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**Peer Advisors Make Connections with First-Year Learning Communities**  
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First Year Learning Communities at City Tech

The First Year Learning Communities (FYLC), a program of the Office of First Year Programs at New York City College of Technology (“City Tech”), provide first year students a supportive structure through collaborative learning experiences and peer mentoring to foster better academic achievement. Students in learning communities are afforded the social and educational network that reinforces their success. Students enrolled in FYLC participate in activities that include a welcome orientation, registration workshops, study rooms, mid-semester social event, and participation in a peer mentor program. Student success in the first year of college is critical to a successful academic journey and FYLC strives to provide key assistance in the first year. Faculty are trained via the Summer Institute to implement cooperative learning, alternative assessment in the classroom, cross disciplinary writing assignments, and critical thinking activities in addition to learning how to use the support of counseling, library resources, educational resources (such as our Learning Center) and technology in the learning process.

First Year Learning Communities Goals

The goals aim to support students in their first year in college by:

- Assisting with the transition to college for first year students
- Actively engaging students to build an academic community
- Enhancing academic achievement via faculty, staff and peer mentor support
- Constructing a supportive environment for students in a large urban commuter campus
- Increasing student satisfaction and involvement at City Tech
- Increasing retention and GPA
- Decreasing class withdrawal rates
- Providing faculty with an intensive training institute where they:
  1. Create thematic-based content centered round common student learning outcomes
  2. Incorporate active learning practices in linked courses
  3. Implement a reflective learning process into the classroom through linked courses
  4. Communicate effectively with First Year Learning Communities (FYLC) peer mentors.
- Deepening the degree to which students feel connected to the college
- Increasing successful pass rates on CUNY certification exams.

## Importance of Peer Advisors

Many of our students come to our college underprepared and in need of additional assistance to succeed academically. Many are first generation college students who come to our urban campus with a myriad of dilemmas, ranging from financial concerns, family problems, issues revolving around single parenting, housing needs and legal issues. Others come with an academic deficit from graduating from a low performing high school, completing a GED program or have been chronically academically unsuccessful for many years. Our program strives to equalize the first year college experience for these students by providing additional student support. One key element that is used is providing each learning community student with a peer mentor.

Peer Advisors are valuable for an academic institution because they are experienced with the campus, they are economical to the budget, they can relate to the situations of fellow students, and they are effective (Newton, Ender, 2010). Our peer advisors are recruited through a very selective process, and receive on-going training and support throughout the year. The First Year Program sets high expectations on the work the peer advisors must complete, which includes establishing a relationship with professors, conducting class visits, facilitating workshops, organizing events and meeting with students.

An evaluation interview is conducted with each peer advisor at the end of each semester. It is a reflective process of discussing the program. Students articulate specifics about the semester, what worked, and what didn't work and what would they change. It is an incredible opportunity to receive first-hand feedback and construct improvements to the program with concrete information.

## Requirements for becoming a Peer Advisor

Peer advisors play an important role in introducing new students to City Tech. They must be mature, articulate, and responsible individuals who have a strong academic record. Since they will be meeting new students, they must have the personality and interpersonal skills necessary to work effectively with individuals and groups. They will serve as role models for new students as well as continuing students.

- Peer Advisors are students who must have completed at least 20 credits and be CUNY “certified” (taken the certification [entry] exams in Reading, Writing and Mathematics, if their SAT or other scores are not high enough when they apply to City Tech)
- Peer Advisors should have a 3.0 Grade Point Average or higher.
- Advisors are expected to devote approximately 5 - 10 hours a week to the program. This includes reaching out to students, meeting with students, keeping a log and collaborating with faculty. They will also be assigned office hours and they receive pay checks bi-weekly.
- Peer Advisors must be knowledgeable about City Tech. Advisors are trained to help answer the questions correctly or refer students to the appropriate office.
- Peer Advisors are assigned to a Learning Community class and are expected to reach out to the students at least four times per semester.
- Peer Advisors must attend workshops, meetings and training sessions as part of their commitment.
- Peer Advisors collaborate with professors to see how students can become more engaged in their class work and with their advisors.

## College Involvement

The student who becomes involved with college life on many levels has made an investment of time and energy that pays off in dividends of satisfaction and higher academic performance (Newton, Ender, 2010). We strongly believe in encouraging our students to become involved at City Tech. In our FYLC we provide our students with information on college events, student government and student clubs and strongly support their participation. We also organize and facilitate a variety of workshops and mid-semester events to persuade college involvement. Peer mentors, faculty and staff kick off the semester with a Welcome Orientation for our learning communities students.

### Workshops of the First Year Learning Communities

*City Tech: Full Disclosure:* What is City Tech and what does it mean to you? This orientation, led by seasoned Peer Advisors for new students, offers information about college issues such as understanding attendance policies, deciphering academic requirements, the importance of extra-curricular activities, and creating an active college social life. Come with questions!

*Career Exploration Workshop:* What are you doing with your life? How do you make that awesome decision about your career? Are you doing all that you can now to prepare for your career? Join an advisor from the Counseling Center to explore your career possibilities and learn about your unique attributes through tests, exercises, and group discussion. Take action toward your future now!

*City Tech Tour Workshop:* Led by peer advisors, students are given an in-depth tour of City Tech's main attractions and college resources. Key visiting points include: Computer labs on all floors, Student life and Development office, the Student Government Association room, Library, the Student Support office, Student Information and Technology Help Desk, the Wellness Center, Registrar, Bursars, Financial Aid, Admissions, Student Scholarships and Residency and the Learning Center.

*Time Management Workshop:* The Time Management workshop prepares students to understand, not only the necessary amount of time to schedule studies, classes and college life, but also to manage how to make time for everything, such as home responsibilities, club time, work, commute time, and how to take an active role in making personal time. Students learn that college is a new world of responsibilities and freedoms, and that learning to find the balance between the two is a key component to college life.

*Library and Learning Center Workshop:* Led by staff in their specific offices, students are given a hands-on tour and introduction to two incredibly important resources City Tech offers. Library workshops introduce students to finding books necessary for the research process, utilizing online tools like Lexus Nexus and EBSCO host for online journals and periodicals, the media room for DVD's, microfilm and other audio or visual media, and the option of private study rooms. Learning Center workshops introduce students to how tutoring, computer labs and supplemental studying aids can help them achieve the grades they really want.

*Health Majors Workshop:* Don't be intimidated by these competitive majors and their GPA requirements. Learn how other students rise to the challenge and thrive on this educational track. This workshop introduces course requirements, campus resources for students enrolled in health specific courses (such as anatomy and dental hygiene), and the differences and similarities of the specific majors.

*Registration Workshop:* This workshop, geared toward students registering on their own for the first time, reviews the details of online registration. Have your questions answered about how to effectively plan for your desired major and strategize for using your time spent at school, and master the CUNYFirst (formerly e-SIMS) online platform and the CUNY Portal.

## Technology

Previous semesters FTLC had created a Blackboard community for our FYLC. This technology was used to post information on events, announcements, send out group emails while using technology to stay connected. City Tech has created a new innovative site called OpenLab which allows for a range of levels of interaction among the faculty, staff and students. The OpenLab is an open digital platform for teaching, learning, and collaboration, and a key component of a City Tech grant-funded initiative, "A Living Laboratory: Redesigning General Education for a 21st-Century College of Technology." The Office of First Year Programs has created a group for our learning communities within the OpenLab. It will assist with outreach to our students and also promote our workshops and events. It will also be a new form of community building among our first year initiative and the college community.

## General Assessment

At the end of each semester a Student Satisfaction survey is administered to all Learning Community classes, and consistently we have received a positive response to our program. Peer advisors also share with the coordinator positive emails from mentees that describe the valuable help that they received. We have also received praise from faculty members who have appreciated the classroom support and involvement provided by the Peer Advisors.

Our social and academic supports are especially critical to the retention of students of color. While role modeling seems to be effective in retention programs generally, it appears to be especially important among those programs concerned with disadvantaged students of color (Tinto 1987, 1993), and Pascarella and Terranzini (2005) also stress the importance of student-student interactions and relationships.

FYLC Student Satisfaction Survey Fall 2011 highlights:

- 85% Likely to return to City Tech
  - Comparison: 65% Likely to choose City Tech again from *CUNY Student Experience Survey 2010*
- 82% Students felt that professors cared about their academic success
- 85% Peer Mentor (Advisor) was helpful
- 87% Knowledge of college expectations
- 78% Enjoyed being part of learning community
- 81% Improved their writing skills
- 80% Liked having same students in two classes

A formal look at student success is conducted by the Assessment of Institutional Research (AIR) that looks at students that participate in learning communities and compares GPA, retention rates, withdrawal rates with non-learning community students.

## Success rates in FYLC and Non-FYLC Comparison Group

Data from the 2010-2011 academic year provide a comparison between success of students in courses that are part of the First-Year Learning Community (FYLC), and those that are not as shown in Table 1. In the Fall 2010 semester, students in FYLC (N=352) had a GPA of 2.43, slightly higher than the Non-FYLC group (N= 2,351), which had a GPA of 2.37. More noticeably, students in the FYLC had earned

13.48 credits as compared to the students in Non-FYLC courses, who had earned 7.94 credits. The retention rate of the FYLC students (Fall 2010 to Spring 2011) was 3% greater than the non-FYLC students (89.4% vs. 86.3%).

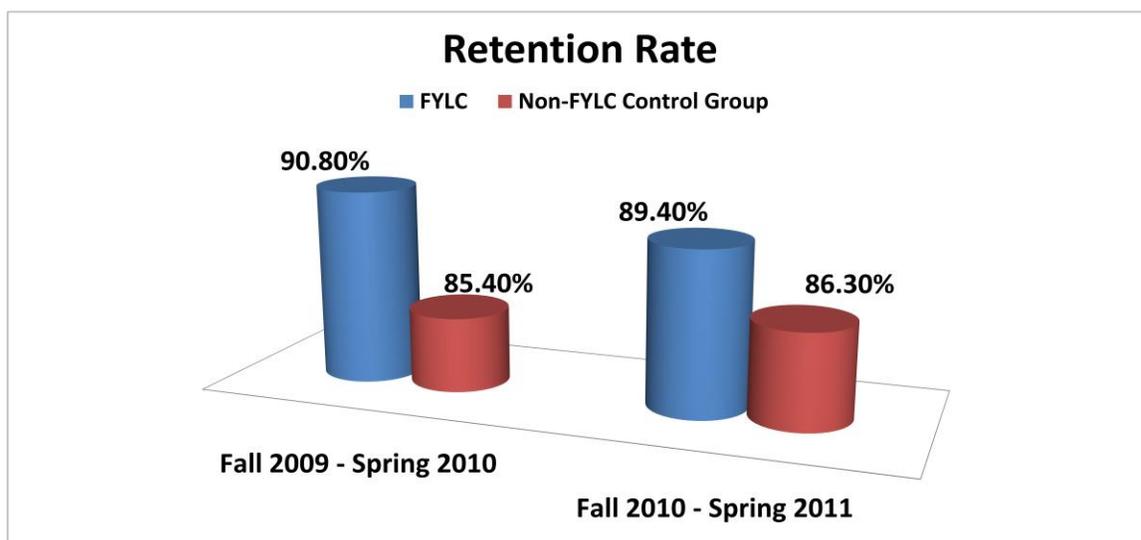
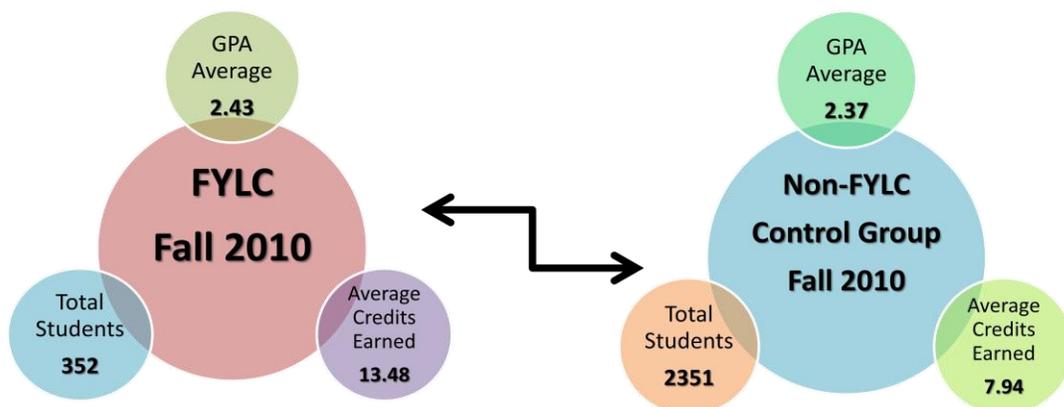


Table I. Success rates in FYLC and Non-FYLC Comparison Group

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