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**Four Years Later:  
Reflections on Freshman Cluster Experiences**

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**Office of Undergraduate Evaluation and Research  
Division of Undergraduate Education**

**UCLA**

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## **Four Years Later: Reflections on Freshman Cluster Experiences**

The Freshman Cluster Program was initiated in 1997-98 to engage students in yearlong, collaboratively taught, interdisciplinary courses that are focused on topics of timely importance. Each cluster is devoted to a broad topic, such as the environment, and grounded in a set of pedagogical principles that emphasize:

- ***Interdisciplinarity.*** Teaching and scholarship that covers multiple areas of knowledge and different ways of knowing, and that attempts to demonstrate how various disciplines converge and diverge in their approaches to common problems.
- ***Best Practices.*** Participating in activities such as intensive discussion, inquiry-based learning, group work, primary text analysis, research, interdisciplinary study, and seminars that have been demonstrated to foster both student learning and good teaching.
- ***Intellectual Skills.*** Learning how to think critically, deliver reasoned and persuasive oral and written arguments, identify, acquire, and use the knowledge necessary to solve problems, and evaluate both traditional and digital information.
- ***Learning Communities.*** Developing a sense among first-year students that they and their instructors are part of a common intellectual community, which encompasses both in-class and out-of-class teaching and learning experiences.

Since the program's inception, a total of 13 cluster courses have been designed and taught, involving a total of 10,550 students and engaging 198 graduate student instructors (GSIs) and 102 faculty. During its nine-year history, the cluster program has also offered 493 culminating seminars, 40 percent of them taught by UCLA faculty and 60 percent by the program's GSIs.

In 2003, a comprehensive five-year review of the program revealed that freshmen found their cluster courses to be challenging and intellectually stimulating. More than half reported that their writing, analytic, and library skills were strengthened as a result of their cluster participation. Freshmen especially credited the spring culminating seminars with enabling them to further investigate course content and relate it back to what they had learned during the preceding two quarters. They also valued highly the sense of community they felt in the clusters, both with their fellow students and their instructors.<sup>1</sup>

What remains to be seen is how students retrospectively view their cluster experience four years later, as college seniors. What impact do they feel their participation in this innovative general education program had on their transition to college? What elements of the cluster program do they feel had the most pronounced effects on their subsequent undergraduate careers? What can we learn from them to potentially enhance the cluster experiences of future freshman cohorts? This report summarizes the senior year reflections of 610 students who participated in the freshman cluster program during 2000-01 and 2001-02 and who, in both cases, were surveyed four years later.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the clusters, please refer to the *Freshman Cluster Program Self Review 1998-2003* at: <http://www.college.ucla.edu/ge/clusters/selfreview.pdf>

## **A Brief Overview of the Freshman Cluster Program**

Cluster courses differ in content and instructional methods, but all are designed as learning communities and include three groups of participants: (1) a freshman population of anywhere from 120 to 200 students; (2) an interdisciplinary teaching cohort of three to four faculty members and three to six GSIs; and (3) an instructional support network including the cluster administrative team, librarians, Residential Life representatives, and Writing Programs consultants. Learning communities like the cluster program have been found to ease first-year students' transition from high school to college by providing them with more supportive social networks, greater opportunities to meet and interact with faculty, enhanced instructional support services, and a wider range of extracurricular educational activities.<sup>2</sup>

During fall and winter quarters, cluster students attend lecture courses and small discussion and/or laboratory sections. In these sections, they work on a wide range of academic skills—critical thinking, writing, lab work—and also learn how to engage in college-level discussions about specific problems, texts, or ideas that are addressed in the larger faculty-taught lectures. In spring quarter, students enroll in a culminating seminar that builds on their experiences during the first two quarters and challenges them to complete a substantive project of their own. They also continue to take part in intensive discussion, debate, research, and writing exercises and to engage in collaborative learning activities. Both the discussion sections and the culminating seminars are limited to twenty students each and are taught primarily by each cluster's cohort of advanced GSIs. Faculty also lead discussion sections and culminating seminars, but in smaller numbers.

To further the sense that students and instructors are part of a community engaged in common intellectual enterprises, cluster courses are taught in specially designed classroom space in the residence hall area of campus where some ninety percent of the first-year class resides. In addition to their class meetings, cluster participants engage in other events such as dinners, film and media presentations, and field trips that provide them with additional opportunities to apply course material to real-life situations and to become closer with their peers, GSIs, and faculty. Over the course of the academic year, students receive 15 units of credit, complete nearly one-third of their required general education coursework, and satisfy both their general education seminar and Writing II requirements.

### **Methodology**

The information in this report is derived from the Cluster Senior Survey, which assesses students' perceptions of the cluster program four years after they participated as entering freshmen. The survey, which also includes open-ended questions, queries students' retrospective perceptions of selected features of the program, its effects on selected skills, and its impact both on their transition to college and their subsequent academic performance. The survey also asks students to identify the most memorable and challenging aspects of the clusters and the reasons they would (or would not) recommend the program to incoming students.

Two versions of the survey were administered; one in spring and summer 2004 (to students who completed the cluster sequence in spring 2001) and the other in spring and summer 2005 (to students who completed the cluster sequence in spring 2002). Copies of the survey questionnaires are contained in Appendix A. Only students who received a grade of D- or higher in their spring seminar were included in the survey population. In both years, students were initially sent a notice asking them to complete the survey online. Several

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<sup>2</sup> See Love, A.G. and Tokuno, K.A. (1999). Learning community models. In J.H. Levine (Ed.), *Learning communities: New structures, new partnerships for learning* (Monograph No. 26). Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition.

weeks later, non-respondents were mailed a paper version of the survey. In mid summer, a final paper survey was mailed to students who still had not responded. To encourage participation, potential respondents were offered the opportunity to participate in a drawing for either a \$100 or \$200 gift certificate. Of the 751 students who completed the cluster sequence in 2000-01, 276 (37%) completed the questionnaire (150 online, 126 via paper). Of the 888 students who completed the cluster sequence in 2001-02, 334 (38%) completed the questionnaire (231 online, 103 via paper).

The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS. After the data were inputted, student responses were analyzed using frequencies and cross tabulations. Responses to each open-ended question were downloaded into a separate file. Researchers developed a deductive coding scheme based on key cluster features. Assisted by the data analysis software program ATLAS.ti, they then used those codes along with inductive codes that arose from the data to sort all of the responses.

Many of the questions that members of the 2000-01 cluster cohort were asked to answer differed from those to which their 2001-02 counterparts were invited to respond. Consequently, this report summarizes information that was first aggregated by respondent cohort, then organized topically to illustrate key themes that emerged in reviewing the information that was available from both groups of senior survey respondents. Necessarily, most of the percentages that are reported in this report reflect proportions of respondents from a single cohort rather than both cohorts.

## **Findings**

The primary purpose for studying seniors' retrospective perceptions of their freshman cluster experience is to understand how the program impacts undergraduate student development and socialization. The subsections that follow highlight four major contributions the cluster program makes to students' educational experience at UCLA: (1) appreciating interdisciplinarity; (2) enhancing skill development; (3) establishing a sense of place within the academic community; and (4) promoting active learning.

### **Appreciating Interdisciplinarity**

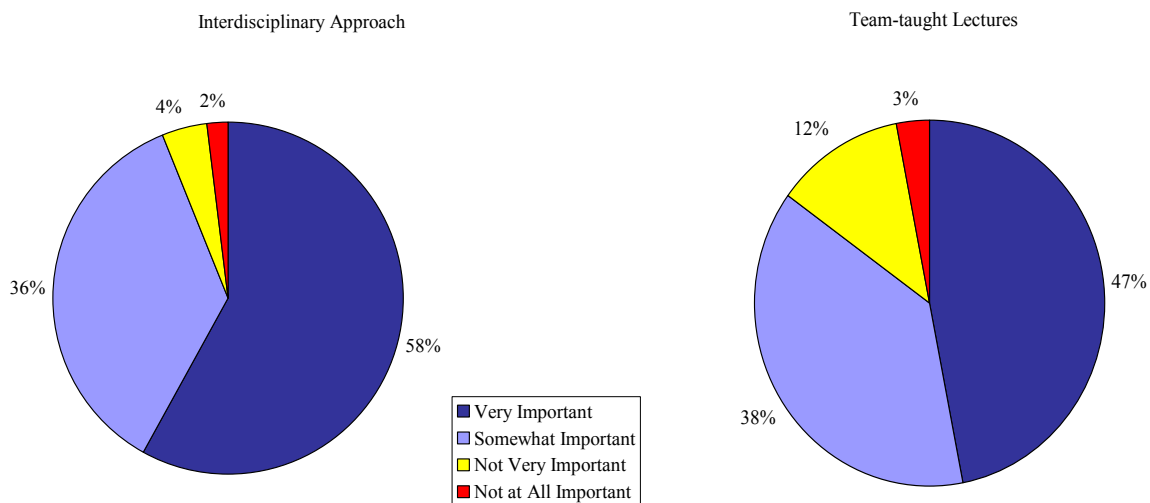
One goal of the cluster program is to challenge freshmen to understand complex and controversial issues from multiple perspectives. Toward that end, teams of faculty and GSIs from different disciplines, departments, and programs familiarize freshmen with their distinct disciplinary perspectives on the cluster topic. They also work together to demonstrate how their various disciplines converge and diverge in approaching common problems.

Looking back four years later, the overwhelming majority of former freshman cluster participants believed that the interdisciplinary approach and team taught lectures were "important" to their cluster learning experience (Figure 1). More specifically, over 80 percent "agreed" that the interdisciplinary nature of the clusters and the faculty's collaborative approach to teaching helped them to see a topic from alternate perspectives, aided their ability to synthesize knowledge from disparate fields, and increased their understanding of the similarities and differences between disciplines. Roughly 30 to 45 percent felt that their cluster experience impacted their abilities in each of these areas either "strongly" or "to a great extent."

Many respondents recalled the difficulty they initially experienced as freshmen when challenged to "think across" traditional disciplinary lines and apply different "lenses" and "frames of reference" to the material they were studying. They also readily recalled the difficulties they faced in attempting to "integrate ideas across a wide spectrum." However, looking back on that experience, students commonly expressed their appreciation not only for the "broad overview" and "solid foundation" they gained as a result of the

clusters' interdisciplinary emphasis, but also for the increased consciousness they felt with respect to how “amazing,” “diverse,” “interconnected,” and “rewarding” various fields of study are. Ultimately, just over one-third (37%) reported that they opted to take more courses related to their freshman cluster that were not related to their major or minor field of study, while roughly one-quarter (26%) said that as a result of their cluster experience, they became more interested in majoring or minoring in a cluster-related field.

**Figure 1. Importance of an Interdisciplinary Approach and Team-taught Lectures to Student Learning**



Reflecting on their undergraduate experience as a whole, more than nine in ten respondents (94%) said that understanding a topic from a different perspectives was either “very” or “somewhat” important to their academic performance at UCLA. Asked specifically to evaluate the unique effect that their participation in the cluster program had on their ability to view topics from multiple perspectives, more than eight in ten (84%) rated the clusters as having had “great” or “some” impact. For many, the interdisciplinary nature of the clusters was the program’s “most” memorable aspect. In fact, just under half (49%) indicated that the opportunity to study a new or unfamiliar discipline is a “very” important reason why they would recommend the cluster program to incoming freshmen.

Taken together, these findings confirm the results of earlier analyses. For example, in the various assessments conducted between 1998 and 2003, a majority of freshmen reported that the clusters’ interdisciplinary approach increased their awareness of contemporary issues and was “a good basis for all introductory classes.” Freshmen also indicated that the team-teaching approach “provided variety,” and that they enjoyed the “diversity of the course material as well as the perspective offered by multiple professors and graduate student instructors.” Based on the responses of seniors who participated in the current study, the program’s emphasis on interdisciplinarity appears to have made a lasting, and very positive, impression.

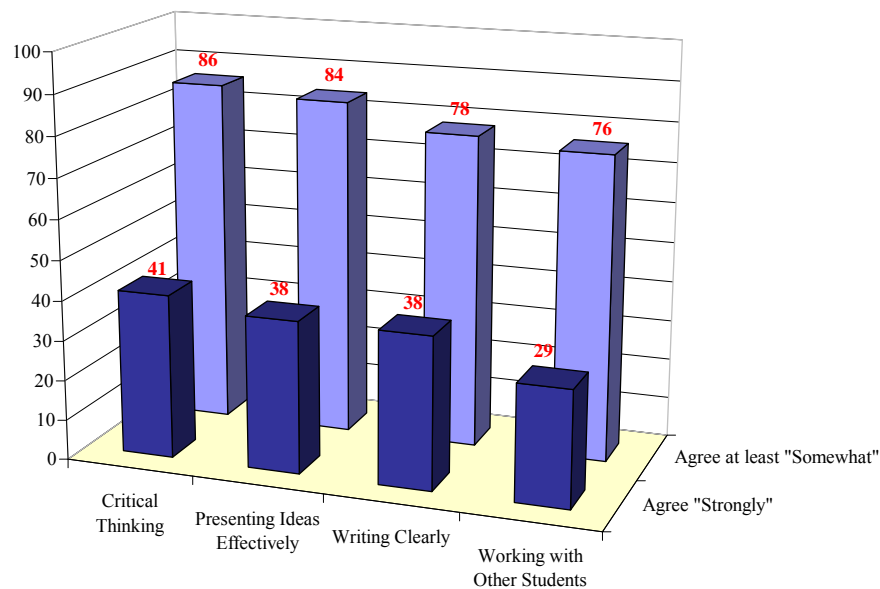
## Enhancing Skill Development

Another central goal of the freshman cluster program is to strengthen skills—critical thinking, problem solving, rhetorical effectiveness, creative expression—that will enable freshmen to succeed both academically and within a rapidly changing world. Senior survey findings show that, in addition to enhancing students’ understanding of a topic from different disciplinary perspectives, the cluster experience positively impacts other aspects of students’ intellectual skill development. Additional skills that promote students’ academic success and self-understanding are also commonly strengthened.

### *Thinking, Communicating, Writing, and Collaborating*

Fully eight in ten students indicated that they felt “more intellectually challenged” during their freshman year as a result of their cluster program involvement. Based on students’ developmental self-perceptions, the clusters’ most pronounced effects were on their critical thinking skills, capacity to present ideas effectively, ability to write clearly, and ability to work well with other students. In each of these areas, more than three-quarters of former cluster participants agreed that, to at least “some” extent, their cluster experience contributed positively (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Cluster Effects on Selected Skill Development**



Overall, students expressed the highest regard for the cluster program’s role in enhancing their critical thinking skills. The majority of respondents viewed their experiences in cluster discussion/lab sections as having at least “some” impact on their ability to think critically about course readings (80%) and topics raised in lecture (84%). Reflecting back on their undergraduate experience in its entirety, these students believed that cluster activities helped them learn to evaluate situations before “jumping to conclusions fueled by narrow-mindedness and preconceptions.” Some students also reported that the “broadening” capacity of the clusters made them both more “confident” in asserting their own opinions and more “tolerant” of others’ sometimes dramatically different perspectives. Respondents also attributed their enhanced critical thinking skills to the challenges they experienced in being asked to read and evaluate

texts that were “in many cases beyond my full understanding” and then attempt to communicate those ideas clearly.

Students were also highly complimentary about the positive effects they believed the cluster program had on their writing ability. Nearly 20 percent considered their self-perceived gains in writing ability to be the “most” valuable aspect of the cluster experience. This assessment was based, at least in part, on the value these students saw in learning how to “research, understand, digest, and then reconceptualize completely foreign ideas.” Finally, although only about two-thirds (65%) viewed their capacity to work with other students as having been “important” to their overall academic performance at UCLA (this was the lowest rated item on a list of ten skills queried), fully three-quarters (76%) felt that their cluster experience had either “some” or “great” impact on their ability to work collaboratively.

### ***Information Literacy, Citizenship, and Time Management***

While not as highly rated overall, many senior survey respondents also felt that their cluster experience enhanced other skills that were instrumental to their subsequent academic success. For example, seven out of ten students believed that their freshman cluster activities improved their reading strategies and enhanced their understanding of how to use others’ words and ideas ethically. Other information literacy skills that respondents believed were augmented by their freshman cluster participation included locating books and other materials in the UCLA library (60% agreed) and evaluating Internet sources for academic purposes (59% agreed). Overall, roughly one-quarter believed that the clusters “strongly” impacted their skill development in each of the four above-mentioned areas.

Participating in the clusters also influenced some students’ values, citizenship, and awareness of current events. For example, 80 percent of senior survey respondents “agreed” that their cluster experience contributed to their understanding of contemporary issues and problems. Not all of the clusters emphasize citizenship and the development of personal values as part of their curricula. Nonetheless, between five and six out of every ten respondents reported that the clusters impacted their personal values (61%) and made them more aware of their responsibilities as citizens (56%). Just under one-quarter of these respondents (23%) noted a “great” impact in each of these areas. Looking across clusters, fewer than fifteen percent of respondents indicated absolutely “no” cluster impact on their sense of responsible citizenship (14%), personal values (11%), and understanding of contemporary issues and problems (5%).

Finally, approximately sixty to seventy percent of respondents reported that their cluster experience had improved their time management skills. Seniors recalled that they were particularly challenged by the amount of reading they were assigned in the freshman clusters, alternately describing it as “grueling,” “aggressive,” “difficult,” and “more than one person could actually complete.” However, faced with “constant” reading demands, students were “forced,” to “evaluate the importance” of each assignment, “develop strategies” to help them effectively cover large amounts of material, and determine how to establish and maintain a healthy “balance” between their academic and social lives. For some students, experiencing that overload within the cluster environment ultimately helped increase their ability to manage multiple and conflicting demands later on in their undergraduate careers.

Seniors’ generally positive assessments of the clusters’ effects on selected aspects of their skill development are consistent with reviews freshmen have provided. For example, at the end of their cluster sequence, well over half of freshman participants reported that their writing, analytical, and library skills had been strengthened. The “depth of analyses and the breadth of concepts” within the clusters was described by one freshman as resulting in an “unparalleled opportunity for holistic education and intellectual stimulation.” The effects of such experience seemingly continue to impact students throughout their undergraduate careers.



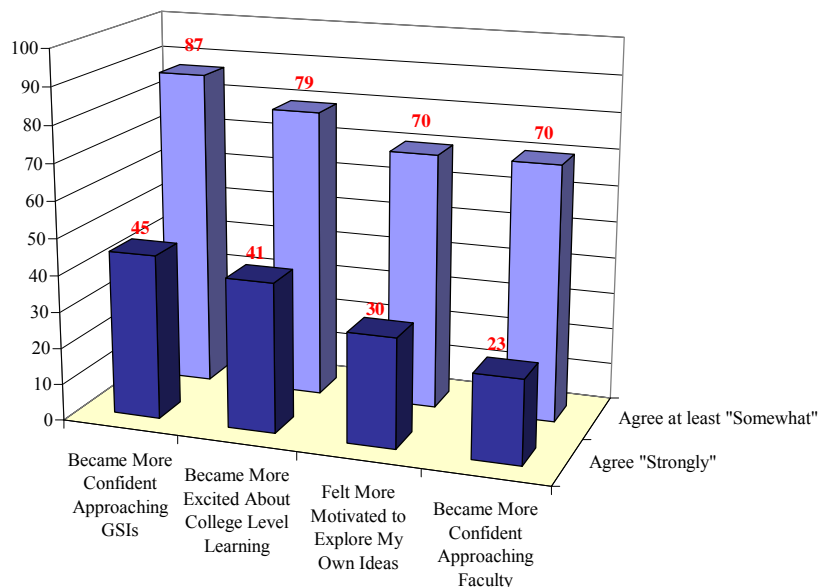
## Establishing a Sense of Place within the Academic Community

In addition to instilling an appreciation of interdisciplinarity and enhancing skills to promote academic success, the Freshman Cluster Program aims to help ease students' transition from high school to college by creating a community of learners among freshman, faculty, and GSIs. Community bonds are established and nurtured via academic and social experiences that occur both in and out of class. As such, the clusters are designed not only to challenge students intellectually but also to foster their academic self-confidence, socialize them to college teaching and learning, encourage them to be more engaged in the first year of college, and provide them with opportunities to establish meaningful connections with their peers and instructors. Taken together, findings from the senior surveys reveal that the cluster experience generally enhances students' academic and social self-confidence.

### Academic Self-Confidence

On the whole, seven in ten students "agreed" that their cluster experience had at least a "somewhat" positive effect on their confidence approaching faculty and graduate student instructors, their excitement about college level learning, and their motivation to explore their own ideas. A subset of roughly one-quarter or more of that same population agreed "strongly" that their freshman cluster experience had a positive effect on each of these conditions (Figure 3). In response to a separate question, just over three-quarters (78%) reported that their cluster experience enhanced their academic self-confidence. Students also underscored the clusters' instrumental role in helping freshmen "learn how to learn in a college environment" and teaching them "how to get the most out of [their] education."

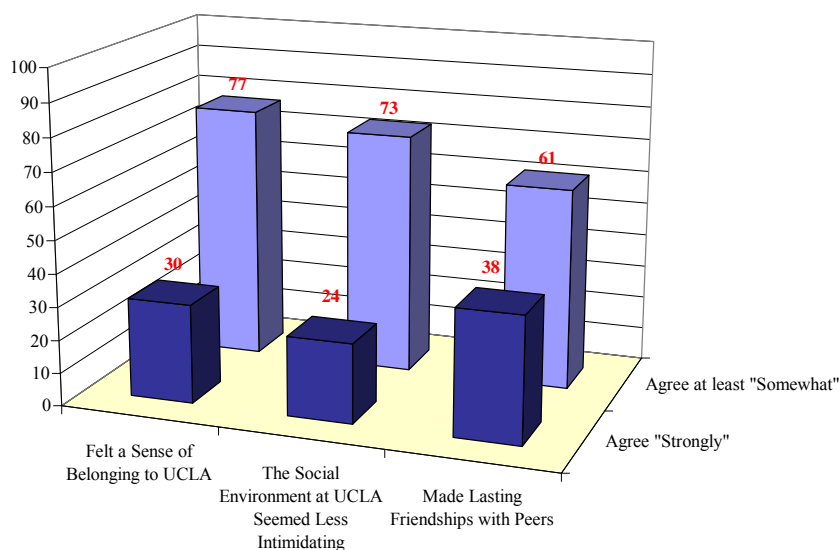
Figure 3. Cluster Effects on Selected Aspects of Student Motivation and Confidence



### Social Self-Confidence

In addition to the cluster program's academic benefits, many students experienced lasting social gains. For example, more than seven in ten seniors reported that their cluster experience contributed to them feeling a sense of belonging to UCLA and made the social environment seem less intimidating. Roughly six in ten students also indicated that they made lasting friendships with their cluster peers (Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Cluster Effects on Selected Social Outcomes**



All in all, the overwhelming majority of former cluster participants who responded to the follow-up surveys credited their cluster experience with playing a significant role in socializing them, within a very supportive environment, to the expectations and practices of a research university. The clusters’ yearlong format was especially instrumental in helping students begin to feel “at home” in the UCLA community, both academically and socially. Reflecting back on their freshman year cluster experience, some seniors expressed their appreciation for what one referred to as the “consistency” that cluster participation provided in the “craziness of freshman year.”

Indeed, the overwhelming majority of respondents (more than nine in ten) indicated that having the same class for an entire academic year was “important” to their process of becoming “acclimated” to college life. Many seniors also recalled that the structured opportunities to interact with peers and instructors outside of class were instrumental in reinforcing that they were important members of the academic community. Being able to observe faculty as researchers, participate in their research activities, and engage with them in individual and small group dialogue, as opposed to simply listening to them lecture in a traditional classroom environment, was especially important to helping students feel less “intimidated” interacting with faculty, more enthused about the subject matter, and more secure in their own abilities.

Overall, senior students’ enthusiastic recollections of the benefits they enjoyed as members of a learning community closely parallel the sentiments they expressed four years earlier, as freshmen. Embarking on their undergraduate careers in a “warm,” “welcoming,” and “supportive” environment where they felt simultaneously “comfortable,” “confident,” and “challenged” contributed substantially to students’ abilities to establish connections and to create a sense of place for themselves within an academic environment that can feel very large and impersonal. Seniors’ positive regard for the learning community aspect of the program is also evident in the proportions who identified as “very” important the following reasons they would recommend the clusters to entering freshmen: Helps with transition to college (47%); opportunity to develop good relationships with GSIs and faculty (41%); opportunity to participate in an intellectual community (38%); instructors’ concern for students (34%); and opportunity to make friendships with other cluster students (34%).

## **Promoting Active Learning**

As elaborated in earlier sections of this report, survey respondents emphasized the cluster program's benefits with respect to helping them appreciate interdisciplinarity, enhance their skill development, and establish a sense of place within the academic community. Evidence of students' active engagement in their learning process is woven throughout the findings presented in each of those sections. Here, the focus shifts more specifically to how students retrospectively perceived two of the program's core pedagogical practices: discussion sections and capstone seminars.

### ***Discussion Sections***

In response to items that queried the clusters' impact on academic socialization, between two-thirds and three-quarters of senior survey respondents "agreed" that their cluster discussion/lab sections helped them become more confident in expressing their opinions in class. The "intimate" nature of the cluster discussion sections also allowed students to get to know each other, their GSIs, and their faculty, creating an atmosphere that made it, in the words of one student, "easier to engage in constructive arguments, debates, and exchange of ideas." Reflecting back on their freshman cluster experience, seniors commented that the small group discussions were "memorable" in that they enhanced their active engagement with course material and gave them an opportunity to experience first hand that instructors are "approachable" and "want to answer questions." The connections that were created between students and their instructors also stimulated students' intellectual engagement and enhanced their willingness to participate in class discussions.

### ***Culminating Seminars***

Asked specifically about the spring quarter culminating seminars, 90 percent of senior survey respondents indicated that the seminar was "important." Students frequently cited the seminars as being the "most" memorable aspect of the cluster program. Alternatively described as "fantastic," "engaging," "challenging," and "the highlight of my cluster experience," the seminars seem to have been particularly important to students for four reasons. First, they allowed students to build on the course material they were introduced to in fall and winter quarters. Second, participation enabled students to deepen their understanding of the ways in which different disciplinary approaches can illuminate a topic. Third, the seminars allowed students to explore a topic of their own choosing in greater depth, providing them with opportunities to "think outside the box" and to be "creative" and "independent." Finally, the seminars' limited enrollment made for a more intimate, less intimidating classroom environment which encouraged participation and allowed students to receive more personal attention from their instructors.

Overall, it appears that the unique combination of autonomy and connection that characterizes the culminating seminars contributes substantially to helping students gain a sense of their value as integral members of the UCLA academic community. For example, the majority of follow-up survey respondents "agreed" that the seminar afforded them the opportunity to explore their own interests (83%) and ideas (81%). Most also found that their spring seminars had an especially positive impact on their confidence to participate in class discussions (68%) and to communicate with their instructors (64%). As one student commented, the spring capstone experience marked "the first time I was treated like a student of higher education."

How do seniors' reflections on these two foundational pedagogical elements of the clusters compare with those of freshman who have just completed the cluster sequence? In the five year self-study of the program, many freshmen lauded the cluster discussion sections and capstone seminars for encouraging them to actively engage with class material and to "understand the readings at a higher level." Freshmen noted that these small learning environments made it "easier to absorb information through participation"

instead of being “talked at” in lecture.<sup>3</sup> A substantial majority of freshmen also indicated that the spring seminar was a particularly important part of their cluster experience because it allowed them to investigate a topic in some depth and to form closer bonds with course instructors and fellow students.<sup>4</sup> These findings are supported by the follow-up study reported here which illustrates the resounding success of the fall and winter discussion sections and the spring quarter seminars and highlights yet another aspect of their cluster experience that students continue to value four years later.

## Conclusion

Clusters provide UCLA freshmen with a unique opportunity to participate in a learning community that emphasizes interdisciplinarity and “best practices” for undergraduate teaching and learning, promotes skill development, and unites students, GSIs, and faculty in a common yearlong intellectual enterprise. As illustrated in the *Freshman Cluster Program Self-Review 1998-2003*, the cluster experience substantially enhances many students’ transition to college. According to freshman evaluations, the clusters also have positive self-perceived effects on intellectual skills, sense of community, and educational aspirations. Findings from the current study of fourth-year students’ reflections on their freshman cluster experience reveal that these and other cluster effects remain generally influential throughout students’ undergraduate careers.

Seniors’ sentiments about the cluster program’s roles in helping them to appreciate interdisciplinarity, enhance selected skill sets (critical thinking, written and oral communication, collaboration, information literacy, etc.), establish a sense of place within the academic community, and engage actively in their educational process were especially compelling. For a majority of those who take part, the clusters enhance their undergraduate experience to at least some measurable extent. For some, the program transforms perspective and shapes future academic and career plans.

All in all, this study demonstrates the clusters’ clearly positive contributions to UCLA’s undergraduate curriculum. To understand further the clusters’ impact on students’ undergraduate experiences at UCLA, additional research that captures the aggregated perspectives of a broader spectrum of former participants and that relies upon a consistent set of questions would be useful. The UCLA College Senior Survey offers a valuable mechanism for accomplishing these objectives. Incorporating a few items on future versions of this annual survey that query, in more specific detail, students’ perspectives on their general education experiences would alleviate the need for former cluster participants to complete an additional senior year questionnaire. Apart from conserving students’ and researchers’ time, this approach would likely generate responses from more former cluster participants given that UCLA College Senior Survey response rates are substantially higher than those researchers typically obtain when conducting follow-up surveys on selected aspects of students’ curricular and co-curricular experiences.

An added benefit of collecting information about former cluster participants’ general education experiences during their first year at UCLA and beyond as part of the UCLA College Senior Survey is that the same information could also be asked of the roughly 50 percent of UCLA undergraduates who do not participate in the freshman clusters. Consequently, it will be possible to analyze how the perspectives and experiences of cluster participants may differ from those of their non-cluster peers. Insights gleaned from such analyses may prove especially valuable with respect to understanding the longer-range impact of freshman cluster participation and its effects on students’ subsequent undergraduate experiences.

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<sup>3</sup> *Freshman Cluster Program Self-Review 1998-2003*, page 36.

<sup>4</sup> *Freshman Cluster Program Self-Review 1998-2003*, page 42.

**APPENDIX A**  
**2004 AND 2005 CLUSTER SENIOR SURVEYS**

## COVER LETTER AND 2004 CLUSTER SENIOR SURVEY

Dear Former Cluster Student:

**Did you participate in one of UCLA's Freshman Cluster Courses? Share your experiences to help us make the program better!** As a participant in the clusters program, you had a unique educational experience designed exclusively for freshman. We are interested in what you think about the clusters at the end of your undergraduate career. Please fill out this research survey, which asks you to reflect on the impact of your cluster course on your overall college experience. In addition, it asks you to respond to a few brief questions about your general impressions of classroom space at UCLA. On average, it should take 15-20 minutes of your time to complete this questionnaire.

What do you have to do to be eligible for the drawing? Complete the enclosed research survey and return it in the postage-paid envelope. If your reply by AUGUST 6, 2004, your name will be entered into a drawing for one of five **\$200 gift certificates for Circuit City**. Please be sure to include your name and email address in the space provided. Your email address and name will not be connected with your responses.

The information you provide will be combined with responses from other participants and reported only in the form of summary statistics and group totals. Your individual responses will be connected to your academic profile ONLY in the database. Only the primary investigator (Paula Zeszotarski), the co-investigator (Marc Levis-Fitzgerald), and College Information Services staff will have access to the password-protected database containing this information for purposes of producing a report. Your name, student ID, and any identifying attributes will not be connected to your responses in any reports or publications.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact the Office for Protection of Research Subjects, 2107 Ueberroth Building, UCLA, Box 951694, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1694, (310)-825-8714.

Although we hope you complete this survey, your participation is voluntary and you may skip any questions you would prefer not to answer. If you have any questions about this survey, please contact Paula Zeszotarski Ph.D. at 310-206-5282 or [pszozota@college.ucla.edu](mailto:pszozota@college.ucla.edu).

Thank you very much for your participation in this survey.

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### SURVEY STARTS HERE:

- 1) Which cluster course did you take in your freshman year (2000-2001)?
  - M1ABC: The Global Environment
  - 20ABC: Interracial Dynamics in American Culture, Society and Literature
  - 21ABC: The History of Modern Thought
  - 50ABC: Perception and Illusion in Psychology, Literature and Art
  - 60ABC: The United States, 1963-1974
  - 70ABC: Evolution of the Cosmos and Life
  
- 2) What was the most memorable aspect of your cluster experience? Why?

3) Clusters are organized in a way that is distinct from most other UCLA courses. Rate the importance of each of the following characteristics to your cluster learning experience:

	Very important	Somewhat important	Not very important	Not at all important
Spring seminar as capstone.....	4	3	2	1
Freshmen only enrollment.....	4	3	2	1
Team-taught lectures.....	4	3	2	1
Interdisciplinary approach.....	4	3	2	1
Yearlong course.....	4	3	2	1
Organized, out of class activities (e.g. meals w/ course faculty, films, field trips).....	4	3	2	1

4) To what extent did the cluster course contribute to your knowledge and understanding of the following areas:

	A great deal of Impact	Some Impact	Very Little Impact	No Impact
Contemporary issues or problems	4	3	2	1
Being a responsible citizen.....	4	3	2	1
My own values.....	4	3	2	1
My academic interests.....	4	3	2	1
The similarities and differences among the different disciplines.....	4	3	2	1
A new or unfamiliar discipline.....	4	3	2	1

5) Compared to other GE courses you took at UCLA, how well did your cluster course contribute to your knowledge and understanding of the following areas:

	A great deal of Impact	Some Impact	Very Little Impact	No Impact
Contemporary issues or problems.....	4	3	2	1
Being a responsible citizen.....	4	3	2	1
My own values.....	4	3	2	1
My academic interests.....	4	3	2	1
The similarities and differences among the different disciplines.....	4	3	2	1
A new or unfamiliar discipline.....	4	3	2	1

6) Below is a list of skills most students find useful in college. How would you rate the impact of your cluster course on your development of these skills?

	A great deal of Impact	Some Impact	Very little Impact	No Impact
Time management.....	4	3	2	1
Reading strategies.....	4	3	2	1
Working with other students.....	4	3	2	1
Presenting ideas effectively in college-level class discussions.....	4	3	2	1
Critical thinking.....	4	3	2	1

Locating books and online materials in the UCLA library .....	4	3	2	1
Evaluating Internet sources for academic purposes .....	4	3	2	1
Understanding the ethical use of others' words and ideas .....	4	3	2	1
Writing clearly .....	4	3	2	1
Understanding a topic from different perspectives .....	4	3	2	1

7) Compared to other GE courses you took at UCLA, how much did your cluster course have an impact of the development of these skills?

	Much more than other GE	Somewhat more than other GE	Somewhat less than other GE	At lot less than other GE	Don't Know
Time management.....	4	3	2	1	NA
Reading strategies.....	4	3	2	1	NA
Working with other students.....	4	3	2	1	NA
Presenting ideas effectively in college-level class discussions .	4	3	2	1	NA
Critical thinking.....	4	3	2	1	NA
Locating books and online materials in the UCLA library .....	4	3	2	1	NA
Evaluating Internet sources for academic purposes .....	4	3	2	1	NA
Understanding the ethical use of others' words and ideas.....	4	3	2	1	NA
Writing clearly .....	4	3	2	1	NA
Understanding a topic from different perspectives .....	4	3	2	1	NA

8) What was the most challenging aspect of your cluster course? Why?

9) Please describe the influence of the cluster course on your academic plans. (Circle one answer).

**As a result of participation in the clusters,**

- I became MORE interested in **majoring** in a topic related to my cluster course. Yes No
- I became MORE interested in **minoring** in a topic related to my cluster course. Yes No
- I took **more courses** in an area related to a cluster (not for major or minor). Yes No
- I took an **independent study** related to the cluster. Yes No
- I became involved in a cluster-related **extracurricular activity**. Yes No

10) Clusters are also designed to help you with the transition to college life. Please describe the impact of the cluster course on each of the following attitudes and beliefs. **As a result of participation in the clusters,**

	Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree Strongly
I became MORE confident in my academic ability.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The academic environment at UCLA seemed LESS impersonal.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I felt a sense of belonging to this university.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I became MORE excited about college level learning.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I made lasting friendships with students in my Freshman class.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



The social environment at UCLA seemed LESS intimidating.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I became MORE confident approaching TAs.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I felt MORE intellectually challenged in my first year of college.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I became MORE confident in expressing my opinion in class discussions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I felt my class contributions were valued.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I became MORE motivated to explore my own ideas.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The academic environment at UCLA seemed LESS intimidating.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I became MORE confident approaching faculty.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

11) Would you recommend your cluster course to incoming UCLA students? Yes or No? Why or why not?

12) Is there anything else you would like to share about your cluster experience?

13) Will you graduate in June 2004. YES NO [If no, skip to 14.]

14) If not, when do you expect to graduate?

- Winter 2004 or earlier
- Summer 2004
- Fall 2004
- Winter or Spring 2005
- Later than Spring 2005

**END OF SURVEY**

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If you would like to be entered in the drawing for one of five \$200 Circuit City gift certificates, you must include your name, email address, and phone number so we can contact you if you win.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

## COVER LETTER AND 2005 QUESTIONNAIRE (PAPER VERSION)

Dear Former Cluster Student:

**Did you participate in one of UCLA's Freshman Cluster Courses? *Share your experiences to help us make the program better!*** As a participant in the cluster program, you had a unique educational experience designed exclusively for freshmen. We are interested in what you think about the clusters at the end of your undergraduate career. Please fill out this research survey, which asks you to reflect on the impact of your cluster course on your overall college experience. It should take 15-20 minutes of your time to complete this questionnaire. Although we hope you complete this survey, your participation is voluntary and you may skip any questions you would prefer not to answer.

Complete the enclosed research survey and return it in the enclosed postage-paid envelope by July 6, 2005 and your name will be entered into a drawing for one of five **\$100 gift certificates for Best Buy**. Please be sure to include your contact information in the space provided at the end of the survey. Your personal information will not be connected with your responses.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact the Office for Protection of Research Subjects, 2107 Ueberroth Building, UCLA, Box 951694, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1694, (310)-825-8714. If you have any questions about this survey, please contact Paula Zeszotarski Ph.D. at 310-206-5282 or [pszszota@college.ucla.edu](mailto:pszszota@college.ucla.edu).

Thank you very much for your participation in this survey,

Primary Investigator/Researcher:

Paula Zeszotarski

Postdoctoral Scholar

Freshman Cluster Program

Office of Undergraduate Evaluation and Research

UCLA College of Letters and Science

A265 Murphy Hall

Los Angeles, CA 90095-1571

Co-Investigator:

Marc Levis-Fitzgerald

Director

Office of Undergraduate Evaluation and Research

UCLA College of Letters and Science

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Los Angeles, CA 90095-1571

### SURVEY STARTS HERE:

1) Which cluster course did you take in your freshman year (2001-2002)? If you did not take a cluster in 2001-2002, you are not eligible to participate in this study. **(Check the appropriate box).**

- M1ABC: The Global Environment
- 20ABC: Interracial Dynamics in American Culture, Society and Literature
- 21ABC: The History of Modern Thought
- 22ABC: Towards a World Economy: Perils and Promises of Globalization
- 60ABC: The United States, 1963-1974
- 70ABC: Evolution of the Cosmos and Life
- 80ABC: Frontiers of Human Aging: Biomedical, Social, and Policy Implications

2) If cluster courses were to be offered as upper division courses in your major, what features would you like them to include? **(Check all that apply).**

- Spring seminar as capstone
- Team-taught lectures
- Interdisciplinary approach
- Yearlong course
- Organized, out of class activities (e.g. meals w/ course faculty, films, field trips)

3) Please indicate how important each of the following has been to your academic performance at UCLA (3a) and how much your cluster experience contributed to your development in these areas (3b) (**Circle the appropriate number**):

	<b>a. Importance to your academic performance at UCLA</b>				<b>b. Your cluster's contribution</b>			
	<b>Not at all important</b>	<b>Not very important</b>	<b>Somewhat important</b>	<b>Very important</b>	<b>No impact</b>	<b>Very little impact</b>	<b>Some impact</b>	<b>A great deal of impact</b>
Time management	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Reading strategies	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Working with other students	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Presenting ideas effectively in college-level class discussions	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Critical thinking	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Locating books and online materials in the UCLA library	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Evaluating Internet sources for academic purposes	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Understanding the ethical use of others' words and ideas	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Writing clearly	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Understanding a topic from different perspectives	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4

5) a. Would you recommend a cluster course to an incoming UCLA freshman? (**Check the appropriate box**).

Yes        If "yes," go to question #6.

No        If "no," go to 5b.

b. If you answered "no," why would you not recommend a cluster course to an incoming freshman?

6) Please indicate how important each of the following reasons is to your recommendation (**Circle the appropriate number**):

	<b>Not at all important</b>	<b>Not very important</b>	<b>Somewhat important</b>	<b>Very important</b>
The content of the course was interesting	1	2	3	4
The extra General Education (GE) credit	1	2	3	4
The instructors' concern for students	1	2	3	4
The opportunity to build good relationships with faculty or TA	1	2	3	4
The opportunity to focus on one topic for a year (3 quarters)	1	2	3	4
Accessibility of material to non-majors	1	2	3	4
The opportunity to make friendships with other cluster students	1	2	3	4
The opportunity to study a new or unfamiliar discipline	1	2	3	4
The cluster helps with transition to college	1	2	3	4
The opportunity to participate in an intellectual community	1	2	3	4

7) Please indicate your degree of agreement with these statements about the impact of these cluster program features on your personal and intellectual development (**Circle the appropriate number**):

	<b>Disagree Strongly</b>	<b>Disagree Somewhat</b>	<b>Agree Somewhat</b>	<b>Agree Strongly</b>
Having one course for an entire year eased my transition from high school to college.	1	2	3	4
I made lasting friendships with students in my freshman class because we spent a whole academic year together.	1	2	3	4
I developed good relationships with my cluster faculty because I was able to spend three quarters in their class.	1	2	3	4
The social environment at UCLA seemed less intimidating as a result of my participation in the cluster.	1	2	3	4
I developed a good relationship with my cluster TAs.	1	2	3	4
Being taught by an interdisciplinary team of cluster faculty increased my understanding of the similarities and differences among the different disciplines.	1	2	3	4
The interdisciplinary approach aided my ability to synthesize knowledge from different disciplines.	1	2	3	4

The interdisciplinary approach helped me to see a topic from different perspectives.	1	2	3	4
I became MORE confident in expressing my opinion in class discussions because of my experience in cluster discussion sections/labs.	1	2	3	4
My ability to think critically about course readings was improved by my experience in cluster discussion sections/labs.	1	2	3	4
My ability to think critically about topics raised in lecture was improved by my experience in cluster discussion sections/labs.	1	2	3	4
My ability to write college level essays was improved by my experience in cluster discussion sections/labs.	1	2	3	4
As a result of being in a cluster seminar, I became MORE confident approaching instructors.	1	2	3	4
As a result of the cluster seminar, I became MORE confident in expressing my opinion in class discussions.	1	2	3	4
In my cluster seminar, I was able to explore a topic of my own choosing in greater depth.	1	2	3	4
I had the opportunity to explore my own ideas through my final seminar paper/project.	1	2	3	4
The organized, out of class activities deepened my knowledge of course material.	1	2	3	4
The organized, out of class activities allowed me to apply theories learned in the cluster to real-life situations.	1	2	3	4

8) Please describe the influence of the cluster course on your academic plans. **As a result of participation in the clusters:**

- a) I **majored** in a topic related to my cluster course. Yes  No
- b) I **minored** in a topic related to my cluster course. Yes  No
- c) I took **more courses** in an area related to my cluster (not for major or minor). Yes  No

9) Please describe the impact of the cluster course in general on each of the following attitudes and beliefs. **(Circle the appropriate number).**

<b>As a result of participation in the clusters,</b>	<b>Disagree Strongly</b>	<b>Disagree Somewhat</b>	<b>Agree Somewhat</b>	<b>Agree Strongly</b>
I became MORE confident in my academic ability.	1	2	3	4
I became MORE excited about college level learning.	1	2	3	4
I felt MORE intellectually challenged in my first year of college.	1	2	3	4

I became MORE motivated to explore my own ideas.	1	2	3	4
I was more confident approaching faculty members in other classes because of my cluster experience.	1	2	3	4

10) Will you graduate in June 2005? **(Check the appropriate box).**

- Yes        If “yes,” go to question #12.
- No         If “no,” go to question #11.

11) If not, when you do expect to graduate? **(Check the appropriate box).**

- Winter 2005
- Summer 2005
- Fall 2005
- Winter or Spring 2006
- Later than Spring 2006

12) What was the most memorable aspect of your cluster experience? Why?

13) What was the most valuable aspect of your cluster course for preparing you for the rest of your undergraduate years? Why?

Thank you for your participation.

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If you would like to be entered in the drawing for one of five \$100 Best Buy gift certificates, you must include your name, mailing address, email address, and phone number so we can contact you if you win.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_