What are Learning Communities / First-Year Interest Groups?

**Learning Communities (LCs)**

Groups of students who live in the same residence hall (usually on the same floor(s)) and share common interests. Many students in LCs take courses in common, though the curricular component is not required. Students in LCs live and study together, attending a variety of co-curricular programs and often engaging in service projects together.

**First-Year Interest Groups (FIGs)**

Sub-groups of 20-24 students inside Learning Communities. Students in a FIG take 2-3 courses in common. Such courses may be directly linked by curricular priorities and faculty collaboration, or they may be linked almost entirely by theme or topic, with little-to-no faculty collaboration. In most cases, FIG classes are offered in the fall semester only. The majority of FIGs are for freshmen.

Ultimately, both LCs and FIGs strive for the same thing: to establish a community of learners who pursue answers to similar intellectual questions.

How do FIGs work? What are the options?

SLU has three different types of FIGs, with varying degrees of faculty involvement. In each case, all the students in a FIG enroll in 2-3 freshman courses in common, though classes/sections may or may not be restricted to FIG students alone. In large lecture courses, for example, FIG students comprise just one cohort inside the larger (non-FIG) class.

**Co-Enrolled FIGs**

- **Classes** linked loosely by theme of the Learning Community, providing students an opportunity to take classes in common. **Faculty** collaboration is minimal.

**Linked FIG Classes**

- **Classes** linked more deliberately by collaboration between faculty. **Faculty** teaching in the FIG all work together to link aims/activities across the classes and to enhance students’ learning across disciplines.

FIGs have been designed with lots of flexibility built in, so that faculty/departments can determine how best to meet the goals of their own classes, while still participating in FIGs. Ultimately, the structure of FIGs should accommodate the intellectual aims of the course(s), not constrain them. Faculty teaching in FIGs are invited to participate as stakeholders in the LC to which their FIGs are attached.

Why should I participate in a FIG?

Research* shows that there are many good reasons to participate in FIGs. Here are just a few of the highlights:

**Benefits to Faculty**

- Enhances student class participation, learning, and motivation
- Improves student evaluations and student satisfaction with course(s)
- Enhances Jesuit mission of “educating the whole person”
- Demonstrates service to the university
- Demonstrates teaching development activities

**Benefits to Students**

- Leads to deeper engagement with and understanding of material covered
- Increases class participation, motivation and ownership in the learning process
- Facilitates deeper understanding of connections across disciplines and courses
- Integrates learning from inside and outside the classroom
- Builds intellectual community by helping students to form study groups and work collaboratively

* Both published research and data gathered here at SLU describe the many benefits of learning communities. See Zhao, C. and G.D. Kuh, “Adding Value: Learning Communities and Student Engagement” (2004), and the FIG Instructor Survey, Dept. of Student Development, November 2009.
If you're interested in participating in a FIG:

1. **Talk to your department chair or program director.** Find out if your participation is feasible for the following fall semester. FIGs work best when they enhance the work of your department and discipline. (Aim to begin these conversations around September, so the department/program has time to consider your request.)

2. **Consult the SLU Learning Communities website** (www.slu.edu/lc). See if there is an existing FIG that appeals to you or an existing Learning Community that might be connected to your own teaching interests.

3. **Start with courses you already teach (or would like to teach).** Do you already teach a freshman course that is well-suited to an existing LC or FIG? How might you innovate on existing curricula? In addition to freshman-level courses that connect to an existing Learning Community, consider courses that satisfy core curriculum requirements for your college and/or that function as introductory or gateway courses to an area of study.

4. **Talk to your colleagues.** Seek out faculty who are already teaching in a FIG, and/or talk with colleagues who might be interested in linking courses with you in some way.

5. **Confirm your interest in participating with your department chair/program director.** By late December/early January, you’ll want to finalize plans with the head of your department/program. Ask that person to notify the FIG Coordinator that you have a potential FIG course you’d like considered for the following fall term.

6. **Keep the following in mind as you plan your course:** Students register for classes in the summer and consider a variety of factors when doing so. That means enrollments will fluctuate from year to year. Therefore, if seats set aside for FIGs do not fill, they may need to be opened to non-FIG students. Enrollments will be monitored throughout the summer, and chairs/directors will be informed about adjustments as needed. FIG faculty will receive finalized rosters for FIG courses in August.

If it turns out that you cannot participate in a FIG, there are lots of other ways you could be involved in one of the Learning Communities. Contact Susan Fanale or Katie Beres for more information.

**What kinds of support are available?**

There are several different kinds of support available for faculty participating in a FIG.

- **Student Involvement Center:** Susan Fanale (sfanale@slu.edu), Director for the Student Involvement Center, Katie Beres (kberes1@slu.edu), FIGs Coordinator, and Elizabeth Niebruegge (ehudnall@slu.edu) can provide information about LCs/FIGs and assist with logistical matters.

- **Reinert Center for Teaching Excellence:** Dr. Debie Lohe (dlohe@slu.edu), Program Director for Teaching Enhancement, can assist with class planning and adaptation, effective teaching strategies, and soliciting student feedback.

- **LC Stakeholders Groups:** Stakeholder groups (consisting of faculty, staff, and student leaders within the LC) meet regularly during the year, particularly the fall semester, to discuss issues related to the success and growth of the LC. These conversations help stakeholders to plan activities and to troubleshoot and identify issues that need attention.

- **Community- and FIG-Building Events:** (All last approximately 1 hour, except for the May Workshop.)
  - **April LC Event:** A chance to meet other faculty and staff (including the RAs) connected to your FIG/LC and to gain a fuller understanding of your Learning Community.
  - **FIG Instructors:** Online resources will be available beginning the middle of May for fall FIG instructors.
  - **August FIG Orientation:** An opportunity to meet your FIG students and to set course expectations before the semester begins (particularly useful if you have a blended course, with both FIG and non-FIG students enrolled).