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Interdisciplinary Teams in the First Year Experience

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Interdisciplinary Teams Are the Heart of Guttman's First-Year Experience Program

At the Stella and Charles Guttman Community College, the first new community college in the City University of New York system in 40 years, the First Year Experience (FYE) is designed around interdisciplinary learning communities. These learning communities provide the foundation for achieving Guttman's institutional learning outcomes (GLOs). Modeled after the Lumina Foundation Degree Qualifications Profile and the Association of American College and University's LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes, the GLOs are (a) Broad Integrative Knowledge; (b) Applied Learning; (c) Specialized Knowledge; (d) Intellectual Skills for Lifelong Learning; and (e) Civic Learning, Engagement, and Social Responsibility. The components of the FYE learning communities allow students to acquire and practice critical reading, thinking, writing, and numeracy skills. Teams of faculty and staff from various disciplines and student support areas form the backbone of the program.

To establish appropriate support structures, Guttman randomly assigns first-year students to one of six learning communities or houses. Each house comprises three cohorts of 25 students. The cohorts are heterogeneous, with some students having demonstrated proficiency in reading, writing, and math, and others needing remedial instruction in one or more subjects. Those in the same cohort take all their courses together, and an instructional team that includes faculty in mathematics, English, and the social sciences teaches classes in the learning community. A dedicated advisor called a Student Success Advocate (SSA) rounds out the instructional team.

The design of Guttman's curriculum hits all of the hallmarks outlined in Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins's (2015) guided pathways model, incorporating systematic and collaborative learning facilitation design as a nexus for innovation and student success. A student's first semester schedule includes the following courses:

- **Statistics**, focusing on real-world applications of mathematical reasoning;
- **Ethnographies of Work**, exploring sociocultural ideas about work and engaging students in assignments that focus on job trends, work place culture, and career exploration;
- **Learning About Being a Successful Student** (LaBSS), offering intrusive advising that helps students acclimate to college life by introducing habits of good learning and grit in a graded, one-per-week session; and
- **City Seminar**, integrating college-credit work and development skills practice across four components: (a) Reading and Writing (3 hours per week); (b) Critical Issues (3 hours per week); (c) Quantitative Reasoning (3 hours per week); and (d) Studio (1.5 hour per week) and using problem and project-based inquiry as the primary pedagogy.

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Designed by faculty with expertise in different areas, the City Seminar serves as the anchor of the FYE. Each seminar focuses on a unique contemporary issue, for example, food justice, gentrification, and immigration. While it meets for a total of 10.5 hours per week, the course is offered for three college credits.

The instructional team structure epitomizes Guttman's intentional focus on student success and ensures that students remain at the center of the model supported by interconnected services and faculty and staff (Figure 1). The teams meet weekly to discuss student progress and curricular alignment. Librarians and support staff interface with the teams on a regular basis. Faculty members are compensated 1.5 course credits per semester for participating in instructional team meetings. Each house has a team leader who receives an additional 0.5 credit per semester to set agendas, keep notes, and facilitate discussion. There are current conversations about compensating part-time faculty for attending team meetings. Assessment of the team structure is ongoing in Guttman's Center for College Effectiveness through triangulation of data provided in the team notes, early-alert flags, and support service reports.

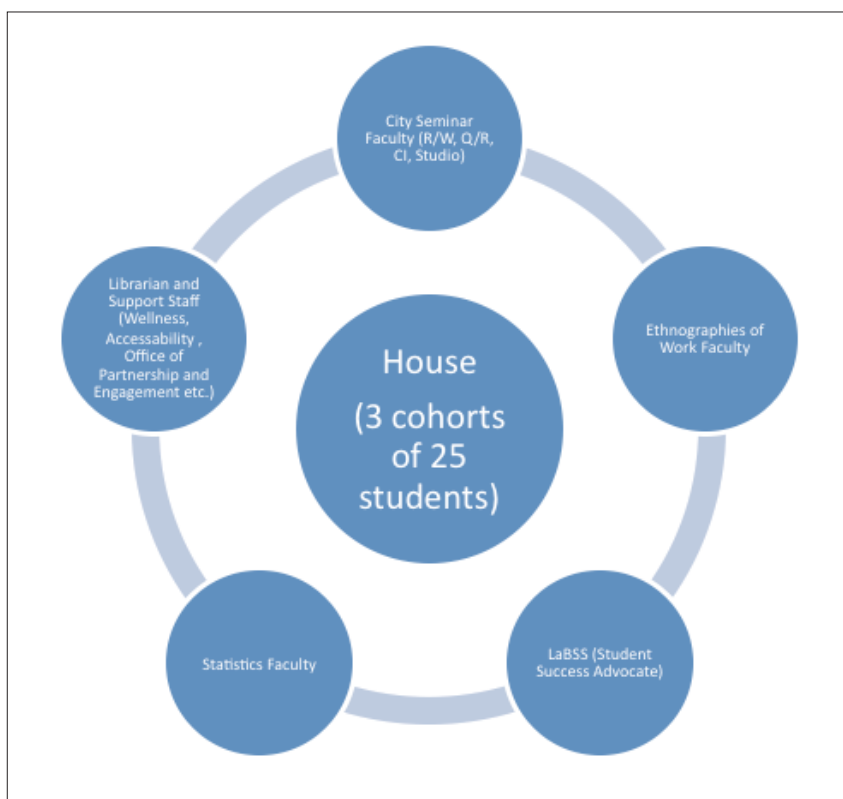


Figure 1. Team structure of the FYE at Guttman Community College.

SSAs are core members of each instructional team. They know each student intimately through their work in the weekly LaBSS sessions and through three mandatory, one-on-one meetings scheduled during the semester. Regular contact with the SSAs through team meetings means that faculty do not wait for structured times in the semester to prepare an

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early-alert flag for a student who may need additional support. The embedded support provided by the SSAs encourages students to address social-emotional concerns that otherwise would manifest at the end of the semester when the obstacles have already negatively impacted academic performance.

Recognizing the need for structured, compensated time and space for the teams to meet, the College provides both incentives and opportunities for the faculty and staff on the FYE instructional teams to engage one another. The structured time allows faculty and staff to discuss the whole situation of every student—whether they are emerging learners, learners approaching competency, or excelling learners—and to assess the effectiveness of their curricula and instructional strategies in relation to each student's varying needs. Students benefit from these ongoing structured discussions because they enable faculty to holistically address learning differences as well as identify additional opportunities for students who are excelling in courses.

In addition, the interdisciplinary nature of the teams allows each faculty member to build and enhance their repertoire of instructional strategies. Faculty members in English, mathematics, social sciences, and the sciences discuss and adapt strategies practiced in each other's classrooms. Supplementing these informal exchanges, team members collaborate on designing assignments, developing rubrics, and responding to student work.

Team meetings are most successful when they focus on improving student learning. They ensure that none of Guttman's first-year courses are delivered in isolation and thereby create richer and deeper learning experiences than those using more traditional instruction. Because discussions at team meetings focus on students' strengths and abilities, regardless of their individual starting points, team members are supported in creating learning environments in their individual classrooms that encourage the kinds of intellectual risk-taking that help students make lasting improvements.

Overall, the instructional team structure promotes trust and accountability across the team and the house, enabling faculty, staff, and students alike to grow as learners without compromising academic rigor. We recognize that Guttman is a unique institution; however, other institutions may benefit from developing and implementing a similar model to support student success. 

References

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