

"LEARNING TO LEARN" (L2L): A CAPACITY-BUILDING PROJECT TO ENSURE COLLEGE SUCCESS OF FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

INTRODUCTION and GOALS FOR PARTICIPATION

Urban Minority Serving University (UMSU) was brought to life in the midst of the Great Depression. The institution provided a setting in which the disadvantaged youth of the region could give expression to their educational hopes and aspirations. Now, as a public comprehensive university located in a vibrant and diverse urban environment, UMSU strives to become the institution of choice for all resolute learners and continues its mission to provide an affordable, high-quality education for an ethnically and culturally diverse student population of more than 6,000, equipping them with the capability to become productive citizens who continuously contribute to a global and rapidly changing society.

As a largely commuter and nontraditional student HBCU¹ institution, UMSU faces a unique set of obstacles not found on a traditional residential campus. For example, according to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) report, UMSU students spend significantly more time working off-campus and providing care to dependents than peer institutions and national averages. As a result, a quarter of UMSU first-year students report that it is likely that work or family commitments will delay them in completing their undergraduate education. Two-fifths of the first-year students report that it is likely that financial problems will delay them in completing their program coursework. Despite these challenges, the University is committed to increasing retention, ensuring timely graduation, and facilitating student success. As one of the indicators of this commitment, UMSU was recently selected to join 220 colleges and universities in the inaugural College Access & Opportunity Guide.

This proposal recommends further expanding and enhancing UMSU retention efforts by implementing a comprehensive but targeted project to enhance institutional capacity to retain first-generation students (FGS), to ensure their academic, developmental, and professional success, and to help them become critical thinkers and *resolute learners*. The purpose of the proposed "Learning to Learn" (L2L) project is to increase FGS' *social capital* by intentionally and proactively engaging them in the campus academic community, developing necessary learning skills sets, and providing the motivation, support, and resources that FGS need to successfully navigate the college environment. The distinctive focus of the project is designing a collaborative, faculty-led program to facilitate the development of students' *self-directed learning skills* or capacities to discover and construct rather than simply obtain knowledge in solving important college transition problems. Self-directed learning skills will facilitate FGS' academic socialization, support their college adjustment, motivate them to take advantage of campus support services, and encourage them to take responsibility for life-long learning.

The main goals of the proposed L2L project are to improve FGS retention, course completion, satisfaction, and graduation rates. The objectives of the project are to (i) establish a Mentoring Network, (ii) design an interactive wiki-based L2L website for FGS, their parents, and faculty mentors, and (iii) enhance general education core courses by implementing innovative pedagogical approaches to stimulate active self-directed student learning. Intended outcomes of the project implementation are the following: FGS participants will understand what is expected from them at the university, both academically and socially; engage in the academic and social life of the campus community; and gradually develop their competencies as self-directed learners. Faculty participants will become increasingly aware of academic and developmental needs of FGS; engage in co-curricular experiences intentionally designed for at-risk students such as FGS; and develop innovative mentoring, instructional, and assessment approaches to stimulate and facilitate student active self-directed learning.

The strategies and techniques implemented as part of this capacity-building project will be assessed and best practices will be identified. The effective approaches developed by the project can then be applied for all student populations at UMSU as well as serve as models for other minority and majority serving institutions².

¹ HBCU -- Historically Black College or University.

² Thayer (2000) notes that strategies that work for first-generation students are likely to be successful for the general population as well. However, the reverse is not true.

FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS (FGS)

When entering higher education institutions, many FGS, who lack the intergenerational benefits of information about college (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005), encounter new academic and social territory – a circumstance that often leads to unfulfilled expectations, frustration, and departure (Hicks, 2002; Vivian, 2005). FGS also are less likely to develop strong relationships with other students and more likely to be less satisfied with the campus environment (Terenzini et al. 1996). Further, FGS are less likely to develop relationships with faculty members and to perceive faculty as being concerned about their development than non-FGS (Terenzini et al., 1996). As a result, FGS are less integrated in the campus academic community and are twice as likely as students whose parents earned a bachelor's degree to leave before their second year (Choy, 2001). If, however, FGS persist in college, their performance on core learning outcomes is similar to that of the general student population (Pascarella et al., 2004).

According to the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE), 60% of UMSU first-time freshmen are FGS. In comparison, nationally, less than 40% of entering freshmen are FGS (BCSSE, 2008). Striving to provide high-quality targeted services to its diverse student populations, UMSU offers a broad range of support programs to prospective and currently enrolled FGS. For example, UMSU participates in Upward Bound, a federally funded program that provides first-generation middle and high school students with intensive developmental support services designed to prepare them for undergraduate studies. UMSU also coordinates College Prep Academy, a college awareness program to introduce local minority first-generation high school students to careers and educational opportunities available at UMSU. Further, the UMSU Office of Student Support Services provides a comprehensive support program for 400 low income FGS currently enrolled at UMSU. The services provided include registration/financial aid application assistance, campus orientation, tutorials, access to the computer labs, and cultural and educational enrichment exposure. Finally, offices (such as Academy for Collegiate Excellence and Student Success [ACCESS]) and programs (such as New Student Orientation, Freshmen Seminar, and Freshmen Transition Week) provide academic and social support to all UMSU students, including FGS. As a result of the broad support services implemented at UMSU, student retention and graduation rates have been slowly but steadily increasing in recent years. In addition, program participants consistently report high levels of satisfaction with services provided by Upward Bound, Student Support Services, and ACCESS (2006-07 Program Assessment Reports and 2008 UMSU Graduating Student Exit Survey).

However, despite recent increases in the graduation rate and high rates of student satisfaction with available academic and support services, retention and graduation rates of FGS remain alarmingly low. In fact, the freshmen retention rate for UMSU FGS is significantly lower than the rate for non-FGS (66% vs. 75%) (UMSU IR, 2009). This is not surprising as the diagnostic assessment data show that entering UMSU FGS are less prepared to do college level work, demonstrate lower performance in the general education coursework, and expect to have less interaction with faculty members than non-FGS.

Indeed, BCSSE data show that UMSU FGS report lower levels of high school academic engagement, expected academic engagement during the first year of college, and perceived academic preparation for college level work than non-FGS. Further, the expectations that UMSU first-year students have about college are, in many instances, dramatically different from UMSU faculty expectations (2007 UMSU FSSE and NSSE). In addition, FGS tend to be less pro-active than non-FGS in seeking academic assistance from faculty members. For example, less than half of entering UMSU FGS (49%) plan to discuss grades or assignment with an instructor very often, compared to 61% of non-FGS. Similarly, FGS expect to receive prompt feedback from faculty on their academic performance significantly less often than non-FGS (35% vs. 49%) (BCSSE, 2008).

Further, UMSU FGS tend to underperform in general education core courses compared to non-FGS. For example, in CHM-100, 41% of FGS receive grades less than C- compared to 30% of non-FGS. Similarly, in SCM-285, 17% of FGS receive grades less than C- compared to only 9% of non-FGS (UMSU IR, 2009). This is especially disturbing since zero percent of UMSU entering freshmen expect to receive grades C- or lower during the first college year (BCSSE, 2008).

Thus, these data suggest that, in order to improve college success of FGS, UMSU should further develop an institutional capacity to design, implement, and sustain an ongoing intentional program to involve faculty members in providing FGS with the necessary support to facilitate *academic socialization*, to provide FGS with valid and reliable information about college in order to help them develop more *realistic expectations*, and to review and enhance *pedagogical approaches* in the general education core curriculum. Indeed, Lohfink and Paulsen

(2005) recently found that participation in curricular-based activities may be more important to FGS college socialization than social activities and that "faculty may have a particularly important influence on the college experiences and the first-to-second year persistence of FGS" (p. 421). Thus, the proposed project aims to increase FGS college success rates by complementing already existing FGS tutorial and social support services provided by Student Affairs staff with the *faculty-driven curriculum-based* program "Learning to Learn" (L2L).

PROPOSED PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

A student-centered institution takes "an R. Buckminster Fuller's view of students: human beings are born geniuses and designed for success. If they fail to display their genius or fail to succeed, it is because their design function is being thwarted" (Barr&Tagg, 1995, p. 23.) Student attrition then is, in part, caused by the institution's inability to facilitate the students' design function for college adjustment. This proposal is based on the premise that the foremost factor in facilitating the students' design function is motivating students to learn how to learn or developing *self-directed learning* skills, since college transition requires freshmen, and especially FGS, "to switch from their previous experience at school, when learning was planned, closely monitored and evaluated for them by their teachers, to an environment in which they have to plan, monitor, and evaluate large portions of learning by themselves" (Wingate, 2007, p. 395; Kytte, 2004; Railton & Watson, 2005; Fazey & Fazey, 2001).

The "Learning to Learn" (L2L) project is a three-pronged approach to engage FGS in the learning to learn processes and help them become resolute learners. First, a Mentoring Network will provide a structure for faculty members to motivate, challenge, support at-risk FGS and engage them in the campus academic community in intentional structured ways. Faculty mentors will essentially serve as role models demonstrating "learning to learn" or meta-cognitive skills that characterize successful college-educated individuals. Second, an interactive L2L website will be designed to connect prospective and current FGS and their parents to the campus community and faculty mentors. Further, a wiki component of the L2L website will help FGS author relevant college adjustment information instead of passively receiving it. And third, the faculty Community of Learning (CoL) will enhance FGS engagement in academic coursework and stimulate self-directed learning by implementing active and collaborative learning pedagogies in the general education core coursework.

The L2L project will be coordinated by the Project Leadership Team, consisting of a senior academic officer and representatives of key stakeholders. In addition to the Leadership Team, successful implementation of this capacity-building project as well as its further institutionalization and sustainability will depend on effective and ongoing collaborations among existing offices and programs to provide holistic support to students, pool limited resources, and build synergies. Finally, assessment components will be embedded in all project programs to ensure accountability, capture effective practices, and take corrective actions if necessary.

Mentoring Network Program

Light (2001) suggested that "good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience" (p. 81). Indeed advising and mentoring provide multiple benefits to mentees, mentors, as well as to institutions (Girves et al. 2005). The need for mentoring is especially crucial for FGS who tend to have less contact with successful academic role models and have lower academic motivation than non-FGS. In fact, Pike and Kuh (2005) found that low academic aspirations are one of two direct reasons for low levels of FGS academic and social engagement and, consequently, attrition. This proposal defines *mentoring* as a multidimensional, dynamic, reciprocal relationship between an experienced faculty member and FGS formed to design and implement an intentional, structured process to rouse, inspire, challenge, support and nurture students, thus facilitating each student's academic socialization, self-directed learning, achievement of intended learning outcomes, and personal development (Girves et al., 2005; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

A group or *networking* mentoring model (Haring, 1997; Girves et al., 2005) will be utilized to design and implement the faculty-led mentoring program for at-risk³ FGS. Faculty mentors will serve as academic role models to the mentoring groups or clusters in the network and will be responsible for organizing cluster meetings, facilitating network-wide workshops, as well as connecting the participants to other faculty members and administrators and to the resources of the institutions. The networking model is not only more efficient than the traditional one-on-one approach but also more empowering, enabling FGS to adapt to the academic culture in their own way rather than being simply assimilated. Indeed, Brookfield (2005), while analyzing effective

³ At-risk students are identified by their scores on BCSSE and CSI.

approaches to developing critical thinking and self-directed learning skills in students, pointed out that "[a]s learners speak of their own critical process, they also attest to the importance of their belonging to an emotionally sustaining peer learning community [i.e., mentoring clusters]—a group of colleagues who are also experiencing dissonance, reinterpreting their practice, challenging old assumptions, and falling afoul of conservative forces" (p. 52). Further, the networking mentoring approach places the emphasis on the concept of community that is culturally consistent with the reality of the African American experience (Boyd-Franklin, 1991; Utsey et al., 2003).

It is expected that the inaugural class of the Mentoring Network will consist of at least one hundred (100) at-risk FGS and ten (10) faculty mentors. The Mentoring Network programming will involve regular cluster meetings, network workshops, formal and informal mentor and peer mentee-led tutorial sessions, development of wiki-based cluster websites, and attendance of social and cultural events. In addition, mentoring clusters will explore opportunities for student engagement in co-curricular activities that emphasize self-directed learning such as undergraduate research, service-learning, and career exploration⁴.

The UMSU ACCESS (Academy for Collegiate Excellence and Student Success) program will serve as an administrative home for the Mentoring Network. ACCESS will provide administrative support, coordinate to foster and monitor activities, develop a pool of mentors and mentees, train the mentors, market the program, and facilitate program tracking, implementation analysis, and outcomes assessment. Faculty mentors will also work closely and collaboratively with UMSU academic Schools and Colleges, Faculty Senate, Student Support Services, Student Activities, Honors College, Upward Bound, and Athletics to build campus support for the program, pool limited resources, and achieve synergies in implementation of activities.

"Learning to Learn" (L2L) Website

The Federal Commission on the Future of Higher Education (2006), while discussing college access in the context of current alarmingly low college persistence and graduation rates, found that many students and parents don't understand college requirements and called for improving the information about higher education provided to students and parents as well as for providing resources for early and ongoing college awareness activities, academic support, and college progression planning. This lack of valid and reliable information about college has an especially negative impact on academic motivation and university expectations of FGS and their parents. To ensure FGS success and timely graduation, this project proposes to design a Learning to Learn (L2L) website that will serve as an "orientation, advising and mentoring center without the walls" for FGS and include a wiki-based component of the Mentoring Network.

The multimedia L2L website will facilitate information flows between and among students, parents, faculty, and advisors and will enhance the Mentoring Network activities. In fact, Lipschultz and Leonard (2008), when discussing the growing role of web-based tools in providing advising and academic support services, found that if there is sufficient academic information appropriately presented to students via web-based means, students come to mentoring meetings "better educated, better prepared, and with more in-depth questions than advisees of the past who often made advising appointments solely to ask for basic academic information."

In addition, Pike and Kuh (2005) found that living off-campus is one of two direct reasons for low levels of FGS academic and social engagement, and, consequently, attrition. Thus, web-based information support is especially important for FGS who tend to work and live off-campus. Further, Packard (2003) noted that "technology-supported mentoring increases access in terms of expanding the realm of who can mentor and be mentored." In addition to building an interactive online resource repository for students, special emphasis will be placed on providing targeted materials for *parents* of current and prospective FGS as well as for faculty mentors and advisors. The L2L website is envisioned as a mentoring tool not only to currently enrolled FGS, but also to their parents who lack the intergenerational benefits of information about how colleges operate and what faculty expectations are. The L2L website will also host an electronic toolbox of advising resources for faculty mentors.

West and West (2008) keenly noted that twenty-first century learners have been Web consumers for much of their lives and are now demanding an online educational environment that supports participation and

⁴ Ishiyama (2002) found that early participation in student-faculty undergraduate research projects was of particular benefit for first-generation college students and concluded that "active engagement of underclassmen in collaborative research inquiry will undoubtedly promote the retention of "at-risk" students." Astin and Sax (1998) found that service participation has positive impacts such as improved civic and academic outcomes and life skills, greater motivation and increased educational aspirations, and greater likelihood of degree completion. Finally, Sandler (2000) found that students' confidence about their vocational futures "affects their attitudes about re-enrolling at the institution, as direct effect, and to a lesser extent their actual persistence at the institution, as an indirect effect" (p. 564).

interaction. *Wikis*, "a collaborative web space where anyone can add content and anyone can edit content that has already been published" (Richardson, 2006, p. 8), are proposed as an innovative low-cost tool to help teams of users with no HTML knowledge collaboratively use, create, and modify web content (West & West, 2008). Mentors and mentees will use wikis to create websites for each mentoring cluster, develop reflection journals, explore different sides of issues discussed at Mentoring Network workshops, build an archive of resources on topics important for FGS college adjustment, etc. Ultimately, utilization of wikis will provide mentees with opportunities to practice self-directed learning skills and will develop mentees and mentors' capacities to become collaborative partners in the processes of Mentoring Network knowledge building (West & West, 2008).

The Office of Quality Enhancement and Assessment (QEA) will collaborate with the participants of the Mentoring Network, Office of Information Technology, Student Support Services, Enrollment Management, and ACCESS to design, implement, and maintain the technical infrastructure for the L2L site; to train participants in the use of the wikis; and to collect the data to gauge L2L site utilization and user satisfaction.

Faculty Community of Learning (CoL)

Failure to complete foundational general education core courses produces a negative domino effect – it prevents students from making a timely progression to graduation, puts an additional financial burden on students and their parents, and discourages students from returning to UMSU, thus contributing to attrition. It is proposed that UMSU establish a faculty community of learning to build faculty expertise to enhance the general education core curriculum by identifying, designing, and disseminating effective active and collaborative teaching and learning practices (Barkley, Cross, & Major, 2004; Brookfield, 2006; Meyers & Jones, 1993). A faculty *community of learning* (CoL) refers to the process of collaborative synergistic learning that occurs when teaching faculty who have a common interest in some subject or problem work in teams to share ideas, find solutions, and build innovations, thus supporting student learning and development. Faculty CoLs stimulate pedagogical experimentation, reward risk-taking, and facilitate dissemination of innovative teaching and learning practices (Middendorf, 2004).

Discussing effective practices that facilitate the college transition of FGS, Prospero & Vohra-Gupta (2007) recommend encouraging and training faculty to use pedagogical methods that promote student self-directed learning (Brookfield, 1985; Kytte, 2004; Wingate, 2007), thus stimulating and supporting meaningful and intentional integration of FGS in academic work. The members of CoL will work to review relevant literature, identify best practices, and enhance selected sections in the following ten general education core courses with relatively high proportions of FGS receiving grades C- or lower: CHM-100 (41%), MTH-103 (35%), BIO-100 (26%), ENG-102 (26%), ENG-101 (24%), HIS-100 (24%), CSC-150 (20%), PHY-100 (19%), SCM-285 (17%), and SOC-101 (16%). CoL participants will also serve as a pilot group for implementation of the Datatel (campus student information system) Early Alert module and will facilitate brown bag sessions to share their experiences in course redesign, discuss effective active and collaborative learning techniques, and disseminate best practices.

The Center for the Enhancement of Teaching, Learning, and Advising (CETLA) in collaboration with the General Education Council will provide administrative support and coordination to the CoL. In addition, CETLA will facilitate the assessment of CoL effectiveness and provide professional development opportunities (e.g., webinars, conferences) to faculty members participating in the CoL.

Assessment

Capacity building projects such as L2L must integrate a comprehensive assessment component to ensure accountability, capture effective practices, make implementation adjustments, and take corrective actions if necessary. In addition, valid and reliable assessment data are needed to bring visibility and credibility to the L2L project, which may in turn lead to its expansion and institutionalization. An assessment program for the proposed L2L project will include diagnostic assessment, process evaluation, and impact analysis.

The Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE) and Noel-Levitz College Student Inventory (CSI) will be used as primary diagnostic early-alert assessments that will help identify FGS students who are at risk of dropping out. Results of the BCSSE and CSI will be used to select mentees for the Mentoring Network and provide at-risk, first-year FGS with targeted interventions. "Process evaluation verifies what the program is, and whether or not it is delivered as intended to the targeted recipients and in the intended 'dosage'" (Schreier, 1994). L2L project process evaluation approaches will include review of agendas, minutes, and sign-in sheets of Mentoring Network and faculty CoL meetings; Mentoring Network workshop materials; mentor and mentee satisfaction surveys; revised syllabi; comprehensive usage statistics for the L2L website; etc.

Impact analysis approaches will also be developed. A system will be designed to track course completion, GPA, retention, and the curriculum progression of Mentoring Network program participants as well as of total FGS population. These student tracking data will provide direct measures of program effectiveness. Scores for the NSSE benchmarks "Active and Collaborative Learning" and "Student-Faculty Interaction" will be used as an indirect assessment measure to gauge overall program effectiveness by comparing results for Mentoring Network participants, total FGS population, and total UMSU student population. To assess the impact of the mentoring program on students' cognitive development and self-directed learning skills, the Scale of Intellectual Development (DeMars & Erwin, 2003) and Awareness of Independent Learning Inventory (Elshout-Mohr et al., 2005) will be administered to program participants at the beginning and end of the program. Further, the L2L Leadership Team will conduct content analysis of mentor journals. Mentors will respond to monthly prompts that will focus on issues of program organization, mentees' growth and development as well as mentor's development. A rubric will also be designed to assess wiki-based projects developed by mentoring clusters. To assess the effectiveness of the Faculty CoL, an evaluation following Cox's (2001, 2004) model will be utilized.

FINANCIAL NEED

The major source of funding for UMSU is state appropriations. As a minority serving institution, the University has experienced a long history of serious underfunding compared to the majority serving institutions in the state. The current economic crisis further exacerbates historical underfunding. State appropriations for UMSU decreased by 5% in Fall 2008 and an additional 15% reduction is projected for Spring 2009, due to the state budget shortfall. Further, given its mission to provide affordable high-quality education, UMSU has one of the lowest tuition rates among higher education institutions in the region and is not able to rely on significant tuition increases to offset reductions in state appropriations. These factors make the Wal-Mart Foundation grant especially timely, valuable and helpful in assisting UMSU to address its mission of providing access to higher education for diverse populations in the region.

Despite financial challenges, UMSU is committed to the college success of FGS and other populations of at-risk students. UMSU has established a multi-faceted network of support services for at-risk students through Student Support Services, ACCESS, Upward Bound, and Enrollment Management. However, assessment data suggest that three critical components of FGS support system identified in the literature—faculty involvement, information outreach, and curriculum enhancement—are currently underdeveloped at UMSU. Thus, additional funding is needed to further develop the institutional capacity to engage faculty in helping at-risk FGS to succeed in college, to improve information flows between FGS, their parents, and faculty mentors, and to enhance the core curriculum to facilitate the development of self-directed learning skills in students.

PROPOSED BUDGET

The proposed budget for the L2L project requests funds for personnel, program support, administrative support, and travel. Personnel funds will be used to provide support for active faculty participation in L2L implementation thus ensuring sustainability of the project. The training stipends will support the development of the Mentoring Network programming, workshop materials, and wiki sites. The training stipends will also support modification of course materials and pedagogical approaches, facilitate regular CoL discussion sessions, and encourage faculty participation in and administration of various assessments. Program support funds will be used to cover costs associated with Mentoring Network and faculty CoL activities. In addition, program support funds will be utilized to purchase hardware and software to develop an interactive, wiki-based L2L website.

Administrative support funds will be used to purchase necessary supplies and to cover the printing costs necessary to facilitate the work of the Mentoring Network and faculty CoL. Administrative support funds will also be used to purchase the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE) for 2009 and 2011 administrations. Travel funds will be used to support UMSU team attending 2009 and 2011 Summer Academies, to support one Leadership Team member attending an AAC&U conference on self-directed learning, and to support faculty mentors and student mentees attending regional professional conferences and MEAC events.

In addition, the L2L Leadership Team has identified key campus partners (e.g., ACCESS, Student Support Services, Title III, QEA, CETLA, Enrollment Management, Upward Bound, and OIT) and will work with them to establish collaborative relationships to pool and share human, technological, and financial resources that are necessary to implement and sustain this ambitious project and to achieve the common, campus-wide goal of developing FGS as resolute learners and ensuring their academic, developmental, and professional success.