

**Assessing the Impact of a Freshman General Education Program:
From Student Self-Reports to Direct Assessment**

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Program description

In 1997, the UCLA College of Letters and Science initiated the Freshmen Cluster Program, an undergraduate education initiative that offers freshman students the opportunity to enroll in an interdisciplinary, team-taught, yearlong course (two quarters of lecture and one quarter of seminar) focused on a topic of timely importance such as the "global environment" or "interracial dynamics in America." Twelve cluster courses have been developed since the program's inception, involving 5717 students, 140 graduate students, and 109 faculty. The program is currently offering 10 clusters enrolling 45% of the freshman class. Each cluster consists of 120-160 freshmen, 3-4 faculty members, and 4-6 teaching fellows. Students earn 15 units of credit (including honors credit), complete nearly a third of their required general education coursework, and satisfy both their general education seminar and Writing II requirements.

Past research: What we learned from the freshmen

In addition to the quarterly university course evaluations, our surveys of the students in the Spring Quarter of each academic year ('98-'99 to '02-'03) allowed us to collect data on students' motivation for enrolling and the impact of the unique aspects of the cluster courses.

The findings of these research efforts indicate that the program has achieved some of its objectives for student learning and engagement in the university community.

- **Motivations for enrolling in the program.** Students were primarily motivated by the extra GE credits offered, their interest in the topic of the course, and the yearlong structure of the course.
- **Impact on intellectual development.** Most students reported that their writing, analytical, and library skills were stronger as a result of taking this course. Most students felt that their cluster course was more valuable overall than other freshman year courses and especially in terms of thinking critically, the amount they learned, intellectual stimulation, engagement in the course, and enthusiasm about the course.
- **Workload.** Compared to other courses, students reported that their cluster required more work and they devoted more time to preparing for it.
- **Sense of community.** Cluster students also reported that they felt more sense of community and had more contact with teaching fellows than in other courses their freshman year.

Four years later: A pilot study with fourth year students who completed the cluster as freshmen

In 2004, OUER conducted a pilot study of fourth year students who had completed a cluster course sequence in the freshman year (2000-2001). The purpose of this study was to determine whether their impressions of the program at the end of the course sequence held true over the next three years and to show that the program had continuing impact on the rest of their undergraduate careers. Key findings from this study can be divided into two categories: reflections on the program and impact on student outcomes.

Reflections on program features:

- *Interdisciplinary approach (94%)*
Of all the unique features of the program, the highest percentage of students selected 'interdisciplinary approach' as important to their learning experience because it gave them an appreciation for a new or unfamiliar subject.
- *Yearlong sequence (91%)*
The next highest percentage of students rated the yearlong sequence as a feature that was important to their learning experience because it allowed them to develop relationships with peers, TAs, and faculty

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- *Spring seminar as capstone (87%)*
With the third highest percentage among the program's features, the seminar experience was highly regarded as an opportunity to explore a topic of interest in depth and as a more intimate environment for discussion.

Student Outcomes

- *Reflections on immediate impact*
 - [Understanding] a new or unfamiliar discipline (87%)
 - More intellectually challenged in first year of college (86%)
- *Long term impact*
 - Became more confident when approaching a TA (87%)
 - Better understanding of a topic from different perspectives (87%)
 - Impact on their ability to think critically (85%)
 - Impact on their ability to write clearly (78%)
 - Became more confident in their ability to contribute to class discussions (76%).
 - Impact on learning how to manage their time effectively in college (69%)
 - Made lasting friendships with students in their cohort (61%)
 - Cluster influenced other courses taken (37%)
 - Cluster influenced choice of major or minor (26%)

Research questions guiding the next survey of seniors

- Did the clusters continue to contribute to the student's academic and social development after the freshman year?
- How well did clusters fulfill student expectations (motivations) for taking the course?
- How can we relate features of the program (pedagogical, social) to the actual outcomes – in other words, not only what works but how are students changed by these particular experiences?
- What kind of valid comparisons can we make between cluster students and the rest of their cohort?

Next steps: Direct assessment of learning outcomes

In 2004-05, OUER is conducting a case study of direct assessment methods with one cluster, Biotechnology and Society. We are trying to assess the extent to which students can demonstrate mastery of selected learning outcomes defined and prioritized by the faculty. We are conducting a pre/post test comparison with 2-3 embedded assignments that incorporate outcomes based on five course goals: the acquisition of biological, ethical, political, and historical knowledge; the ability to integrate and apply information from science, philosophy, and social science sources; an experience of the scientific discovery process through hands-on laboratory experiences; improved critical thinking skills; and strengthened written and oral communication skills.

The direct assessment builds upon what we learned from the indirect assessment.

- Through early assessment efforts, we clarified and communicated the goals of the cluster program. These goals influenced the Biotech faculty's choice of student outcomes for their course.
- In the direct assessment, we are focused on what students reported in both the program review and student survey and the student objectives defined by the course instructors – (i.e. having an impact on critical thinking).