ADVANCING TEACHING & LEARNING

CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON TEACHING EXCELLENCE at UC MERCED

19 July 2010

Dear Kamal,

In an effort to improve freshman success in their first year of college and in turn freshman retention, UC Merced is establishing a Freshman Year Experience (FYE) program to coordinate and enhance freshman support initiatives offered by academic and Student Affairs units across the campus. A more complete description of this effort, which is being led by Jane Lawrence the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, is appended.

As student classroom experiences are integral to freshman success, the Center for Research on Teaching Excellence is inviting faculty, including lecturers, who provide freshman instruction to discuss the possibility of developing an informal but improvement oriented group focused on the challenges and goals of freshman instruction.

As this is a pilot project, we anticipate some potential benefits to be:

(1) Opportunities to discuss and investigate methods to increase freshman course academic success
(2) Enhanced opportunity for faculty teaching support
(3) CRTE support tailored to instructional needs

If you are interested in meeting with us and fellow faculty to discuss the needs of freshman and plan some support activities, we would encourage you to join us for an initial planning meeting. Please let us know by the end of this month if and when you are available during the week of August 9 and/or August 23.

We look forward to meeting with you.

Sincerely,

Laura Martin, Ph.D.
Assistant Director, CRTE

Anne Zanzucchi, Ph.D.
Assessment & Faculty Development Coordinator, CRTE

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
UCMERCED

Update on First Year Initiatives
July 2010

Over the last 20 years there has been extensive research done on how to assist first year students to be more successful. In recent years the research has focused increasingly on how to assist sub-populations within first year students to be successful (Gardiner, Barefoot, Tinto, Pascarella, Kruger, Kuh, Terenzini). Two of these sub-populations are first-generation students and under-represented students, both of which comprise the majority of UC Merced's undergraduate student population.

Soon after the campus opened in 2005, it became apparent that too many of our incoming students were struggling academically and psycho-socially as they transitioned into UC Merced. When mid-semester grades are issued for lower division courses, we normally see 50% of our new first year students with at least one or two grades of D+ or lower each fall. Generally these students are able to begin to develop college-level skills by the end of the term, but too many of our students end the year on academic probation, special probation or dismissed. At the end of spring 2010, 588 students were in one of these categories.

What we know: our retention rate between freshmen and sophomore year is the lowest (around 80%) in the UC system; many of our first year students on campus arrive over confident and without an understanding of the skills and abilities they will need to be successful at the University of California. Each year, hundreds of our first year students face the discouragement of having to repeat courses, not having the drive or skills to pass the course on their first attempt. We also know that many lack motivation and support from home, particularly with regard to exploring new pathways into unfamiliar disciplines and career areas. Research has demonstrated that with intentional and organized support in and out of the classroom, more students can be successful (Kuh). Greater academic and co-curricular engagement will help to anchor them to their ambition and the campus community, and allow them to persevere to graduation.

Student Affairs has taken the lead in trying to think about the First Year Experience holistically. We invited units from across Academic and Student Affairs that are key to student success, including representatives from the Schools, Center for Research on Teaching Excellence (CRTE), the Merritt Writing Program, the Library and appropriate Student Affairs. We met for many months to better understand what programs, services and support we are providing First Year students. Each area was challenged to think about its services/programs for first year students, whether they were adequate and to think about opportunities for collaboration. Through these

meetings we developed a matrix that outlines the programs and support services we currently provide to incoming students. Among the ideas that resulted from the meetings was a suggestion that CRTE create materials and/or hold workshops designed for faculty and TAs teaching first year students that would contain information about best practices for working with first year, first generation students as well as information about the background and skill level of UC Merced students.

Given the numerous assessment efforts underway across the University, we also spent quite a bit of time reviewing other college and universities' first year learning outcomes. We have drafted First Year Experience Learning Outcomes (see attached) that we will be presenting to Undergraduate Council in the fall. If we gain their support, our plan is to work collaboratively with units across the campus to design programs that speak directly to our proposed learning outcomes and then to assess for student achievement and, in turn, their effectiveness in supporting student success.

In addition to the initiatives described above, Associate Vice Chancellor Charles Nies has been working with staff in units across Student Affairs to better align summer orientation, move-in weekend and welcome week to help students more quickly make the transition into our academic community and to inform them about the resources and support that is available to them on campus and in the residence halls. Our theme for welcome week this year is "Excellence" with programs organized around the sub-themes of Explore, Connect, Lead and Succeed. Our Residence Life Department has developed a special First Year Experience Program for all first year residents, which includes a series of workshops and programs and easy access to specially-trained peer academic advisors who live in the residence halls with first year students.

The Students First Center is constructing a First Year Experience website based upon a model used at Stanford University. Our goal is to encourage our first year students to use the website as a resource for information and links to academic support services, including advising, tutoring, workshops, the Career Services Center, etc. We also have developed a FYE logo to put on flyers and publicity about workshops, activities and programs to enable first year students to quickly understand that these activities are designed especially for them and their success.

The goal of all of this collaborative work is to help our students be academically successful. By partnering with the Schools, the CRTE, Merritt Writing Program, Student Affairs hopes to be able to offer the programs and services that are proven through our assessment efforts to help our students succeed. Obvious but intended outcomes would be an increase in our freshmen to sophomore year retention rates, the need to recruit fewer students in future years and greater numbers of successful graduates from even the most at-risk groups.

As indicated above, it is our intention to discuss the draft learning outcomes and other initiatives with Undergraduate Council in fall 2010 to obtain their input, suggestions and support as we seek to put into practice collaborative programs to support/promote first year student success.