

Learning Community Snapshots

General Education First Year Cluster Program: California State University, Hayward

I have taught freshman for twenty-five years and when I started seeing the richness and knowledge base students bring to their writing in a cluster, I was stunned. So often students just “exercise” their way through a freshman writing class; they are completely unengaged . . . I think we get such good work from the students because the clusters are challenging and students rise to the occasion because they remain steeped in their topic, their theme.

—Alison Warriner

Since the fall of 1998, all first-time students in the California State University (CSU) system who do not score 550 or better on their SATs must take an English Placement Test (EPT) and an Entry Level Mathematics Test (ELM) before admission. In the CSU system, students whose EPT and ELM placement results identify them as “remedial students” cannot enroll in any other courses until they register for appropriate remedial courses. These must be taken in the first quarter and in subsequent quarters until students are prepared for baccalaureate-level English and/or Mathematics courses. Students are allowed only one repeat of required coursework and they need to meet CSU system requirements within one-year.

At California State University, Hayward, 55 percent of 750 entering freshmen do not meet the cut-off writing score and 60 percent fall below the needed score in mathematics. Unlike open admission community colleges, Cal State Hayward receives no budget allocation to support underprepared students. Many of these students whose placement results identify them as “remedial students” stand in the top one-third of their high school class. They have completed college preparatory coursework with a GPA that qualifies them for admission. Misaligned expectations explain some of these results—for instance, high school English focuses on literature and not argumentative writing, a college-level expectation. Unfortunately, a successful outreach program where college and high school teachers work together to articulate what students need to know for college entry has recently been cut.

In these circumstances, the General Education First Year Cluster Program continues to be an ambitious and successful program with a forward-looking approach that addresses entering students’ various levels of academic preparation without marginalizing those who are compelled to take developmental courses. At Cal State Hayward, all freshmen students choose for the first three quarters of their undergraduate education from more than a dozen clusters of thematically linked courses in the natural sciences, arts and humanities, or social sciences. These cluster classes connect students and professors who share similar interests in a learning community that links courses, with many opportunities for curricular integration, based on a common theme or inquiry. For instance, the “How Things Work” cluster offered in fall quarter 2003 through Spring Quarter 2004, introduces the shared theme to students in this way: “Have you ever wondered how a bicycle or a light bulb works? How humans exercise and use their senses? How earthquakes and volcanoes occur? If you’re curious about how science explains how things work this cluster is for you.” Biology, geology, and

physics are the three discipline courses in the cluster, one of which is taken each quarter. Another cluster, “Viewing Diversity,” connects coursework in anthropology, ethnic studies, and communication, the common element a critical overview of “some of the most important issues pertinent to a broad variety of ways in which human beings perceive diversity. Major emphasis will be devoted to visual presentations of diversity regarding individual identity, culture, gender, race, ethnicity, nationality and the global balance of political and economic power.” Developmental students can register for all clusters except classes in the sciences that specify admission requirements.

Each quarter, students take one of three thematically-linked discipline-based courses tied to an information literacy class taught by a librarian, along with classes in English composition, speech, and an academic success component that is taught by lecturers and graduate students. Each quarter a general education (GE) activity course ties cluster classes together. Within the English composition component, students enroll in different writing courses based on their writing ability. For instance, in fall quarter 2002, approximately 120 to 130 students were enrolled in English 0989, a tutorial led by faculty for no more than ten students who place just below college-level writing proficiency; around 100 students enrolled in a writing 0804 course designed for non-native speakers whose writing ability placed them at a “college ready” level; and, the program also ran more than fifteen sections of a three-quarter 0801, 0802, and 0803 developmental writing course sequence for native speakers.

While mathematics is not part of a learning community cluster, the progress of students who enroll in developmental level mathematics courses, in addition to the General Education Cluster Program, is tracked. The academic success component includes an introduction to campus resources, academic counseling, and learning and study skill strategies that support students not only in their cluster classes, but also in learning math. Academic advisors and counselors attend academic success classes and students can participate in a peer-mentoring program.

While many factors combine to create a successful cluster program, the composition component of the clusters is taught by a highly trained group of instructors who are part of the Cal Sate Hayward composition program, praised by an external reviewer and writing-across-the-curriculum expert as one of the best composition communities in the country. Many instructors who teach developmental writing are graduates of or graduate students in the composition program where they receive training on working with developmental students along with seminars on writing pedagogy. For instance, beginning graduate students take the theory and practice of composition in fall quarter, followed by a writing-across-the-curriculum course in winter quarter, and a spring practicum on teaching writing where they shadow an experienced developmental instructor for the entire quarter and also student teach for a few weeks in a developmental composition class. When these graduate students begin to teach in the Cluster Program, they have experience and are further supported by several organized meetings throughout each quarter where instructors who teach developmental writing students, including those who are part-time, share materials and offer one

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another support. Writing teachers design the writing curriculum based on the books and syllabi used in the cluster and consult other cluster writing faculty that may include up to three developmental teachers and one to two faculty who teach college level English.

At the end of their freshmen year, students whose entry assessment results require them to take three quarters of developmental math and three quarters of developmental English typically complete a total of forty-four credits, twenty-four of which are remedial and twenty are baccalaureate units.

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