PROJECT EXCEL
CENTERS FOR EXCELLENCE

University of Colorado, Colorado Springs

Annual Report

Academic Year 2008–2009

THE PROJECT EXCEL
CENTERS FOR EXCELLENCE

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO AT COLORADO SPRINGS

The Project Excel Program at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs includes the Language Technology Center (LTC), the Mathematics Learning Center (MLC), the Oral Communication Center (OCC), the Science/Health Science Learning Center (SLC), and the Writing Center (WC). These five academic centers provide critical academic and individual support to all students in the University in all major academic areas, both within and beyond the classroom. Originally funded in 1990 by a Title III Grant, The Excel Centers are now an integral part of Student Success at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs.

EXCEL VISION STATEMENT
Fall, 2009

The Project Excel Centers foster communities of learners across the UCCS campus. We promote students' intellectual development and academic achievement by providing opportunities for active learning, critical thinking, interdisciplinary collaborations, and peer mentoring. We offer students a warm, welcoming, and inclusive environment in which they can work with their peers to exchange ideas and create new knowledge.
Through collaborations with students, faculty, staff, and the wider community, we promote the value of student-centered educational experiences.

Project Excel/Student Success Goals for the Academic Year 2008–2009

Goal 1: Improve Students' Academic Success: Provide individualized academic and personal support to all students in an inviting and intellectually stimulating environment, which embraces individual differences, makes students more successful, and improves retention.

Goal 2: Build Community: Help students make interconnections with the campus, faculty, support staff, peers, and broader community to enhance students' college experiences and to improve retention.

Goal 3: Collaborate with Faculty: Develop strong collaborative partnerships with faculty and create services and opportunities to facilitate students' academic success and personal development.

Goal 4: Develop Center Expertise: Provide Center staff with opportunities to learn, to change, and to grow professionally.

Goal 5: Explore Means of Assessing Center Effectiveness

EXCEL CENTER OVERVIEW AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Each of the five Excel Centers (Language Technology Center (LTC), the Mathematics Learning Center (MLC), the Oral Communication Center (OCC), the Science/Health Science Learning Center (SLC), and the Writing Center (WC)) offers students a unique program of academic support that is based on the principles of collaborative learning, individualized assistance, and the intelligent use of technology. Peer tutoring is the center of the Excel educational practices. Each Center is staffed with a full-time director, who guides peer undergraduate and/or graduate assistants to provide students with the best in peer collaborations and learning. The resulting unique peer tutor-student relationship—made possible by their common status—is one that strengthens students' confidence, facilitates students' understanding, and helps ensure students' success.

The Centers are designed to complement classroom activities in various disciplines, as well as to offer individualized assistance to students. Excel Center programs include:

- Drop-in and online tutoring
- Writing consultation sessions
- Online writing lab
- Videotaping and feedback on presentations
- Supplemental instruction and extra instruction sessions
- Academic preparation workshops
- Interactive computer programs
- In-class workshops and presentations
- Media, print resources, and computer resources
- Foreign language conversation tables
- Make-up exams

Other Center-specific services are described in the individual reports that follow.

The Excel Centers aid in student retention and recruitment by providing a friendly, welcoming environment with high quality academic assistance to help students be more successful. Excel Center Directors also assist the University in retaining and recruiting students by advising students during freshman orientation, teaching within the departments, providing intervention through the early alert system, mentoring new freshmen, helping students make connections to the campus, and advising and assisting students throughout their academic careers. The Centers work closely with other Student Success units to enhance the performance and retention of all students, including new freshmen and transfer students, minority students, and students with disabilities.

EXCEL CENTER USAGE

During 2008–2009, 70,171 student visits were made to the Excel Centers during the fall, spring, and summer semesters and 1694 students used the Online Writing Lab, for a total of 71,865 uses. This total does not include workshops and other in-class activities. All Centers saw increased usage (Table 1).

Table 1. Student Visits to Excel Centers in AY 2008–2009

	LTC	MLC	OCC	SLC	WC*
Fall 08 (July-December)	1657	8381	3212	24051	2911
Spring 09 (January-June)	1710	6684	2752	17320	2817
Totals	3367	15065	5964	41371	5728

*Number includes both in Center usage and usage of the Online Writing Lab (OWL)

Note that these numbers are lower than the actual numbers of students using the Centers because they reflect only the numbers of students who sign in to a center and who submit papers through the Online Writing Lab (OWL). Students often do not sign in when they visit a Center. Students participating in other center activities, such as workshops, supplemental instruction sessions, online tutoring, reviews, or in-class activities, are not included in the totals

Demographics of Students Served in the Excel Centers (Fall, 2008)

In general, more females use the Excel Centers than do male students, with the exception of the Math Learning Center. The lower percentage of female MLC users may reflect the lower numbers of females in the math and engineering courses that typically use the Center. The Excel Centers also have a slightly higher percentage of students of color than the campus overall.

Table 2. Gender and Ethnicity of Excel Center Users, Fall, 2008

	LTC	MLC	OCC	SLC	WC	Campus*
Gender						
Female	56%	44%	54%	64%	68%	57%
Male	44%	56%	46%	36%	32%	43%
Ethnicity						
White	65%	68%	74 %	69%	67%	75%
Hispanic	20%	12%	13%	11%	11%	9%
Black	5%	4%	3%	4%	6%	3%
Asian	3%	8%	5%	9%	6%	5%
Native Amer. Ind.	0.3%	1%	1%	1%	1%	0.7%

Although the Centers serve all students, from freshmen to graduate students, approximately half of the students using the Excel Centers are freshmen and sophomores. The Writing Center also sees a large number of seniors and graduate students. (See Table 3.)

Table 3. Student Classification of Excel Center Users, Fall 2008

	LTC	MLC	OCC	SLC	WC	Campus
Freshman	28%	33%	39%	30%	33%	22%
Sophomore	22%	23%	33%	20%	12%	16%
Junior	27%	22%	16%	21%	16%	18%
Senior, Senior 5th	13%	16%	11%	25%	30%	23%
Graduate	--	2%	--	2%	7%	16%
Other[+]	1%	2%	1%	2%	1%	--

[*]AY 2008-2009 percentages.

Freshmen Retention and the Excel Centers:

Student retention is a major emphasis in the Excel Centers. Students who use the Excel Centers earn higher grades and are retained to a significantly greater extent than freshmen who do not use an Excel Center. The Fall 2008 entering freshman cohort had a significantly higher retention rate (73%, as compared to only 54% for freshmen who didn't use the Excel Centers. Freshmen who used one or more of the Excel Centers had a significantly higher fall GPA, as well (2.85 for Excel Center users versus 2.36 for non-users), even though users and non-users had similar index scores, SAT and ACT scores. All Centers had high rates of freshman retention. Table 4 shows the numbers of freshmen using each Center, the retention rate for these freshmen, and the average fall GPA.

Table 4. Freshman Usage and Freshman Retention by Excel Center

Excel Center	Number of Freshmen	Retention Rate
Language Technology Center	82	71%
Mathematics Learning Center	283	76%
Oral Communications Center	275	74%
Science/Health Science Learning Center	313	74%
Writing Center	187	78%

Approximately 66% of the freshman cohort (771) used one or more of the Excel Centers. Last fall, 389 freshmen didn't use any Excel Center, 447 freshmen used just one center, 229 freshmen used two centers, 83 students used three centers, and 10 students used four centers. No students used all five centers. As might be expected, freshmen who use more of the Excel Centers earned significantly higher fall GPAs:

Table 5. Center Usage and Fall GPA

Number of Centers Used	Number of Freshmen	Average Fall GPA
0	389	2.37
1	447	2.79
2	229	2.92
3	83	2.96
4	10	3.13

The Excel Centers worked with freshmen, regardless of ability level. Regardless of index scores of incoming freshmen, students who used the Excel Center users were more academically successful:

Table 6. Fall GPA Based upon Excel Center Usage and Index Scores

Index Score	GPA Excel User	GPA Non-Excel User
< 92	2.23	1.68
93-103	2.48	1.98
104-119	2.94	2.54
120 and above	3.52	2.34

The Centers vary in the services they provide and therefore in the assessment measures each uses to evaluate effectiveness. There are several difficulties in assessing the effectiveness of the Excel Centers, which must be noted here. First, assessment data depends heavily upon having students identify themselves by signing in to the Centers, but often students do not sign in. Second, Center use is not mandatory, so more motivated students may be more likely to seek out and use tutoring. Third, time on task is often more important than number of times students use a Center, yet we have no way of knowing how long students work. Fourth, and most importantly, because we cannot assess specific learning gains, we compare course grades between Center-users and non-Center users. Course grades are not always a measure of learning, but they don't indicate what a student has gained from interactions with the Center. Nevertheless, using course grades is the most efficient method for our assessment. With those caveats, across all Centers, Center-users were generally more academically successful than non-users.

A summary of the results is presented below. Note that the data include all Center-users, not just freshmen.

The Language Technology Center served students in all language classes, including American Sign Language classes. Students who used the LTC earned higher course grades in French 101 (3.17 vers 2.84), German (3.27 versus 2.14), and Spanish classes (3.01 versus 2.38).

The Mathematics Learning Center served students in all mathematics courses, as well as ID 105, Quant 201-202, CS 107, CS 109, and PES 111-112. MLC-users earn higher grades in many lower division math courses, although in most cases the differences are not statistically

significant. Students who attended more supplemental instruction sessions had higher grades than those who attended fewer sessions.

The Oral Communication Center served students in COMM 102, COMM 201, COMM 210, and COMM 324. Students were less apprehensive, had greater self esteem, and showed greater presentation skills after completing the courses. Paired direct observations revealed significant improvement in voice quality, gestures, engagement, and organization.

The Science/Health Science Learning Center served students in over seventy science lecture and laboratory courses. SLC-users earned higher grades in chemistry, biology, and physics classes. SLC-Users earned more significantly more As and Bs and fewer Ds and Fs.

The Writing Center served all English Program classes and over seventy classes across all disciplines, departments, and colleges. Students who used the Writing Center had higher fall GPAs than the campus average (3.09 vs 2.96). Students enrolled in English composition (ENGL 131) earned higher grades (2.8 vs 2.6 for non-users) in spite of having lower ACT-English scores.

Details about the Center programs and their effectiveness are explained in the individual Center reports, which follow.