

**Staff Faculty Inquiry Group (SFIG):**

**Hispanic Male Students**

**In Foundational Courses**

Charles Diggs – Co-Chair

Jorge Santiago – Co-Chair

(Northern Essex Community College)

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## **Introduction**

This proposed plan describes the development and outline of a Staff Faculty Inquiry Group (SFIG) at Northern Essex Community College (NECC), Haverhill, Massachusetts. Unlike usual faculty committees within a community college, where participants get together periodically to discuss a particular issue, this SFIG is designed to pull together key interested staff and faculty (and at times students) willing to discuss specific learning issues of a targeted population. Through data collection and analysis and the SFIG then determines what the specific problem areas are, and develop strategic remedies to improve learning and academic success within the student group. Working with key administrators, faculty, and staff, the SFIG then helps implement a specific strategy within the college community to better serve the targeted group of students improve their academic success. SFIGs are supported by the NECC Teaching and Learning Center and grew out of earlier Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Cluster. The proposed NECC-SFIG is designed to target a particular barrier that influence level of success in these classes among Hispanic male students, and develop a remedy to improve this group's success rate. More on this student group will be presented below under "Supportive Evidence."

## **General Design and Purpose of a SFIG**

Originally designed for only faculty inquiry groups (FIGs), NECC chose to add staff members (and at times students), thus changing involvement to include non-faculty participants, or a SFIG. Still, the NECC model remains true to the original purposes developed by the Carnegie Foundation in 2008. The SFIG design is new, and similar groups are currently implemented in a handful of institutions. SFIG's are designed so that members understand the task on hand; and are committed to be a working group and not just a discussion body.

These inquiry groups encompass "a broad set of practices that engage (college participants) in looking closely and critically at student learning for the purpose of improving courses and programs" in order that adult learners realize their academic goals (Huber: 2008). Among the areas often investigated are: teaching method within the classroom (pedagogy), classroom format (or structure), student methods of learning, and supportive services among others.

Student and college studies are key to SFIG's, directing the college community toward improving courses (Foundational Courses at NECC specifically), curriculum, student support services, and student learning. In essence, a SFIG is not only designed to improve general-purpose support services, but also target efforts to bring inquiry (investigation) "to bear on particular educational tasks, issues, and innovations" (Ibid.).

The central work of SFIG's involves asking questions about teaching, learning, services, and structure, followed by seeking answers through literature review, gathering and analyzing data/evidence (conducting primary research if needed), and involving students in the process when necessary. "Usually, questioning begins with a problem the" college has identified (Ibid.).

SFIG's usually last 2 or 3 years, although theoretically they can go longer since these groups build into their action plans a continuous circular feedback (assessment) loop, regularly evaluating the

impact of changes implemented at the college. These assessments look at the impact of changes on the college and the targeted student group; and if necessary make adjustments on previous changes to continue the academic success of the adult learner.

SFIG's offer powerful advantages than traditional college committees ("Faculty Inquiry in Action," Carnegie Foundation, et. al.: 2008). First, members work with others in collective ways to acknowledge challenges and search together for solutions. Secondly, SFIG participants feel a sense of empowerment to take risks and experiment with new ideas. Finally, the SFIG brings together support personnel, counselors, institutional research, and at times students (and not just faculty) to bring different and new perspectives to the process. SFIG's "are powerful settings for sharing diverse perspectives, experiences, and resources" to bare on specific issues of a targeted group of students" (Ibid.)

One last word, because the NECC preliminary working group of faculty, staff, and administrators chose to target Hispanic male students for this SFIG to focus on, the designers of the inquiry group (and co-chairs of the group) recognize that cultural elements must also be included in the processes of inquiry, data analysis, development of recommendations for solutions and their implementation. Review of many college based programs targeting specific ethnic, gender based, and/or racial groups have been often designed with a particular service structure based on their cultural elements. The designers of the proposed NECC-SFIG recognize that cultural factors may (or may not) also infringe on the academic success of Hispanic males, and therefore must be considered. Cultural elements must be considered if only to recognize them as possible barriers to the success in foundational courses of the targeted student group. Not only should teaching methods (pedagogy), class structure, student learning approaches, motivation for learning, and support services (among others) within the college and community need to be reviewed for possible barriers to success, cultural elements must be considered too. "For adult students to successfully master the basic skills, a complex mix of ingredients must be (considered) and understood" ("Basic Skills as a Foundation for Students Success in California": 2007).

### **Sample Evidence**

Just as an example, the data presented in the attached table demonstrate that in three of the four foundational courses selected<sup>1</sup> more Hispanic male students in the fall of 2009 passed when compared to those who failed (except in Basic Algebra II). Still, the difference between those passed and those who failed is 12 and 14 percentage point different in College Reading and Basic Writing respectively. In Basic Algebra II the difference was an 18 percent difference between those who failed and those who passed –the actual percent difference was 41% who passed and 59% who failed.

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<sup>1</sup> Other foundational courses include: Intro. To Psych./Soc., English Comp. 1, College Algebra & Trig., and Basic Writing.

Only in ESL 004 and 115 do we find that those who passed were significantly higher than those who failed –78% and 22% respectively. Finally, when we total of those who passed with those who failed we find that more failed (47% and 53% respectively). Outside of ESL, the percentages who failed are much too high to accept and ignore.

**Fall 2009 Number and Percent of Hispanic Male Students  
Who Took Initial Foundational Courses and Passed or Failed**

<b>Course</b>	<b>Number Took</b>	<b>Number Passed</b>	<b>Percent Passed</b>	<b>Number Failed</b>	<b>Percent Failed</b>
College Reading	44	25	57%	19	43%
Basic Writing	81	45	56%	36	44%
Basic Algebra II	109	45	41%	64	59%
ESL 044 and 115	32	25	78%	7	22%
<b>Total</b>	<b>266</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>126</b>	<b>53%</b>

Source: Jorge Santiago, NECC

**SFIG Membership**

Announcement of the development of this particular SFIG will be made through an all campus email, and presented during Convocation in September 2010. The entire college community will be invited to participate, and those who choose to do so will be provided a more detail description of what this SFIG will entail, and the level of input necessary for success. If they still wish to participate and become a working partner, they will be welcomed to participate.

**Concluding Remarks**

The crises for Hispanic male students in foundational courses are real. Only the four initial courses were presented here. There are four others in the “foundational or gate-keeping” category too. This second group of courses is of Hispanic male students who took the initial four foundational courses and passed, then took the second set of foundational classes. The initial four, however, were felt to be sufficient to demonstrate the needs of Hispanic male students in these necessary courses.

The proposed SFIG has a two prong approach to this issue. During the first year, SFIG members will review data and literature from various sources concerning a number of issues related to Hispanic male performance, and remedies applied in other institutions to help this group of students. By the end of this first year it is expected that the members would have selected a specific barrier to target, as well as develop specific activities to help improve success among these students in these foundational courses. During the second year implementation of the selected remedy will occur, as well as review of its impact on student performance in these foundational courses.

The second prong of this SFIG will be in the third year, where SFIG members interested in continuing beyond the second year, will develop a series of key barriers for Hispanic male student

success in the foundational courses, operationalize the broad barriers, and develop a survey instrument to implement on NECC's actual Hispanic male students in these foundational courses, on several potential key barriers, to get a better picture of what is going on to our students specifically. The survey will then be applied via the interview process. This data collected and analyzed will provide valuable information of who these Hispanic male students are, and what other barriers play a role, among NECC students specifically, in determining success (of failure) in these foundational courses. The SFIG format is a powerful tool to bare on questions in an academic setting to get at needed information. **This is a working SFIG, meaning that much reading and discussion will occur. The SFIG will meet once a month for 1 ½ - 2 hours. For faculty who participate, this SFIG involvement can count as "College Service Activities."**

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