

**2003-04 ACADEMIC SENATE REVIEW OF THE GENERAL EDUCATION
FRESHMAN CLUSTER PROGRAM**

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Appendix I: Site Visit Schedule

Appendix II: External Reviewers' Reports

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INTRODUCTION

The General Education Freshman Cluster Program at UCLA represents an ambitious attempt to broaden and deepen the educational experience of a significant number of incoming freshmen. The goals of the Program are to smooth the transition of new students from high school to college, to expose them to a broad range of disciplinary and inter-disciplinary subjects and methodologies consistent with general education, to strengthen core academic skills such as critical thinking and writing, and to help freshmen students form and participate in communities of learning. Our assessment is that the Cluster Program has been enormously successful. Indeed, we view it as one of the jewels of undergraduate education at UCLA, an innovative educational experience that should be celebrated and nourished in these times of budgetary difficulties. In the words of the external reviewers:

The Freshman Cluster Program is a great success. All of my observations and recommendations above are intended to make an excellent program even better. Perhaps it is so ambitious that it can not possibly fulfill all of its goals equally well. Nevertheless, it has succeeded in creating an integrated, interdisciplinary, team-taught year-long academic experience for first-year students—something almost no other college or university has attempted, and certainly something that no other college or university has accomplished more successfully. In this moment of financial threat, the cluster program first must be protected and should even, if possible, continue to grow to offer this powerful learning opportunity to even more UCLA freshmen.

- Hank Dobin, Dean of the College, Princeton University, pp11

The bottom line is that as long as it [the Freshman Cluster Program] continues to be mounted with such high quality, it will be an excellent gateway experience for undergraduates.

- Christina Maslach, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education, University of California Berkeley, pp3

The Review

In 1998 the Cluster Program was formally launched by Judith Smith, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education, as a five-year initiative. This is the first Academic Senate review of the Cluster Program and follows Vice Provost Smith's request for review as the cluster initiative period comes to an end. The review process began with the self-review report produced by the Cluster Program administrative team in collaboration with cluster faculty and the Office of Undergraduate Evaluation and Research in the Division of Honors and Undergraduate Programs. The self-review further benefited from the commentary of an external review team brought to campus to evaluate a fledgling Cluster Program, supported by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. A draft of the self-review report was distributed to faculty cluster coordinators at a meeting on May 15, 2003. At that time, the coordinators endorsed the self-review report appended.

The formal Academic Senate review began with a "pre-meeting" between members of the internal review team, Vice Provost Smith and several members of the Cluster Program administrative team. At that meeting the review timetable was finalized and the review team

members asked for a copy of the Hewlett Foundation Report and some additional cluster syllabi. The Cluster Program administrative team has been most helpful and extremely responsive throughout the course of the review.

The Freshman Cluster Program site review took place on March 11-12, 2004. Over the course of two days, the review team met with Judith Smith, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education, with the Cluster Program administrative team, with cluster science faculty as one group and with cluster social sciences and humanities faculty as another group, with graduate student instructors, with the instructional support team (library, writing programs and OID representatives), with representatives from the Office of Residential Life, with David Rodes, Chair of the General Education Governance Committee, and with current and former cluster students. Additional discussion took place with a small number of cluster faculty on an individual basis.

Overview of the Freshman Cluster Program

The General Education Freshman Cluster Program comprises a series of yearlong classes that are only available to freshmen. Each of these classes consists of two quarters of lectures and discussion/laboratory sections and a spring quarter capstone seminar. Students who successfully complete the full year of study receive 15 units of credit (almost one third of their required General Education (GE) coursework), and satisfy their GE seminar and Writing II requirements.

The individual classes, or clusters, within the Freshman Cluster Program are team taught by faculty and graduate student instructors drawn from a number of different departments. Faculty members teach the fall and winter quarter lectures, focusing on core concepts from different disciplinary perspectives, while faculty and graduate students offer a number of spring quarter seminars (capped at 20 students) that allow more in-depth analysis of selected materials associated with each of the cluster courses, and that demand a substantive final written project on the part of students. The clusters focus on topics of considerable academic and societal importance, such as interracial dynamics, the global environment, biotechnology and society, globalization and the history of social thought. Cluster topics are selected, in part, for the way that they allow, even demand, inter-disciplinary approaches: a central aim of the cluster program is to expose students to the ways in which different disciplines examine common problems.

At the same time, the individual clusters are supposed to enhance the basic intellectual skills of freshmen, particularly in the areas of critical thinking and writing, and to foster a community of learning or scholarship among faculty, graduate student instructors and students. To attain these goals the Cluster Program is supported by a dedicated team of administrators/lecturers, librarians from the undergraduate library, by writing program consultants, by representatives of the Office of Residential Life and by the Office of Instructional Development.

Between 1998 and 2003, twelve different cluster courses have been developed and taught at UCLA. Some of these clusters have been offered only once or twice, others have been offered each year the Cluster program has been in existence. Over this five year period, 196 capstone seminars have been taught, sixty percent of these by graduate student instructors. In sum, 4234 freshmen students have participated in the Cluster Program, along with 73 faculty members and 102 graduate teaching instructors.

STRENGTHS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The UCLA Freshman Cluster Program is innovative both in intent and structure. It aims to satisfy a series of diverse goals - of general education, exposure to the mission and practices of a research university, skills development and establishment of learning communities - and it attempts to do so with a year-long curriculum where alternative disciplinary viewpoints and approaches take center stage. Both external reviewers commented that such goals are more typically met with a series of separate programs combining small writing classes and freshmen seminars with larger introductory general education classes. Evaluating the accomplishments of the UCLA Freshman Cluster Program, the external reviewers write:

Where UCLA stands out from the crowd is in trying to achieve these multiple goals within an integrated, 3-quarter course sequence. This educational vision is a very ambitious one, which is difficult to do well and is not an easy model to sustain. Despite these challenges, UCLA has been remarkably successful at achieving these multiple goals, and providing a unique educational experience for the students who enroll in the FCP [Freshman Cluster Program].

- Christina Maslach, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education, University of California Berkeley, pp1

Has the cluster program succeeded at its ambitious agenda? Are the administrative and logistical efforts and the additional expense of the cluster program worth it?

My own answers are, unequivocally, “yes” and “yes”.

- Hank Dobin, Dean of the College, Princeton University, pp1

The Student Experience

The students that enroll in the Cluster Program have a significantly higher average high school GPA, average SAT-math and SAT-verbal scores than non-cluster students. For declared majors, significantly more cluster students were likely to be humanities majors and significantly fewer of them were likely to be life science or physical science majors than non-cluster students. This seems to reflect the year-long commitment required by the Cluster Program and the relatively tight curricula schedules of first-year science students.

About 49% of cluster freshmen are undeclared, a number comparable to that of non-cluster first-year students. Our evaluation of the success of the Cluster Program is based on the quantitative indicators of student performance presented in the self-review report and on our discussion with two groups of current and former cluster students and other members of the cluster community.

Students learn about the Freshman Cluster Program largely from summer orientation counselors. Enrollment in the Cluster Program is seen by many students as an efficient way of satisfying a significant portion of GE requirements at UCLA, especially in those areas where credits would not accrue from fulfilling course requirements in preparation for a major. Thus, science clusters tend to be over-populated by humanities and social-science students, while humanities and social science clusters attract large numbers of science students. One of the external reviewers (Hank Dobin, pp3) worried that these "demographics" might suggest the Cluster Program is not fulfilling the GE mission of requiring that students seriously engage alternative majors. However, well over one-third of the current cluster students interviewed stated that participation

in the Cluster Program made them question their choice of major. Indeed, one student reported that participation in the inter-racial dynamics cluster made her switch to north campus from the pre-med program. Another student reported interest in obtaining a minor completely unrelated to the major because of the cluster experience, while a business-econ major talked of a completely new perspective on science after participation in the biotech cluster. The cluster self-review reports about 15% of students found the Cluster experience useful in their choice of major. Overall, then, there is evidence that the Cluster Program is meeting its General Education goals.

What is more certain is that students do not always appear to be getting the right information from the summer orientation counselors about why they should consider participation in the Cluster Program. Students reported counselors advising them that clusters represented the “quickest way of satisfying GE requirements”, or that they were “the best way of getting GE credits in the areas where you are weakest”. A number of students commented that the advice they received from counselors did not match their experience in the Cluster Program. While we would not want to claim that the counselors do not present some of the more positive pedagogical aspects of cluster participation, the inconsistent advice coming from summer counselors needs attention.

Although students enrolled in the Cluster Program for a variety of reasons, they expressed little equivocation when asked to evaluate their cluster experience. Data gathered from year-end surveys of students, reported in the self-review, reveals that students find cluster courses much more valuable than other classes, more intellectually stimulating and more challenging. The students also report their attachment to, and level of engagement in, cluster classes is markedly higher than in non-cluster classes. The review team amassed similar evidence in its discussions with current and former cluster students. Students commented that:

- The cluster has helped me more than any other course. You read critically, you read between the lines, in part because you're asked to think about different perspectives on the same subject.
- The cluster gives you more time to explore, it gives you more of a feeling of what upper division must be like. In most non-cluster classes, you get interested in a topic and then you move on to something else.
- You need a slow-reading rather than a speed-reading class for the cluster: you really have to think about the readings.
- It's not an easy A by any means, they expect a lot....They treat you like educated individuals.
- My GE cluster class is my favorite class. I want to go to the class, I put something into it.

Most students also noted that the cluster experience was intense. A good number of the students we interviewed reported that the amount of reading they had to do was very high. However, this appeared to be a concern only with one or two of the cluster courses. In addition, student's noted that while they enjoyed the team-teaching format and different styles of professors, they had some difficulty in piecing together the different arguments and distilling the most important information. There was overwhelming evidence that without the close support of the graduate teaching instructors, the clusters would lose much of their coherence.

How has the Cluster program succeeded at meeting the specific goals of the program, namely, developing critical thinking and writing skills and developing a sense of belonging within a community of scholars? The external reviewers were particularly interested in writing instruction. They asked cluster students whether their writing skills had improved because of instruction through the Cluster Program and a little over 50% of students responded positively. Data in the self-review reports a slightly higher percentage. This difference probably reflects our questioning of students who had not yet completed the spring cluster seminars where the focus on writing is particularly intensive. Unfortunately, we do not have strictly comparable data on writing improvement in non-cluster students and so the relative effectiveness of the clusters as a means of improving writing skills is difficult to judge. Across individual cluster courses we were told that writing comprises somewhere between 20 and 35% of fall/winter quarter grades. Hank Dobin (pp 9) argues forcefully that this percentage should rise and that faculty should take a more active role in emphasizing the importance of writing. Discussions with the cluster community as a whole suggested that writing instruction was a task largely left to the graduate student instructors. Unfortunately, the graduate instructors felt that their training in writing instruction, approximately eleven hours in relatively large groups, was insufficient to be very effective, especially when it came to assisting the weaker writers. Overall, the graduate instructors would welcome additional and on-going, institutional support for the writing component of the Cluster Program.

The review team focused somewhat less on the development of critical thinking, analytical and related skills than on writing. However, data from the year-end survey, reported in the self-review, shows strong evidence of student intellectual development in these other areas through participation in the Cluster Program: approximately 70% of students surveyed report that their analytical and library skills were stronger at the end of their freshman year. 15 of 22 students interviewed by the review team noted that their library and other skills were enhanced in their cluster classes.

In terms of achieving a sense of belonging to a learning community the clusters also are performing well. The year-long format of the clusters classes allows students greater opportunity to make contact with faculty and graduate instructors, as well as with their peers. There is considerable evidence that cluster students take advantage of this opportunity. In meeting the review team, students talked about the friends and study groups that had formed through the clusters, they commented that professors in the clusters were “closer” to students and more “enthusiastic” than in non-cluster classes, and that the graduate student instructors in the clusters were better prepared and more committed than in other classes. Data from the year-end student survey suggests that such educational community building helped students get more out of the cluster courses. Our, less formal, discussion seemed to concur. In general, the students interviewed regarded the cluster experience as a significant advantage in their adjustment to the university.

In terms of the stated goals, the Cluster Program has clearly been successful on some fronts, while on others success has proven more difficult to measure. All review team members applaud the efforts of the cluster administrative team to gather information on cluster student performance. We also are in agreement that there should be more attention paid to comparing the performance of cluster students against some form of non-cluster control group, especially in the

area of writing skills assessment. However, the bottom-line is that the students perceive the cluster program as a challenging and rewarding experience and one that clearly helps prepare them, intellectually and socially, for their journey through the university and thereafter. The students were also clear that the success of the program is due, in large part, to the hard work of the faculty and graduate student instructors.

Faculty

The 2003 Report of the Joint Administrative Taskforce on Undergraduate Education in a Research Context indicates that more than 50% of pre-major and GE classes at UCLA are taught by lecturers and non-ladder faculty. The Cluster Program has increased the exposure of freshmen students to ladder-rank faculty, who deliver approximately 75% of Cluster lectures (Self-Review Report). Faculty participants in the Cluster Program are drawn from a wide cross-section of academic units at UCLA, although south campus units tend to be somewhat under-represented. Discussion with south campus faculty suggests home departments and/or schools are concerned about the “loss” of some of their best teachers to the Cluster Program and about competition from Cluster courses to departmental GE classes. These issues pose a threat to the viability of science-oriented clusters and thus, possibly, to the Cluster Program as a whole. Across faculty from the Humanities and Social Sciences, departmental support for participation in the Cluster Program appears to be considerably higher, although there remain concerns that faculty from smaller departments might be unable to participate as their home departments have less latitude in mounting an effective teaching program. Most everyone agreed that the current system of faculty buyouts for participation in the Cluster Program is “about right” in terms of compensation to home departments. Without this system, the Cluster Program could not function.

For individual faculty, participation in the Cluster Program is regarded as a challenging and time-consuming endeavor, but one that offers many intellectual rewards from the creation of novel year-long, inter-disciplinary classes, from the opportunity to experiment with new forms of pedagogy, from the potential for interaction and learning with and from colleagues, and from the chance to “mold young minds” and get to know students better. Many Cluster faculty lamented the fact that such opportunities tended to be rare at UCLA. On reflection, the overwhelming majority of Cluster faculty have enjoyed the experience and believe that, in different ways, participation has contributed to their professional development.

For most faculty in the Cluster Program workload is a significant issue. There is little question that Cluster teaching is very demanding. On top of the usual lectures/seminars, lab/discussion design, there are frequent planning meetings throughout the year, coupled with commitments to various social activities on top of regular class hours. And all of this typically follows an arduous process of cluster course development, sometimes taking as much as a year. Development of integrated class materials and attempts to make the cluster classes as inter-disciplinary as possible clearly presented many difficulties. These difficulties were acknowledged by the cluster faculty, as they were by students who often found themselves searching for direction. However, the faculty involved remain incredibly enthusiastic about a program that they, and others, have invested so much in. For cluster course coordinators, those faculty who lead the development of new cluster courses, there are additional fixed costs of forming and molding affinity groups of

faculty interested in developing a cluster, and of taking the lead in course development. These coordinators commonly receive a one-course buyout for their additional administrative efforts. As best we can tell, this level of compensation is appropriate for the work performed.

At the end of the day, how successful are the Cluster Program faculty? One obvious indication of their success is the relatively high evaluations that they receive from students (reported in the self-review). In our interviews, student praise for this dedicated group was effusive. Past cluster students commented that they have “never had more enthusiastic teachers”, and that the faculty appeared to be “teaching a class they loved, not one they had to” (see also Dobin, pp2). Current cluster students stated that the professors in the cluster courses “made more effort to have contact with students”. All this enthusiasm helped instill the notion of a knowledge community and appears to us to have led to a higher level of student engagement.

Graduate Student Instructors

Graduate student instructors play a critical role in UCLA’s Freshman Cluster Program. Through fall and winter quarters they are responsible for leading discussion and lab sections. In the spring quarter, graduate students are expected to develop a seminar based on their own research interests insofar as these dovetail with the primary substantive material of the cluster course with which they are affiliated. In this respect, the Cluster Program is explicitly designed to provide many of UCLA’s senior graduate students with their first opportunity to develop a class and take primary responsibility for its instruction.

Most of the graduate students that participate in the Cluster Program are advanced to candidacy and have at least five quarters of prior teaching experience. The graduate student instructors are typically selected by the faculty of individual cluster classes based on academic merit and experience. In some clusters, selection follows an open call to those interested and qualified. In other clusters, it is unclear if there is a general announcement regarding cluster teaching opportunities. Many of the students who apply to the program do so because of recommendations from faculty and graduate students with prior experience in the clusters. Unfortunately, relatively few of the graduate instructors come from the sciences. This reflects the greater availability of other funding opportunities, particularly research assistantships. To an extent it also reflects a negative bias on the part of some science faculty toward teaching and related activities that are perceived as slowing time to degree.

Almost all the graduate students we interviewed said that the Cluster Program is a big undertaking and that it does slow progress to degree. For many, but not all, participation in the Cluster involves somewhat more work than a regular teaching assistant position, in part because of the regular class meetings and extra preparatory work. This burden was greater in fields relatively unfamiliar to the students and where the diversity of the teaching faculty and class materials was greater. In all cluster classes, but in the more disparate clusters especially, the graduate student instructors play a central role in terms of contextualizing materials for the freshmen students, many of whom stated that they would have been completely lost without their TAs. More generally, across the undergraduate students we interviewed, the praise given to the graduate student instructors was tremendously high. In many instances they were regarded as the best teaching assistants individual students have experienced at UCLA, largely a reflection of

their “commitment”, “dedication” and their “high level of preparation”. The graduate instructors have a significant impact on many of their undergraduate students, so much so that past cluster students remain in contact with their graduate teachers: yet more evidence of the role of the clusters in fostering a community of scholars at UCLA.

Notwithstanding the workload, the graduate student instructors that we interviewed unanimously regarded their participation in the Cluster Program as positive. It was clear that the spring seminar is the key to their involvement. Especially for returning graduate instructors, but also those new to the Program yet aware of their spring quarter duties, the opportunity to create their own class was inspiring. As Hank Dobin (pp2) comments, “The opportunity to teach in the clusters provided them [graduate instructors] with their greatest and most satisfying intellectual challenge as teachers and scholars in training. The fellows universally saw the experience as a critical piece of their professional development.” In this regard, the Cluster Program has clearly met another of its primary goals.

The graduate student instructors would like to see some changes in the Cluster Program. Specifically, they felt that they did not receive adequate training to help undergraduate students with their writing skills. Currently, the graduate instructors receive about eleven hours of training in writing instruction prior to the start of the cluster sequence. Many commented that such instruction was offered in a large group setting. The graduate students would like more training in writing instruction and they would like that training to extend over much of the year during which they are actually teaching. A secondary concern of a good number of the graduate student instructors focused on logistical concerns about teaching and advising students in the new De Neve Plaza Commons building. These concerns appear minor – access to parking, to office space, to computers, to the cafeteria – but they generated considerable debate among the students that we interviewed.

Administration

The Cluster administrative team, led by Vice Provost Smith, has done a superb job in designing the broad outlines of the Cluster Program and working with faculty, graduate students and other support staff on campus to mount the individual cluster courses. It is doubtful that such a vital program would have emerged from individual departments and groups of faculty without strong administrative support and visionary guidance.

The Cluster administrative team plays an especially critical role in the formation of cluster courses, from helping individual faculty form affinity groups and advising them on the broad structure of the Cluster Program, to shepherding classes through the General Education course approval process. David Rodes, Chair of the GE Governance Committee, and numerous cluster faculty, commented that GE approval for cluster classes is an unnecessarily laborious process and that some streamlining is required. The review committee concurs.

The core administrative support team has been assisted by many other groups. As Hank Dobin (pp4) states, “The cluster program has benefited enormously from the time, expertise, and funding of other units on campus, notably the library, OID, and the writing programs.”

The administrative team also has done an admirable job in trying to establish a system for monitoring the effectiveness of the Cluster Program. This system rests heavily on student interviews and perceptions about their experience in cluster courses. We endorse the importance of these evaluation efforts but ask, in addition, that the program attempt to identify a control group of non-cluster students that might allow performance comparisons between cluster and non-cluster students in the future. Christina Maslach (pp2-3) and Hank Dobin (pp10) both call for additional assessment of the Cluster Program.

Such a complex and ambitious program of intellectual development is not inexpensive. Indeed, the Cluster administrative team estimates that the instructional cost per student is approximately 20% higher in the Cluster Program than outside (self-review, pp29). We believe that these costs are fully justified and that by increasing the number of students within individual cluster courses by a relatively small number, the per-student instructional costs of the clusters could be made commensurable with those of non-cluster courses.

We are also strongly of the opinion that the budget of the Cluster Program as a whole, and the portion of that budget that supports the central administrative team, should not be reduced.

GOALS

Vice Provost Smith had set a goal of enrolling about 40% of the freshman class in the Cluster Program, offering approximately ten cluster courses each year. She also mentioned the possibility of devolution, of giving more control over cluster course maintenance to individual groups of faculty and departments, as well as appointing a faculty director for the Cluster Program.

Given the reduction in the size of next year's freshman class, the 40% enrollment target should be met if ten clusters are offered. The review committee wondered why that target might not be lifted. Individual faculty and graduate students all thought that the program could be expanded though the upper limit of demand is uncertain. Given the apparent success of the program, expansion certainly seems a desirable goal, so long as it was cost effective. As we mentioned earlier, a small increase in enrollment within each of the clusters would bring per-student costs down in-line with those of an equivalent non-cluster experience, with the added benefits.

Whether or not the Cluster Program is to grow further, the review team was in accord that the program must continue to develop new cluster courses. A number of faculty who presently teach in the cluster expressed some reservation about continuing their involvement over the medium-to-long-term. Within individual clusters some annual turnover of faculty can be accommodated, within others, such turnover might jeopardize the cluster entirely. It seems to us unlikely that the Cluster Program will be able to continue to mount ten clusters each year without development of three or four new clusters. It is therefore imperative that the Cluster administrative team work to expand the number of potential cluster courses. We concur with Hank Dobin (pp 5) that an inventory of about fifteen cluster classes should suffice.

We were unclear about the need for a Cluster faculty director. With Vice Provost Smith at the helm of a very capable administrative team, it was unclear to us what the functions of such a director would be. “However, the [review] team did express concern about what would happen at the point that Judi Smith is no longer personally involved in guiding and managing the program. If a new Vice Provost or Dean were either less supportive or less involved, then appointing a faculty director might make sense.” (Dobin, pp5).

Finally, we heard clearly from the faculty that moving control of aspects of the Cluster Program to individual departments was probably not a good idea at this time, for financial and other reasons.

SUMMARY

In just about all respects the UCLA Freshman Cluster Program has been a remarkable success. Testament to this success, in spring 2004, the Program was awarded the Theodore Hesburgh Certificate of Excellence at the annual meeting of the American Council on Education. A constructive spirit that hopes to make an accomplished program even more outstanding guides the commentary above and the recommendations that follow.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Administration:

1. The UCLA Freshman Cluster Program should be supported at all costs. In these times of fiscal difficulty, we strongly urge that the budget for the Cluster Program be maintained at its current level.
2. Reduce the overly burdensome GE course approval process for cluster courses.

To the Cluster Administrative Team:

1. Continue to develop new cluster courses such that an inventory of cluster classes is established sufficient to allow approximately ten clusters to be offered each year.
2. Revise the system of writing training for graduate student instructors to emphasize smaller classes, expanded preparation and year-round instruction and support.
3. Increase the number of graduate student instructors associated with each cluster to reduce the graduate student workload.
4. Try and find ways to encourage the participation of science faculty and graduate students in the Cluster Program. (Perhaps through re-evaluating the requirements for graduate student instructors and through broader advertising of the Cluster Program.)

5. Improve the quality and consistency of information provided to prospective cluster students during the summer counseling sessions.
6. Expand the Cluster student evaluation program to enable more effective comparisons, including quantitative indicators of performance, between cluster and non-cluster students.
7. Meet with graduate student instructors to address logistical concerns about teaching at De Neve.

Respectfully submitted:

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