

Freshmen Learning Communities: Meeting the Needs of Commuting Students at an Urban Research University

Nancy R. Mansfield, Nannette Evans Commander,
and William J. Fritz

Abstract

One challenge at urban universities is to help freshmen students make connections to peers and faculty and to help them succeed academically. Georgia State University has developed a model for meeting this challenge and engaging students: Freshmen Learning Communities (FLCs). Freshmen students who live off campus and commute to school are often particularly at risk for feeling unconnected to their university. One of the many benefits of learning communities is that they encourage students to connect to their peers and faculty. This benefit of FLCs, while important for all students, is especially valuable for commuting students. This paper describes the institutional context of Georgia State, a leading research urban university facing the challenges of meeting the needs of commuter students. The FLC program at Georgia State is outlined as a successful model for engaging students in the learning process. Additionally, assessment information indicating academic and retention improvement is presented along with conclusions.

Undergraduate education is prominently on the agenda of most research universities. Faculty and administrators at those institutions value the delivery of undergraduate education, and they are developing academic initiatives, new pedagogy, and improved social experiences for students. A critical issue facing urban research universities is how to provide a sense of community and a comprehensive approach to student learning—especially for the freshman experience. The challenge at Georgia State is to help the 2,200 freshmen students make connections to faculty and peers on a large urban campus and to succeed academically. Georgia State has developed a model for meeting the challenge and engaging freshmen students: Freshmen Learning Communities (FLCs). The FLC program is a means by which college freshmen can develop a small community of peers who share common academic interests. This paper describes the institutional context of Georgia State, a leading research urban university facing the challenges of meeting the needs of commuter students. The FLC program at Georgia State is outlined as a successful model for engaging students in the learning process. An example is presented to illustrate the benefits of participation in

the FLC program for one commuter student. Additionally, assessment information indicating academic and retention improvement is presented along with conclusions.

The Georgia State Story

Georgia State University, located in the heart of downtown Atlanta, has changed dramatically over the past several years. In Fall 1995, Georgia State was designated as one of four research universities in the University System of Georgia. It has evolved into a major public research university, with Colleges of Arts and Science, Business, Education, Health and Human Sciences, Law, and a School of Policy Studies. As part of this evolution, the composition of the undergraduate population has undergone a remarkable transformation, driven in part by changing University System of Georgia entrance requirements that are highest for research universities. In 1995, the university admitted approximately 1,200 first-time freshmen. All students commuted to the campus, 40 percent of the freshmen were in learning support, and the average SAT score was 1000 for regularly admitted students (those students who were not placed in learning support).

By contrast, in Fall 2003, enrollment reached more than 2,200 freshmen students in a student body of approximately 28,000 students. These numbers comprised a growing number of students directly out of high school in search of the traditional college experience. While the quantity of students at the university has increased tremendously, the quality of students has also grown, as evidenced by an average SAT score of 1070. Five years ago, over half of the Georgia State freshman class would not meet this fall's entrance requirements.

Georgia State provides many unique advantages to students by virtue of being an urban campus in the heart of downtown Atlanta. Our students have access to the highest levels of educational advancement because the urban environment provides a rich setting for learning that extends beyond the walls of the classroom. Georgia State, with its urban mission, draws on its environment to give students opportunities to learn from practitioners, to develop cross-cultural understanding, and to contribute to the civic well being of the community. Urban universities in general reflect the diversity of their cities and provide educational experiences that enhance students' cross-cultural understanding. The rich diversity of students attending urban universities enriches learning, scholarship, and service. Such is the case at Georgia State with our large minority presence of 32 percent African Americans, 11 percent Asians, and a growing Hispanic/Latino population. Georgia State provides a rich milieu for communities of learners and is ranked as first among traditionally white institutions in the nation (and seventh when including historically black colleges) in granting degrees to African Americans. With more than 51 percent minority representation in the undergraduate student body, first-year students are able to interact with students from every state in the nation and more than 148 countries. Thus, the diversity supports a community setting that broadens perspectives, develops critical thinking skills, and challenges stereotypes.

At a comprehensive research university, in addition to benefiting from enhanced student services and programming, students may select from a broad range of academic programs. As the only urban research university in the state, Georgia State offers more than 200 degree programs with strong disciplinary-based departments and a wide array of problem-oriented interdisciplinary programs. The overarching goal of the University is to achieve a front-rank position among the nation's premier state-supported universities located in an urban setting.

Challenges of Commuting Students

Commuting students, those who live at home or find an apartment off campus, represent more than 80 percent of the students in American colleges and universities today. At Georgia State the numbers are much more dramatic; approximately 99 percent of the students at the university are commuting students. Only 2,400 students (out of a total of 28,000 students) live in the residence halls. Although most urban universities house a number of students on campus, much larger percentages live off-campus as commuters. The widespread and substantial differences in the college experiences and activities of commuters and residents have been well documented in the literature (Jacoby 1995). Traditional residential college students assimilate more easily into campus life as they develop relationships with roommates and hall mates in the dorm. On the other hand, commuting students often feel disconnected from the campus (Chickering 1974). The empirical evidence in Chickering's work is clear. In every area of campus life, commuters are less involved than their resident peers. These differences begin in the freshman year and pervade the general college experience. As a result, urban university students are less likely to participate in traditional campus life activities and do not develop close ties to their institution.

Commuting students face hurdles on an urban campus. First, they do not make progress in their studies to the same extent as residential students. Given their part-time enrollment status, and the kinds of work and family obligations associated with living outside the college setting, it is not surprising that students at urban universities do not complete their studies within the six-year time frame tracked through nationally available data. Second, commuting students are not as involved on campus. Commuters living at home participate less frequently in school organizations. Compared to dormitory residents, substantial numbers in the course of their college career never attend a meeting of some college organization. They may not ever participate in student government or attend lectures and cultural events on campus (Franklin 2002).

Whether or not a student makes a close friend on campus is one of the most significant factors in a student's successful transition from high school to college. Case studies and statistical analyses of student surveys document the impact of close friendships during the college years. Scholars write of the influence of close friends on overall development, particularly on autonomy and identity. Their findings show that close friendships exert an influence on fundamental developmental issues not only in the transitional life of a student in college, but also in developing an orientation to

adulthood and life goals. For example, close friendships at college affect whether or not students collaborate on the assignments and outside readings and take advantage of study abroad opportunities.

Georgia State University, with a campus infrastructure spread over five city blocks in one direction and three city blocks in another, epitomizes an urban campus. There are only two dormitory complexes with space for 2,400 students. The Village, the first residential housing for university students in Georgia State's ninety year history, became a part of the university following the Olympics in 1996, and a second housing facility, the University Lofts, was added in 2002. Less than 50 percent of freshmen live in the dorms. The large size of the campus, the large size of the student body, and the absence of the natural community-forming mechanism of dormitory living present a difficult environment for students. On many campuses there are no significant responses to commuting students, no attempts to deal with the complications they have in discovering and connecting with academic programs and extracurricular activities. What is the solution to the difficulties they face in building new relationships with students and faculty members and with the institution itself? At Georgia State, the faculty and administration believe that effective education depends on a sound match between the needs of the student and the learning resources available on campus. Commuters find it especially difficult to find this match on their own initiative. While many of the FLC students now take advantage of university housing, a significant portion—over 50 percent—of the freshmen continue to commute. In this setting, the FLC concept provides a substantial benefit to students.

Why Freshmen Learning Communities?

Why do campuses build learning communities into their freshman curriculum? For many campuses it is a means to a crucial end: improve student academic success and increase student retention. Learning communities may change students' attitudes toward the university and their academic careers. In addition, learning communities may be tied to faculty development and the efforts to change the way we teach freshmen. Learning communities, by providing greater interaction among students and teachers, allow students to build supportive relationships they need in college.

Georgia State subscribes to the definition of a learning community provided by Gabelnick, et al.: learning communities are any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses—or actually restructure the curricular material entirely—so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding of and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith 1990).

Alexander Astin presents a broader definition that captures the importance of student interactions in curricular and co-curricular experiences. He recommends organizing students into small group-learning communities to overcome the feelings of isolation common on large campuses. "These can be used to build a sense of identity,

cohesiveness, and uniqueness; to encourage continuity and the integration of diverse curricular and co-curricular experiences; and to counteract the isolation that many students feel” (Astin 1985).

Psychological theories suggest that involving a student in a small community early in his or her academic career will improve the student’s performance and increase the likelihood of retention for that student through developing confidence and facilitating social integration (Pascarella and Terenzini 1991). The transition to college for first-time students is the most critical point of engagement to facilitate student persistence in college (Tinto 1993). Learning communities build on these psychological theories and provide the following benefits:

- Learning communities *organize faculty and students into smaller groups*. Smaller, more intimate classroom environments help combat the isolation that students feel. In smaller classes, teachers get to know their students and students find it easier to form study groups with their peers.
- Learning communities also *facilitate student socialization* to what it means to be college students. Students learn how to succeed in college. Students in FLCs report that they speak up in class, ask questions, and seek help from a teacher.
- Learning Communities *challenge the way teachers teach and students learn*. Learning communities intentionally cluster courses so that teachers and students experience more connected teaching and learning environments. A learning community on a large urban campus acts like a magnet that attracts a particular kind of teacher-scholar. These teachers shine in the learning community environment.

The Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University (Carnegie Foundation 1995) called for a first-year experience providing stimulation for “intellectual growth and a firm grounding in inquiry-based learning,” with seminar learning to open new intellectual horizons and block scheduling to provide a supportive atmosphere. More than 80 percent of universities included in the survey sample offer academically oriented seminars to their first-year students. Block scheduling provides a supportive environment for adjustment to university life. Some research universities use their block-scheduling initiatives to offer an integrated freshman curriculum. About 30 percent report extensive ongoing coordination among the faculty teaching these courses, and 30 percent report some coordination.

The Boyer Commission addressed the need for community in post-secondary institutions by stating that “the campus must be a purposeful place of learning in which every student feels special connection, as shared rituals play a powerful role in creating the larger university community in which smaller, personalized communities of learners can coalesce...” The Commission also made the following recommendations to address the need for community in research institutions:

Research universities should foster a community of learners. Large universities must find ways to create a sense of place and to help students develop small communities within the larger whole.... Commuters and residential students alike need to know that they are needed and valued members of the community.

Freshmen Learning Communities at Georgia State

There are many different types of learning communities. Most campuses have adopted variations on one of the following three models:

1. *Freshmen Interest Groups (FIGS)*. Student cohorts register for 2–4 courses together. The learning community students are part of a larger class that also includes non-learning community students. In this model, faculty do not coordinate assignments or topics, and classroom instruction is unchanged. The disadvantage is that the FIGS model is not as intentional and linkages among students and between students and faculty may be reduced.
2. *Paired or clustered courses*. Discrete courses are linked based on a theme. In this model, faculty plan courses collaboratively; however, courses are delivered separately. The advantage is that community building is enhanced because only learning community students comprise the class. The thematic link in the community is reinforced by student collaboration on assignments. The disadvantage is the time required for faculty to link courses.
3. *Team-taught programs*. Faculty teach an integrated program of courses. This model provides the highest level of integration across the program theme. All students in the community take all courses together in large or small groups. Team teaching is complex in terms of planning and coordination and takes tremendous amounts of departmental and institutional support.

Although many variations and adaptations of these models exist at universities across the country, almost all learning communities have two things in common: shared learning, since students get to know each other and work together, and connected learning, since the shared courses are organized around a theme (Shapiro and Levine 1999). All students, including commuting students, need to find their place socially as well as academically. Learning communities that emphasize developing relationships between and among students may be particularly effective for commuting students.

Georgia State first introduced Freshmen Learning Communities in 1999. Faculty and administrators looked to learning communities to help them address two concerns: development of a sense of community on campus and to provide a formative, integrative experience on which to build lifelong strengths and perspectives. When the program first began, 295 students participated in 11 learning communities. Over 750 students enrolled in 33 different learning communities for Fall 2003 (Table 1). The table below documents the enrollment growth in the FLC program.

Table 1. GSU FLC Enrollment

	Number of Students	% Freshmen in FLC
Fall 1999 Enrollment	296	16
Fall 2000 Enrollment	432	20
Fall 2001 Enrollment	572	26
Fall 2002 Enrollment	677	28
Fall 2003 Enrollment	769	39
% Increase 2002 ‡ 2003: 14		

Faculty generate the FLC program with widespread support from across campus. Faculty members propose themes and titles for a community and develop the curriculum and links between the courses. The creation of FLCs and a New Student Orientation course (GSU 1010) represents a dynamic new emphasis at Georgia State aimed at recruiting and retaining high quality students. The program’s growth is a testament to the enthusiastic response of constituents across campus.

Georgia State’s program is based on the Federated Learning Communities model—a model of paired or clustered discrete courses that are linked to a theme. The learning communities are best described as “learning clusters” because cohorts of 25 students enroll in a first-year seminar and four courses in which the learning is connected around a central theme. Figure 1 below lists the various themes for FLCs at Georgia State.

Figure 1. Freshmen Learning Communities, 2003.

African-American Culture and History	Crime: Society’s Response	Language and Intercultural Communications
Art and Design	Emerging Leaders (I and II)	Latin American and Latino Studies
Business and Technology	Exploring Diversity	Law and Society
Business of Health Care	Global Business and Society	Pre-Med
Business, Risk, and Society	Health Professional	Promoting a Healthy GSU
Career Choices and Life Options	Honors (I and II)	Quantitative Sciences
Chemistry: Introduction to the Natural Sciences	Internet and the Information Age	Residential Emerging Leaders: A Village Learning Community (I and II)
City Life: Exploring Atlanta	International Business Practices	Strategic Thinking and Learning
Communication, Culture, and Stereotypes	Introduction to Business and Finance	Understanding Social Change
Conflict Resolution in the 21st Century	Language and International Business	Understanding Yourself and Others

Students only have to register for the FLC theme of their choice and are then assigned to each of the sections in the course cluster. All FLCs are designed with general education core curriculum courses that apply to any major. A common feature of all learning communities is the New Student Orientation course (GSU 1010), a three-hour course that serves as the focus of the community. GSU 1010 is designed to introduce students to academic life at the university and consists of several components: an introduction to the academic demands and learning resources at the University, a comprehensive advising module, a campus exploration unit, and an urban community service learning project that emphasizes taking advantage of the resources in downtown Atlanta. Highly qualified and experienced faculty who have a commitment to undergraduate education teach the GSU 1010 course. Class size is limited to 25, which allows students to participate in hands-on activities, team projects, and small group conferences with their professor.

Students register for a full cohort of five courses in the learning community as illustrated in the table below (Table 2).

Table 2. Sample FLC: Law and Society

<i>Fall Semester Courses</i>		<i>Credit Hours</i>
<i>GSU 1010</i>	<i>New Student Orientation (Limit 25)</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Engl 1101</i>	<i>English Composition I (Limit 25)</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Phil 2010</i>	<i>Great Questions of Philosophy</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Pols 1101</i>	<i>American Government</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Math 1101</i>	<i>Intro to Math Modeling</i>	<i>3</i>
		<i>Total: 15</i>

In the English and GSU 1010 courses in the learning community, the FLC students are the entire section, and in others FLC students are a subset of a much larger section. The degree of integration among the course, linked assignments, and linked activities varies in each community.

In addition to a strong academic curriculum, the FLC program at Georgia State provides the following benefits:

1. Provides a rich first-year experience. Students quickly get to know fellow students, faculty, and upperclassmen.
2. Creates a small community within a large research university.
3. Makes advising easier. The FLC serves as an advising tool for students unsure of how to maneuver through the general education part of their degree.
4. Simplifies registration. Students can register for five courses in one FLC rather than separate courses.

A Commuting Student—A Georgia State Example

When Georgia State University began exploring the creation of learning communities on campus, faculty, administrators, and student services professionals were brought together for over a year before the first students joined the program. These constituents from across campus discussed what life was like for a commuting student on a large, urban campus. The following story, first published in Georgia State magazine, illustrates life for a commuting student in an FLC.

Lynda “Lyndi” Quinones is more than an hour early for her first college class—intermediate French.

After a pit stop at the university bookstore and Library Plaza, the 18-year-old freshman, who’s commuting from Lawrenceville, Georgia, arrives at the Helen M. Aderhold Learning Center, the university’s newest classroom building, tucked into the city’s Fairlie-Poplar historic district.

She makes her way up a flight of stairs and down the hallway, where a handful of students are already lined up outside the classroom along the floor.

With plenty of time to spare, the aspiring immigration lawyer flips through her newly purchased textbooks. This semester she’s enrolled in one of 32 Freshmen Learning Communities, or FLCs—themed sets of courses geared toward specific disciplines, career paths, or student interests. Her FLC, “Language, Culture, and Communication,” includes classes in anthropology and understanding miscommunication. More than 700 freshmen are enrolled in FLCs this fall.

“Uh-oh. I might be bored. When the book for an intermediate level class begins in English, that can’t be good,” says Lyndi, a high achiever who was a member of the French National Honor Society in high school and is attending Georgia State on a HOPE scholarship.

After flipping through the text, she takes out her cell phone, first calling her grandmother in Florida, who’s not home. Next, she tries an aunt in Virginia, and they talk in Spanish about her first day of class. A native of Puerto Rico, Lyndi is the first in her family to go to college in the United States. She tries to take it in stride but admits it can be a little nerve-racking to have your entire extended family attending college alongside you, even if it’s only in spirit.

“There’s pressure—definitely,” she says. But Lyndi, like the rest of her 2,400-member freshman class, is prepared for the rigors of academe.

Lyndi’s experience is typical for a Georgia State first-year student who commutes to campus. She is engaged and excited about her academic career. In a follow up interview, we learned that she, like other commuters who participated in a Freshmen Learning Community their first semester, now identify with Georgia State as the locus of activity for their college activities. She credits her FLC for getting her on the right track, helping her keep her Hope scholarship, and choosing a major. Although Lyndi continues to commute over 30 miles to campus, she claims Georgia State as her second home.

Assessment: Is the Program Working?

Over the past five years Georgia State has been successful in attracting students, developing efficient registration procedures, and annually increasing the percentage of entering freshmen enrolled in the learning communities. Building learning communities and increasing student enrollments in those communities are two different processes. Simply enrolling students in courses does not create learning communities. Creating communities is an intentional process of redesigning curricula and bringing faculty and students together to create a more collaborative learning environment. Assessment data on Georgia State's program indicates the positive effects of offering such a learning environment to students. Students enrolled in FLCs for Fall 1999, 2000, 2001, and 2002 (see Table 3) achieve higher grade point averages and rates of retention than those who are not enrolled in FLCs.

Table 3. GPA and Retention Rates for Freshmen Learning Community (FLC) Students and Other Freshmen (1999–2002).

Fall 1999 Cohort	N	PGPA	Term GPA	Cum. GPA	Cum. GPA	Cum. GPA
			Fall 1999	Fall 2000	Fall 2001	Fall 2002
FLC	296	2.639	2.72	2.70	2.79	2.86
Non-FLC	1,464	2.619	2.38	2.61	2.70	2.79
Total	1,760					

Fall 1999 Cohort	N	Retained Fall 2000		Retained Fall 2001		Retained Fall 2002	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
FLC	296	232	78.6	193	65.4	177	60.0
Non-FLC	1,464	1,054	71.9	891	60.8	791	54.0
Total	1,760	1,286	73.1	1,084	61.6	968	55.0

Fall 1999 Cohort	N	Fall 2003		Fall 2003	
		N Ret	N Grad	% Grad	4-yr ret rate
FLC	296	122	46	15.6	56.9
Non-FLC	1,464	562	180	12.3	50.6
Total	1,760	684	226	12.8	51.7

Fall 2000 Cohort	N	PGPA	Term GPA	Cum. GPA	Cum. GPA
			Fall 2000	Fall 2001	Fall 2002
FLC	432	2.693	2.87	2.74	2.77
Non-FLC	1650	2.697	2.47	2.63	2.72
Total	2082				

Fall 2000 Cohort	N	Retained Fall 2001		Retained Fall 2002		Retained Fall 2003	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
FLC	432	374	86.6	301	69.7	277	64.1
Non-FLC	1,650	1,286	77.9	1,030	62.4	923	55.9
Total	2,082	1,660	79.7	1,331	63.9	1,200	57.6

Fall 2001 Cohort	N	Avg	Term GPA	Cum GPA	
		FI	Fall 2001	Fall 2002	Fall 2003
FLC	572	2,683	2.96	2.87	
Non-FLC	1,570	2,697	2.67	2.78	
Total	2,142				

Fall 2001 Cohort	N	Retained Fall 2002		Retained Fall 2003	
		N	%	N	%
FLC	572	495	86.5	434	75.9
Non-FLC	1,570	1,239	78.9	1,059	67.5
Total	2,142	1,734	81.0	1,493	69.7

Fall 2002 Cohort	N	Avg FI	Term GPA Fall 2002	Retained Fall 2003	
				N	%
FLC	677	2,685	2.91	654	96.6
Non-FLC	1,882	2,693	2.61	1,729	91.9
Total	2,559			2,383	93.1

Conclusions

Urban universities face unique challenges as they attempt to create community and more supportive learning environments on their campuses. The majority of students commute to campus and work elsewhere while attending college. And with more and more students working an increasing number of hours, campuses need to make the most of the time undergraduates spend on campus. Learning communities provide opportunities for increased interaction with peers and teachers, greater campus and community involvement, and academic support. At Georgia State, the Freshmen Learning Community program provides structure that encourages commuting students to truly interact with the university environment.

At their best, learning communities generate their own synergy, creating a campus culture whose whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Learning communities create opportunities for greater faculty-student interaction, build on the strengths of interdisciplinary curricula, foster collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs staff, and generally establish creative space in which thoughtful members of the college community can work together. Aspects of the model at Georgia State can be applied to other urban universities with commuting students. Like any broad-based campus innovation, learning communities are most successful when they are fully integrated into the university structure.

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Author Information

Nancy R. Mansfield is Associate Professor Legal Studies in the Robinson College of Business at Georgia State University. She served as Director of Freshmen Studies from 2000–2003 and has written and presented widely on law-related topics, pedagogy, and the development of learning communities on an urban campus.

Nannette Evans Commander, an Associate Professor with a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology, is the current Director of Freshmen Studies at Georgia State University,

with responsibility for the Freshmen Learning Community program, the State Scholars Program, and the University Service Learning Program. A faculty member since 1989, she works in the development of programming to retain and improve the academic performance of undergraduate students.

William J. Fritz, a Professor of Geology, is the Associate Provost of Undergraduate Studies at Georgia State University. He has oversight responsibility for enrollment services (registrar, undergraduate admissions, student financial aid, student advisement, international student services, and freshmen studies). He designed a cross-functional team approach to enrollment management; instituted a “student friendly” focus in the enrollment services area, and fosters leadership development across campus. In 1999 he introduced, designed, and implemented Freshmen Learning Communities within the College of Arts and Sciences, which later led to a university-wide initiative.

Dr. Nancy R. Mansfield
Department of Risk Management and Insurance
Robinson College of Business
Georgia State University
P.O. Box 4036
Atlanta, GA 30302
E-mail: nmansfield@gsu.edu
Telephone: 404-651-2717
Fax: 404-651-4219

Dr. Nannette Evans Commander
Office of Undergraduate Studies
Georgia State University
MSC 8E0693
33 Gilmer Street SE Unit 8
Atlanta, GA 30303-3088
E-Mail: ncommander@gsu.edu
Telephone: 404-463-0576
Fax: 404-463-9708

Dr. William J. Fritz
Office of Associate Provost
Georgia State University
One Park Place
Atlanta, GA 30303-3088
E-Mail: wfritz@gsu.edu
Telephone: 404-651-1156