

# First-Year Experience Learning Communities Program Evaluation Fall 2015

A report by the First-Year Experience Program and the Office of Institutional  
Effectiveness and Research  
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## Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	2
Introduction.....	3
Participation of Freshmen in the First-Year Experience Program .....	3
First-time Freshman Success Goals .....	4
Goals Related to Mediating Variables .....	8
Area 1: Social Integration.....	9
Area 2: Academic Integration.....	9
Area 3: Academic Skills .....	9
Area 4: Adaptive Personal Skills .....	10
Students Who Did Not Return.....	10
Peer Mentor and Staff Advisor Outcomes.....	11
Faculty Outcomes .....	12
Using the Data to Improve the Program.....	12

## Executive Summary

The First Year Experience Learning Communities Program (FYE LC) demonstrated significant improvements in freshman success including:

- More students and faculty were involved in learning communities than ever before (97.3% of first-time freshmen; 314 students total; 34 faculty)
- Freshmen earned significantly higher grades ( $p < .01$ ) in their Learning Community courses (81% A/B/C) compared to their non-Learning Community courses (76% A/B/C)
- Ten percent more freshmen earned the Lottery Scholarship compared to previous years
- Fewer freshmen were put on Academic Probation (21.5% compared to the past three-year average of 26%)

While retention rates did not increase this year, we were working against many other factors, such as the closure of Student Support Services resulting in the loss of five advisers and the change in the ACT requirement. The FYE LC data support the LC literature stating that LCs are first and foremost intended to increase student engagement and learning. Thus, the effects of LCs may often be seen in the long-term, such as on overall GPA, graduation rates, graduate school admittance, and job placement.

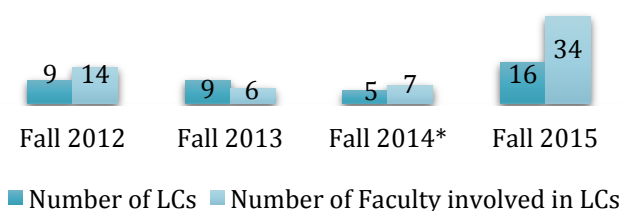
Listed below are the top five areas of improvement needed for fall 2016:

1. Acceptably compensate faculty for the time and effort involved in LC planning and teaching
2. Redesign of Peer Mentor duties, training, evaluation, and integration
3. Redesign of Integrative Seminar curriculum (formerly Freshman Forum)
4. Increased community-building activities and structures
5. Increased integration of linked courses

## Introduction

Fall 2015 was the first year that all first-time freshmen were required to enroll in a Learning Community (LC). Thus, 2015 marked the highest rate of student participation Highlands has ever had in first semester initiatives. It also marked the highest rate of faculty participation in such programs. In sixteen LCs and two special sections of Freshman Forum, thirty-four instructors served 314 students in the FYE program overall.

**Fall Learning Communities and Faculty Involvement (2012-2015)**



All together there are 322 students included in this evaluation, 298 of whom were included in the official first-time, full-time, degree-seeking freshman cohort (FFF). The remaining 24 students were freshmen who did not meet the definition for the official cohort, such as freshman transfer students, who participated in the program.

This review will focus on the FFF cohort. It will cover participation in the First-Year Experience Program (FYE), proximal and distal goals of academic success (Freshman Success Goals), goals related to variables known to have a mediating relationship with academic success, a description of what we know about the students who were not retained this spring, and an evaluation of factors related to the structure of the Learning Communities program.

## Participation of Freshmen in the First-Year Experience Program

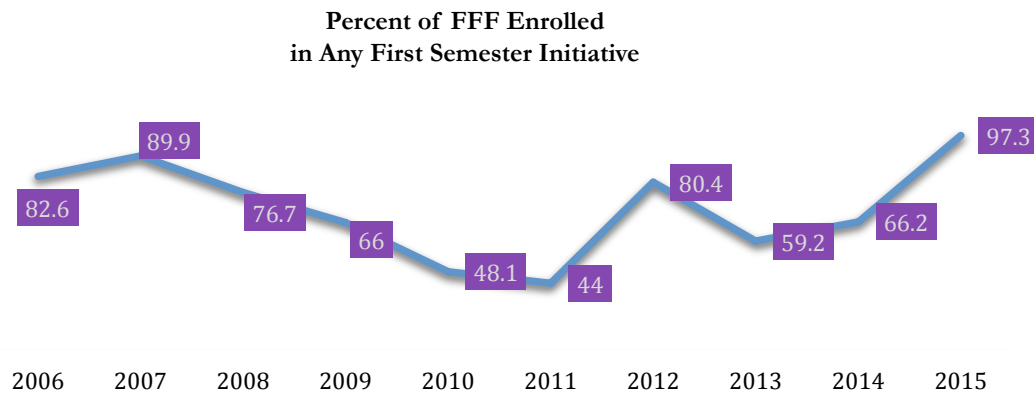
A major goal of the FYE program was to have all first-time freshmen participate in the program.

Of the 298 students in the FFF cohort, 278 were enrolled in Learning Communities consisting of a one-credit Freshman Forum class and two linked introductory level courses, most of which are part of the Highlands core curriculum. There were 12 members of the cohort who were not in Learning Communities but were in stand-alone sections of Freshman Forum. Most of these students had taken a large number of college courses while still in high school and so had already completed most of the courses linked in the Learning Communities. Some transfer students with less than 30 credits also participated in the program.

## Participation in FYE Fall 2015

	In LC	In Stand-Alone	Neither	Total
<b>FFF</b>	278	12	8	290
<b>Non-FFF</b>	18	6		24
<b>Total</b>	296	18		314

The requirement for first-time freshmen to enroll in a LC resulted in the highest rate of participation Highlands has ever had in first semester initiatives. Only 2.7% of FFF did not participate this year.



### First-time Freshman Success Goals

The FFF success goals are proximal goals that relate directly to the distal goal of graduating with a baccalaureate degree in six years or less. The majority of these goals relate to satisfactory academic progress across time.

#### **Freshman Success Goal 1:** Increase in retention to spring compared to prior years

In spite of the loss of five advisers due to the closure of the TRIO Student Support Services office and the removal of the ACT requirement for admission, the fall to spring retention rate did not fall drastically. The University's goal for the year 2020 is to increase fall-to-spring retention to 85% from our historical rate of less than 75%, and our hope was that we would see some increase towards this goal after the first full year of FYE implementation, but, as stated, we were negatively impacted by other circumstances. While the retention rate from fall 2015 to spring 2016 was slightly higher than the average rate over the past ten years (74%), it was lower than the top two years, in 2010 and 2014. To meet our year 2020 goal of 85% retention, we will need to increase by more than 10 percentage points.

**Percent of First-Time, Full-Time Freshmen Retained to 2<sup>nd</sup> Semester**

Cohort	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
<b>% Retained Spring</b>	73.2	73.5	72.3	71.0	78.1	72.0	75.0	73.4	77.8	74.8

**Freshman Success Goal 2:** Increase in retention to fall compared to previous years

This goal will be measured in the fall of 2016. The data for past years is reported in the table below.

**Percent of First-Time, Full-Time Freshmen Retained to 2<sup>nd</sup> Year**

Cohort	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
<b>% Retained 2<sup>nd</sup> Year</b>	45.5	45.8	45.3	48.3	50.0	54.8	47.6	48.4	52.4	

**Freshman Success Goal 3:** Increase in the number of credits earned in the fall semester by freshmen to an average of 15 credits

The average student should complete 16 credits to make good academic progress toward graduating within four years. With this in mind, we have set 15 credits as our goal for average credits earned. This year continued a trend toward increased credits earned by FFF in the fall semester, with the 2015 freshman cohort earning the highest average number of credits of any cohort over the past 16 years. It is important to note that fall 2014 was the first semester freshmen were required to maintain 15 credits (instead of 12) for the Lottery Scholarship.

**Average Number of Credits Earned by First-Time, Full-Time Freshmen**

Cohort	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
<b>Avg. Credits Earned</b>	10.7	12.1	11.1	11.2	11.2	11.0	11.2	12.0	12.9	13.1

**Freshman Success Goal 4:** Increase in attendance compared to prior years and compared to non-LC sections

This goal cannot be directly measured since we do not have attendance data at the course level. We do have data on the number of FFF who were reported for Early Alert in the third week.

**Percent of First-Time, Full-Time Freshmen Reported  
for Early Alert in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Week**

Cohort	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
% Reported	66.4	33.7	42.8	40.9	38.4	24.2	39.4	25.9	32.4	25.8

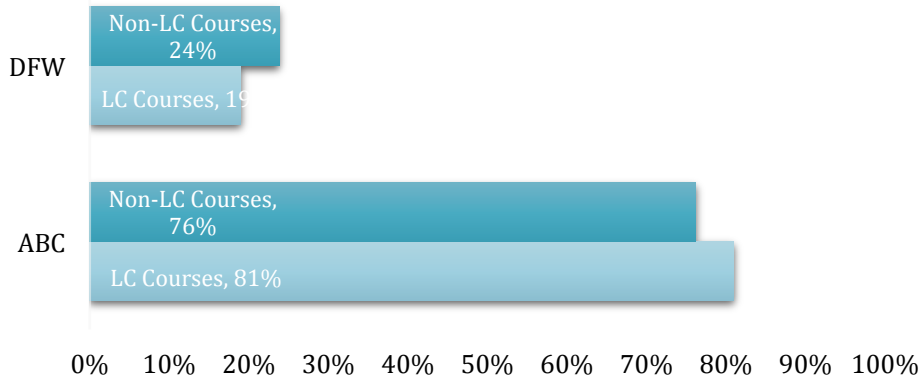
These data need to be interpreted cautiously since the number of faculty participating in Early Alert changes from year to year. We would like to see fewer students reported, but numbers related to this would only be meaningful if all faculty members were sending Early Alert reports.

**Freshmen Success Goal 5:** Decrease in D/F/W rates in classes taken by FFF

First-time freshman pass rates were higher for LC courses than for courses not connected within an LC. This was true when comparing individual courses taken by some freshmen as part of an LC and by other freshmen as a stand-alone course, such as English 106, Psychology 101, Sociology 152, Biology 110, and History 100. This higher pass rate was also true when comparing all freshman grades from LC courses with all other freshman grades ( $p < .01$ ).

	A/B/C	D/F/W	Total	% A/B/C
<b>LC Courses</b>	712	167	879	81.0%
<b>Non-LC Courses</b>	691	216	907	76.2%
<b>Total</b>	1403	383	1786	78.6%

**Fall 2015 LC vs. Non-LC Grades**  
This comparison is significant at the  $p < .01$  level



**Freshman Success Goal 6:** Increase in the number of freshmen with declared majors taking classes in their major compared to previous years

In 2015, only 32% of students who were enrolled in Learning Communities were in a LC that was directly related to their declared major though they may have been enrolled in non-LC courses in their major. Being enrolled in an LC related to the

major was not significantly correlated with spring retention. How we determine a student's major has proven problematic. Students report their major on various documents contradictorily, suggesting that their major as listed in Banner may not be accurate with their intentions. Students have also expressed difficulty with changing their major.

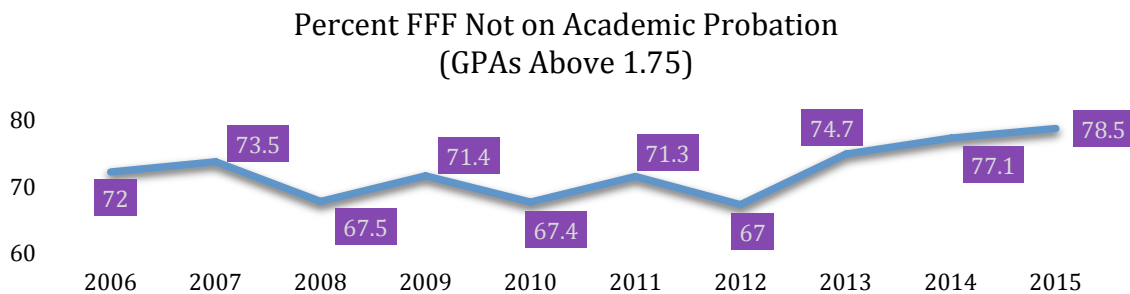
**Freshman Success Goal 7:** Increase in the number of University Studies majors who change major compared to previous years

This goal cannot be measured for previous years. Once a major has been changed during the semester, the data from the beginning of the semester is lost.

We do, however, have data for this year. Of 70 FFF who were declared University Studies majors at the beginning of the semester, 24 (34%) had changed their major by the end of the semester. Our goal is not to get all University Studies majors to change to another program of study, as University Studies is a viable choice in major. Rather, our goal is to move students who are essentially "undecided" to a major that fits their interests and goals. The literature indicates identifying a major of interest and beginning to take courses in that major early on in the college career is linked to academic progress.

**Freshman Success Goal 8:** Decrease in number of FFF freshmen on academic probation in Spring 2016 compared to previous years

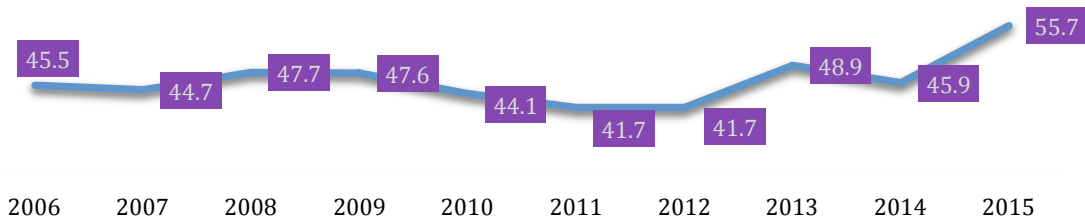
This year continued a recent trend toward fewer FFF on probation after the first semester (21.5% compared to the past three-year average of 26%).



**Freshman Success Goal 9:** Increase in number of freshmen who are lottery scholarship eligible in the fall who successfully are awarded the scholarship in the spring semester as compared to previous years

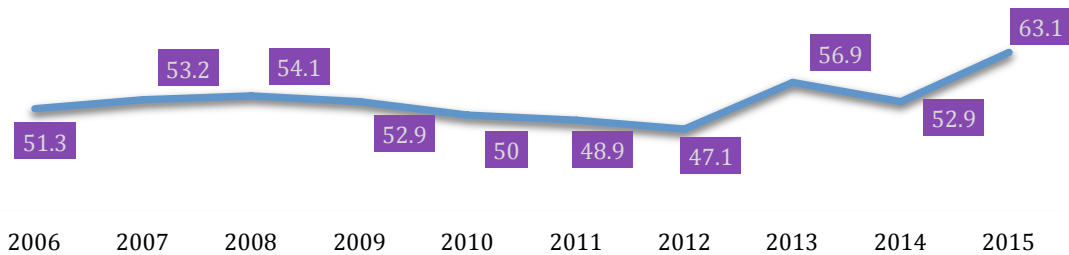
Along with the increases in fall GPA and credits earned, this year we saw a large increase in the number of fall-eligible students who were awarded the Lottery Scholarship in the spring.

Percent of Eligible Freshmen Earning Lottery Scholarship, Spring 2016



The above table does not include students who had earned the lottery scholarship but chose not to return in the spring. That number also showed a substantial increase this spring and is reported below.

Percent of Eligible Freshmen Earning Lottery Scholarship, Spring 2016 (including those not retained)



**Freshman Success Goal 10:** Increase in 4-year and 6-year first-time freshman graduation rates compared to previous years

This goal will be assessed in four years and again in six years.

**Freshman Success Goal 11:** Increase in average GPA for graduating students compared to prior years

This goal will be assessed in four years and again in six years.

### Goals Related to Mediating Variables

The majority of these goals were measured through an extensive First-Year Experience Program (FYE) survey given during the final week of classes. Since these questions were only administered at the end of the semester, we cannot make any determination as to whether or not participation in FYE increased any of these variables. However, we did learn which variables are correlated with student retention at Highlands and which differed across LCs.

One important point is that a full 25% of the students were not present during the last week of classes to complete the FYE survey. Not being present to complete the



FYE survey during the Freshman Forum class at the end of the semester was significantly correlated with being reported during the Early Alert process at the beginning of the semester, suggesting that not completing the FYE survey is a valid measure of attendance problems throughout the semester. There was a significant correlation between taking the FYE survey and retention. Of those who were present to complete the survey, 83% returned for the spring semester, compared to only 25% who were not present to take complete the survey.

### **Area 1: Social Integration**

Social integration was measured through 15 questions on the FYE survey. The questions addressed the extent to which students felt they had developed meaningful relationships with their peers and meaningful connections to the university and the Las Vegas community.

The mean social integration score was 3.7 on a 1-5 point Likert-scale. Social integration was strongly correlated with retention to the spring semester ( $p < .01$ ) and differed significantly across Learning Communities.

### **Area 2: Academic Integration**

Academic integration was measured through 14 questions on the FYE survey. The questions addressed the extent to which the students had developed positive, ongoing relationships with faculty, advisers, and peer mentors. Students were also asked about the development of clear academic and career goals and their understanding of basic processes at the university, such as how to declare a major and how to register for classes.

The mean academic integration score was 3.8 on a 1-5 point Likert-scale. Academic integration scores correlated significantly with retention ( $p < .05$ ). While there was a trend toward these scores differing across Learning Communities this correlation was not statistically significant ( $p = .065$ ).

### **Area 3: Academic Skills**

Academic Skills were measured through 10 questions on the FYE survey.

The mean academic skills score was 4.1 on a 1-5 point Likert-scale. Academic skills scores did not correlate significantly with retention or differ across Learning Communities. It is possible that the questions on the survey, the answers to which were self-reported, may not have accurately measured academic skills. Perhaps the best measure of academic skills is GPA and credits earned, both of which we saw an increase in this year.

#### **Area 4: Adaptive Personal Skills**

Adaptive Personal Skills were measured through 9 questions on the FYE survey.

The mean adaptive personal skills score was 4.2 on a 1-5 point Likert-scale. Adaptive personal skills scores did not correlate significantly with retention or differ across Learning Communities. A self-reported survey may not have accurately measured adaptive personal skills.

Adaptive Personal Skills were also measured through the 8-item Grit Scale developed in the Duckworth Lab at University of Pennsylvania. This scale was administered twice, once in the first week of classes and once at the end of the semester. There were no significant changes from the first administration (mean score 28.13) to the second administration (mean score 28.25). In addition, Grit scores did not predict retention and did not differ significantly across Learning Communities.

#### **Students Who Did Not Return**

There were 39 students who completed the FYE survey at the end of the semester who did not return for the spring semester. Of those, 20 students indicated on the FYE survey that they did not plan on returning for the spring semester. Two said they were not returning but did anyway, 14 said they were planning to transfer after the first year, and another 9 said they were planning to transfer after their second year.

#### **Survey Question: Plans for fall if not intending to return to NMHU**

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Transfer to a NM Community College	9
Transfer to a NM 4-year University	3
Transfer to an out-of-state Community College	7
Transfer to an out-of-state 4-year University	12
Not planning on pursuing higher education	1
other	3

Sixteen of the students who said they were transferring indicated that they wanted to go to a school that was closer to home.

### Survey Question: Reason for not returning to NMHU

Answer	Frequency
Financial problems	12
NMHU does not offer my major	12
There is not enough to do on the NMHU campus:	10
There is not enough to do in Las Vegas	18
Personal problems	13

### Peer Mentor and Staff Advisor Outcomes

In addition to our goals for first-year students in areas in which Peer Mentors play a role (social integration, etc.), we also have stated goals for our Peer Mentors:

- Increase in positive experience as a student leader
- Increase in positive experience with faculty
- Increase in collaboration with faculty
- Increase in positive relationships with first-year students

These goals were measured using an end-of-term Peer Mentor Survey.

Likewise, we have stated goals for the staff advisers linked in the LCs (the LCs to which they are linked constitutes their caseload):

- Increase in positive relationships and collaborations with faculty
- Increase in positive relationships with students

Peer mentors who had a better experience as a student leader were in FF sections that had higher spring retention rates ( $p < .05$ ). Peer mentors' overall experiences were also significantly correlated ( $p < .05$ ) with students' ratings of their overall experience with NMHU and the students' belief that the Learning Community was enjoyable.

Peer mentor and staff adviser perceptions of student responses to their engagement/communication strategies were significantly correlated with how peer mentors and staff advisers felt about their experiences ( $p < .05$  for peer mentors and  $p < .01$  for staff advisers).

Peer mentor and staff adviser perceptions of student responses to their engagement/communication strategies were also significantly correlated with their ratings of the amount of collaboration they experienced with the FF instructor ( $p < .05$  for peer mentors and  $p < .01$  for staff advisers).

Even though the peer mentor and staff adviser perceptions of student responses to their engagement/communication strategies were important to their own experiences, those perceptions were not correlated with the students' perceptions

of their experiences, such as their overall experience with NMHU, their satisfaction with their experience in their learning community, or their development of friendships within the learning community.

## **Faculty Outcomes**

Thirty-four instructors participated across sixteen LCs for fall 2015. LC faculty were trained in On Course (Active Learning pedagogy) in January and May of 2015, were provided times to workshop their LCs in many sessions during spring 2015, attended group work sessions, attended a workshop led by the Director of the Washington Center for Improving Undergraduate Education, and participated in a variety of webinars. Some faculty members also attended the National Summer Institute on Learning Communities at Evergreen State College during the summer. Each faculty member teaching in the LCs attended at least one of the events, and other faculty and staff also took advantage of these opportunities. Training had not been provided in past versions of the program.

Faculty members were surveyed at the beginning and end of semester. We were also able to collect qualitative data during faculty group meetings and the workshop led by the Director of the Washington Center. We collected data on faculty use of the shared Desire2Learn resources page as well as surveyed faculty again in the spring 2016 semester. The qualitative and quantitative data indicated that faculty appreciated when they had the opportunity to collaborate, but that some did not accomplish this, as they had minimal to no communication with their LC partners. We also learned that faculty appreciated getting to know their students better, and that LCs allowed them to do so. Faculty, as well as the students, were concerned about Freshman Forum and felt it was not working as intended. Faculty were concerned about compensation for their additional work in LCs and wanted more support for the teaching of integrative learning and redesigning courses. We learned from faculty that the adviser link could be stronger and that the peer mentors needed more training and support, and the faculty would like training on how to utilize the peer mentors.

## **Using the Data to Improve the Program**

**AY15-16 FYE data demonstrates the following areas of the program need transformation:**

- 1. Acceptably compensate faculty for the time and effort involved in LC planning and teaching**  
Qualitative data collected from faculty indicated the need to examine compensation for LC planning and teaching. The Faculty Association and the administration are in the processes of negotiation.
- 2. Redesign of Peer Mentor duties, training, evaluation, and integration**  
We learned that positive experience as a peer mentor was significantly correlated with retention and that the peer mentor's experience was significantly correlated with students' social integration ratings and rating their LC as enjoyable. We know that social integration is significantly correlated with retention and that social integration differed significantly across LCs. We also learned that peer mentor and staff adviser perceptions of student responses to their engagement/communication strategies were

significantly correlated with their ratings of the amount of collaboration experienced with the Freshman Forum instructor and that faculty rated the experience with the peer mentor as least satisfactory of the experiences survey in spring 2016.

We are working toward providing the appropriate supervision and training for peer mentors. The first step was to move the supervision of peer mentors from the Office of Academic Support to the Academic Enrichment Programs office to provide clearer and more focused duties, training, and support for these student workers. A Peer Mentor Coordinator will be necessary to properly supervise and train peer mentors. A budget is also needed for peer mentor training and peer mentor-related Hacienda and LC activities. Criteria will be created, and peer mentor selection will begin immediately. Faculty development on working with peer mentors and advisers will also be provided.

### **3. Redesign of Integrative Seminar curriculum (formerly Freshman Forum)**

Qualitative data from faculty and students indicated a strong need to revise Freshman Forum.

The first step was to rename the course and revise the catalog description, which was approved by the Academic Affairs Committee in early spring 2016. A revised syllabus was also presented at this time and was piloted spring 2016 with one section. Further revision is necessary and the Coordinator of Academic Enrichment Programs and the Director of the Center for Teaching Excellence will continue working on the revision during summer 2016. The revised syllabus, course outline, and lesson plans will be provided to Integrative Seminar instructors for fall 2016. The daily role of Peer Mentors will be worked into these documents.

### **4. Increased community-building activities and structures**

We learned that social integration was significantly correlated with retention. Social integration questions addressed the extent to which students felt they had developed meaningful relationships with their peers, and meaningful connections to the university and the Las Vegas community.

Efforts are already underway to support community-building. LCs have been grouped 5-6 together into Haciendas with a shared Integrative Seminar time in which peer mentors and faculty can get larger groups of students together. The Haciendas will participate in community service projects, fun social activities, and the "First-Year Competitions." A residential component is being planned to bring the Haciendas together on a more intimate level to encourage relationship-building as well as integration of academics into residence life.

### **5. Increased integration of linked courses**

Qualitative data indicated that faculty members need more support in course redesign and course integration.

Academic Enrichment Programs (AE) and the Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE) are working jointly to support faculty in building integrative curriculum. Professional development for LC faculty began spring 2016. The first event gave an overview of the program structures, integrative learning, and the program goals. LC faculty were asked to come up with an idea by the end of March for at least one integrative project that can be presented to the campus community in a Celebration of Learning event at semester's end and one integrated field experience. They were asked to form detailed plans for these by the end of April (AE and CTE support available upon request). The second event featured a discussion with veteran LC professors discussing how they have built their integrative curriculum over time. At semester's end, faculty will work in teams to workshop their integrative projects and align their course curriculum with the LC. During Professional Development Week in August, LC faculty will participate in additional professional development workshops designed specifically to support their LC efforts. Faculty development will be ongoing throughout the fall semester.

**6. Create more meaningful field experiences**

Only 9 of the 16 LCs participated in a field experience in fall 2015. Qualitative data indicates that faculty members need more support creating field experiences that tie to the curriculum.

As part of the first LC professional development event in spring 2016, LC faculty were asked to come up with an idea and detailed plans for at least one integrated field experience. AE and CTE were available for support upon request as faculty were forming ideas and plans for these experiences. AE and CTE will check in with faculty at the end of the spring semester and provide necessary support for field experience planning and integration within the course curriculum at that time. Continued support will be provided.

**7. Link to spring semester**

As a strategy for increasing social integration, community, and commitment to the university, ideas are being explored for year-long LCs. For the 2016-2017 AY, peer mentors will maintain contact and continue providing activities into the spring semester for their fall LC students. Students will be encouraged to select a course to take together in the spring semester, and we will work toward building structure for this selection.

**8. Better support and programming for transfer students and former dual credit students**

Qualitative data indicated a strong need to address specific needs of transfer and former dual credit students, who come in with many credits and often cannot find an LC that offers courses they need. In fall 2015, these students were placed in "stand-alone" sections of Freshman Forum.

To address this issue, for fall 2016, two LCs were created that connect less credits but provide additional experiences (connection to students at the

University of Puerto Rico – Arecibo; mentorship by graduate students in the field). These two LCs will work better for the course needs of former dual credit and transfer students. In cases in which these two LCs do not meet the course needs of a student in these two groups, a special section of Integrative Seminar (B) has been created. This section will be tailored to address the concerns of these students and has been scheduled within one of the Hacienda times so the students can build relationships with a larger group of first-year students.

#### **9. Improved Placement of Students in LCs**

Qualitative data indicated placement of students in LCs was an important area of concern. We have created an online LC Placement Survey that students receive after registering for New Student Orientation. The survey collects information about a student's interests, goals, skills, and special circumstances (e.g. dual credits). Advisers use the survey to find the LC that best fits the student.

Academic Affairs Committee approved a LC priority scheduling block between Mon-Fri 10:00-12:15. Freshman and sophomore level courses that a freshman might take in the first semester were scheduled outside the block unless linked in an LC. This scheduling arrangement will allow freshmen the ability to register for any LC without regard for time, improving LC placement based on interest. Students can then fill their schedules with core courses outside that time block that work with their other co-curricular commitments. This block also allows freshmen to change their schedules more easily if needed and allows Hacienda groups to come together at a common Integrative Seminar time.

#### **10. Increased team building for LC faculty teams**

In order to build community and social integration for students, we must build community within the LC faculty. LC faculty members will participate in professional development within their Hacienda groups as well as compete with their students in some of the "First-Year Competition" events. We will need to build other social events for LC faculty (retreats, etc.).

#### **11. Improved data collection and assessment**

We are looking to purchase tablets to facilitate ease of administration of surveys. We are considering other FYE assessments and will revise our current surveys. The online LC Placement Survey will allow ease of data collection for particular data. More research and planning will take place in the summer.