Assessment of ACE Learning Communities 2013
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Introduction
The Access to College Excellence (ACE) learning communities are offered to increase first-year students retention and ease their transition into the university. Students pre-register for a cluster of classes based on their academic major and goals. ACE learning communities are made up of 15 students or less, and are tied a one-unit integrating seminar known as CAS 110. CAS 110 provides academic, social, and life skill training.

At the end of the Fall 2013 semester, First-Year Programs collected feedback from students participating in the Access to College Excellence (ACE) learning communities. In total, 276 out of 326 students completed the online survey (84% response rate). Survey development was completed in collaboration with the Department of Speech’s study on student persistence, institutional commitment, and social integration. Additional guidance was provided by Dr. Donna Dahlgren, a psychology professor and Director of First-Year Programs at Indiana University Southeast, and Leilani Takeuchi, previous director of First Year Programs (2007-2011). All survey material was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Hawai’i at Manoa (UHM).

The purpose of the survey was to measure the students’ overall satisfaction with the ACE learning community, and whether the ACE learning communities had achieved its stated learning outcomes as indicated through the First Year Programs mission and CAS 110 student learning outcomes.

Methods
Participants: 326 students enrolled in CAS 110 and participated in the ACE Learning Communities.
Assessment Tool:
1) Institutional data on student first-year retention rate for the students in the ACE Learning Communities and the rate for the 2013 entering students overall.
2) An online survey delivered through Survey Monkey
Procedure:
1) Retention rate: data is gathered by UHM Institutional Research Office.
2) Survey: Using a pre- and post survey strategy. The survey was administered in Week 1 (Pre-Survey) and Week 10 (Post Survey) of the twelve-week CAS 110 class cycle. The response rate was 87% for the Pre-Survey and 85% for the Post Survey.

Results

Figure 1: The ACE Learning Communities have an 88% retention rate compared to an institutional retention rate of 78% for first time incoming freshman, addressing PLO 7 (2011 ACE Cohort Data).

Figure 2: The following chart presents samples of post survey close-ended responses that address a Learning Objective. Satisfactory student response indicates students “agreed” or “strongly agreed” for each statement.

Frequently Occurring Open-Ended Responses
What did you find most valuable and helpful about the course/program? 
- “Making new friends” and “study groups” (PLO 1)
- “Being connected to campus resources” (PLO 3)

Ten years from now, I’ll probably remember this course/program by...
- “The friendships I’ve made and the people I met” (PLO 1)
- “The positive relationship that was built with the ACE peer mentor” (PLO 4)

What are two or three single words that best describe this course/program?
- “Awesome,” “Fun,” “Useful,” “Welcoming,” and “Supportive” (PLO 6)

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First Year Programs Learning Objectives (PLOs)
1. To help students connect with each other, advisors, faculty and ultimately, to help them feel connected to the institution
2. To help students make the transition from being a high school learner to a university learner
3. To introduce students to resources that can support their academic work at UHM and other services that can give them assistance
4. To provide students a positive role model in the peer mentor program
5. To be a forum where students can explore their intellectual interests
6. To encourage students to develop more positive attitudes and behaviors towards the university
7. To increase student retention to the sophomore year and subsequently through the senior year to graduation
8. To increase faculty and department participation in first-year programs

Conclusion
The survey results demonstrated that the ACE Learning Communities were very successful at helping students in their transition from high school to college. Post survey results of the 2013 ACE students indicate that students were able to meet each of the learning objectives of the First Year Programs (Figure 2).

Future actions to improve the assessment of ACE Learning Communities include gathering faculty participation data, and assessment of connections created by students, in addition to the existing satisfaction questions in the post survey. Faculty participation data could involve a trend analysis of the number of unique faculty approvals.

In conclusion, the ACE Learning Communities were able to increase freshman retention, and also help students become actively engaged in their academic journey by connecting them to campus resources and fostering an environment for positive peer to peer interactions.