/files/FoE_ExecSummaryV2.pdf

Pg. 2 of the Closing the Achievement Gap (now called the Graduation Initiative) Delivery Plan Report http://www.csusm.edu/aa/gradinitiative/delivery_plan_report_final_122309.pdf
APPENDIX A

Undeclared Learning Community – ULC

I. Student Learning Goals and Outcomes

Goal 1: Facilitate choice of major and career path
SLOs: Upon completion of the ULC a student will be able to:
- Articulate personal values, life goals and strengths, and be able to apply that knowledge during the consideration of various majors and career paths
- Demonstrate a comprehensive knowledge of the CSUSM academic offerings and be able to apply that knowledge when registering for lower-division GE courses and ultimately selecting a major

Goal 2: Facilitate engagement in the campus community
SLO: Upon completion of the ULC a student will be able to:
- Apply the necessary leadership, communication and organizational skills to plan a campus event and be able to apply those skills to other opportunities for campus engagement outside the classroom

II. Co-Curricular Activities in Support of the ULC and its SLOs:
- Service Project- Participation in the development, planning and delivery of a campus “Majors Fair”
- Additional co-curricular opportunities through Student Life and Leadership
REFERENCES


