Fast Track Focus Group & Follow-Up Questions

Summary of Findings

Goal of Study: This study was conducted to provide the college with additional information about how to improve the Fast Track Learning Community program at Rio Hondo College. The findings are drawn from student focus group discussions and follow up questionnaires completed during class sessions. Topics were coded and organized according to repetitive ideas. Themes were organized by each question.

Sample Size:

- 4 (3 male, 1 female student) Focus Group participants provided feedback in-person on March 11, 2013.
- Follow-Up Questionnaires: 57 participants completed the questionnaires in class during March 11 2013 to April 4, 2013.

Study Limitations: This study was too small to offer complete findings across all student populations but the following key issues arose during the discussions and received from the in class questionnaires.

Questions and Themes

Question 1: How did you learn about the Fast Track Learning Community courses?

Theme: Students often learned about the Fast Track Learning Community (LC) courses through other instructors, counselors, and on their own (self) (during the online registration process). A few students mentioned that they learned about the LC from the assessment center, other students, and the summer bridge program.
**Question 2:** What were your expectations when you signed up for Fast Track Learning Community classes? Can you explain how well the program either did or did not meet those expectations?

**Theme:** Many students described the LC as a great learning experience that was fast paced but helped them complete more credits in a faster time period. They expected to move through the coursework in a faster pace. Several students mentioned that the program met all of their expectations and is good “as-is.”

One student wrote,

> I expected the instructors to communicate with each other, and plan their assignments in a way to put less stress on their students. It did meet my expectations.

**Theme Weaknesses:** Some students indicated that the classes did not seem to be paired well. Specifically LIB 101 did not meet expectations with an ENG 101 pairing. The courses also included a significant amount of lab time.

**Question 3:** What was it like working with the same group of students in your Fast Track classes?

**Theme:** Many students were satisfied with the LC and enjoyed working with the same group of students in LC classes. Students described classes as “comfortable”, “fun”, “interesting,” and “helpful.” Often this included working with the same group of students which created a comfortable atmosphere and an easy way to make friends and form study groups.
Question 4: In some of the course pairings, two classes were accelerated to 8-week sessions while one class was taught for the full 16 weeks. What differences did you find between having 8-week classes and 16-week classes?

Theme: Students described 16 week courses as slow paced. Students understand why 8 week sessions are more challenging. Students pushed themselves to be more successful and complete all of the assignments that are due on a regular basis.

Weaknesses (Verbatim):

Some chaos but will be better with time
Lib 101 course wasn’t accelerated causing many difficulties
At first it was difficult to handle classwork because they were told that one instructor would cover something for an assignment and it wasn’t done, then due dates were changed so it was okay/courses seemed to not “pair” (3).
Different pace (one is faster and the other is regular pace, doesn’t work together) (2)
Prefers 16 week classes (increase of learning) (2)
Not taking 8 week classes

Question 5: How were your Fast Track classes different from your classes that weren’t Fast Track? [For experiences related to the Fast Track structure, rather than specific subjects or instructors. Specifically, probe about faculty members working together and connecting content between the two courses]

Theme: Many students described the benefits of group work and the in-person attention by the professor’s style. This included more communication and interaction with professors on all subjects. Students felt more comfortable asking questions in class.

Strengths (verbatim):

“My FT classes were more interactive and it was a lot more personal with both the other students and the teachers”

“Makes learning about a topic more efficient and effective, because we go over the topic in both classes so the information sticks to us.”
Theme: Some Students were dissatisfied with the communication between instructors and deadlines for assignments. The course pairings were off schedule.

Weaknesses (Verbatim):

“Confusing because communication was off for certain dates and deadlines for both teachers”

“Classes are good but the course pairings need to be on the same schedule (confusing if one gets ahead)”

Question 6: In what ways did being in Fast Track classes affect your learning?

Students were generally satisfied with the fast paced learned and daily assignments.

Strengths (Verbatim)

“Save time knowing the classmates better and closer. Teachers in all class communicate with each other about student improvement.”

“It allowed me to talk more with them in my classes and work together helping each other out.”

(2)

Question 7: In your Fast Track Learning Community classes, were your instructors more supportive in regards to your attendance, participation, and academic success than were your non-Fast Track Learning Community classes? Can you describe why or why not?

Theme: Students indicated that professors provided clear directions and additional support. Class discussions were beneficial and encouraged students to learn, participate, and take extra time every day.

Question 8: Is there anything you would change to make Fast Track Learning Community courses more beneficial for other students?

Theme: Students were dissatisfied with the LIB 101 course. Other students also mentioned the need to work together to be on the same track.

Weakness: Students would like to open the program to more students and more options.

Difficult to find classes that are needed to transfer.
Question 9: Are there other course pairings—not currently offered in Fast Track--that you think would be beneficial to students?

Students Suggestions (Verbatim):

- Science/history
- Math
- Speech classes
- More general education classes like critical thinking
- Easier to ask questions because they feel comfortable
- Higher math class
- Math/reading/music
- Offer reading/speech
- Extra credit
- Only math and English
  - Transfer level coursework
  - English, writing, reading, and vocabulary
  - Science
- Combining mathematics of all levels
- Non ge like dance class
- Math 70 and higher
- Psychology and science classes
- Psychology and counseling class
- Electives like music, language
- Another pair could be English and ……
- Speech and sociology
- Foreign language
- Science course pairings
- History/anthropology
- Anthropology/astronomy
- English/history
- Spanish class
- Math and science
- Arts

Question 10: Switching gears slightly, why do you think some students drop out from college before finishing their classes or programs?

Theme: Students drop out because of financial necessity (need to work to support the family), lack of personal motivation and confidence, and difficulty to ask for help with subjects that are challenging before it is too late.
**Question 11:** What else could the college be doing to help more students get through their coursework and targeted program of study faster?

**Themes:** Many students described their content with college programs. However, some students included the following suggestions: 1) students described course related concerns, 2) need for additional tutoring; 3) and improvement of marketing awareness for opportunities like the FT classes.

**Student Comments (Verbatim)**

Some students do not take advantage of extra support and help
More meeting
Open more courses (2)
Offer more fast track
Online classes
Coursework should be interesting and important for students to want to do it
FT classes according to student’s majors
Open winter class
Offer fast track in other subjects
Also in fast track having a teacher assistant to help the students
Counselor is needed in college to show students right path to graduation or transfer
Cancel counseling to give students more time to focus on writing (1)
Variety in classes
Additional office hours (faculty)
Provide help
Study group hours per week should be a requirement and incorporated them into the fast track class
College is doing a good job; students need to take education more seriously
Additional ft classes to transfer faster
Allow more course slots to be open for incoming freshman (1)
Inform students that tutoring is available and where
More ft classes to students besides math and English
Vocational type of program
Students do not take advantage enough
Increase number of tutors
College has great programs but needs to advertise them more (bring awareness)
Have more fast track programs of different subjects not just English and math
No mandatory lab please
More communication between students and instructors
“It is up to the student to get any extra help they may need. I think keeping all tutors; office hours, etc. are much help. “
More clubs for academic programs (recommendation)
More LCs
Counselor’s aggressiveness to help students meets their goals
Set up meetings with students “in trouble” or “at risk” and figure out how to help them
More tutors
Dismantle standardized testing
Free books
Better advertisements/class offerings
Limited selection of classes
“Explain things better and more importantly professors have to be willing to work more with students”
More tutoring services
More classes
Providing help and more supportive instructors
More generals available

**Conclusion Section:
Add after this is presented to other groups on campus and feedback is received about the report/findings
Appendix Questions (Focus Group and Follow-Up Questionnaires)

1. How did you learn about the Fast Track Learning Community courses?

2. What were your expectations when you signed up for Fast Track Learning Community classes? Can you explain how well the program either did or did not meet those expectations?

3. What was it like working with the same group of students in your Fast Track classes?

4. In some of the course pairings, two classes were accelerated to 8-week sessions while one class was taught for the full 16 weeks. What differences did you find between having 8-week classes and 16-week classes?

5. How were your Fast Track classes different from your classes that weren’t Fast Track? [For experiences related to the Fast Track structure, rather than specific subjects or instructors. Specifically, probe about faculty members working together and connecting content between the two courses]

6. In what ways did being in Fast Track classes affect your learning?

7. In your Fast Track Learning Community classes, were your instructors more supportive in regards to your attendance, participation, and academic success than were your non-Fast Track Learning Community classes? Can you describe why or why not?

8. Is there anything you would change to make Fast Track Learning Community courses more beneficial for other students?

9. Are there other course pairings—not currently offered in Fast Track— that you think would be beneficial to students?

10. Switching gears slightly, why do you think some students drop out from college before finishing their classes or programs?

11. What else could the college be doing to help more students get through their coursework and targeted program of study faster?