The CSULB Learning Alliance
A Unique Educational Experience

In the fall of 1992, the College of Liberal Arts embarked on a project to incorporate intentional learning communities into some of their general education (GE) core classes in order to improve student retention and the undergraduate experience at CSULB. In association with the Dean’s Office, professional staff have created a program which offers a “small college atmosphere” where students receive personalized attention, academic advisement, and encouragement to become involved in university and community life. The design is based upon a partnership among administration, faculty and students.

The Learning Alliance involves a commitment for first-time freshman students and invites a cohort of 250 students annually. Students qualify for the program based upon test scores and their desire to become a participant in a community that enables them to make informed choices about majors and career/life goals. The Alliance draws students from a variety of academic interests and cultural backgrounds resulting in an exciting and representative ethnic and gender mix. Many of the President’s Scholars (Valedictorians) have also found their academic home in the program. By taking classes together, these students share perspectives and develop support networks.

Depending on the semester and curriculum, between 12-16 faculty members operate as a team to plan the focus for the freshman year curriculum. Using existing GE offerings, faculty teaching “connected” classes work together to integrate their two courses. Classes in the program are logically sequenced and emphasize critical thinking and analytical, writing, and discussion skills. Faculty development is a vital component of the program. At monthly sessions, faculty discuss student performance, share concerns, and determine effective techniques for actively engaging students in the learning process. This rich dialogue, centered on teaching and learning, fosters a sense of cooperation and belonging for both faculty and students.

A key purpose of the Learning Alliance is to help students develop a strong sense of civic and social values. To facilitate involvement in the campus and local community, students attend a series of educational, cultural and social activities their first year in the program and complete service hours on a project of their choice (e.g. peer advising, recruitment at local high schools, campus involvement in clubs or organizations, or service to campus programs or offices) in their sophomore year. Ultimately, the goal is to have our students maintain a strong identity with CSULB as they provide the political, educational and economic leadership for our future.

For more than a decade, we have experienced improved retention rates, timely progress towards graduation, increased awareness of faculty roles and responsibilities in the academy, earlier interest and involvement in leadership in student clubs, organizations and the community, and a dedication to the program and educational responsibility. By providing opportunities for innovation in teaching and curriculum redesign, the Learning Alliance has also helped to reestablish a rationale for sequential coursework and has served as a model in the CSULB General Education revitalization process.