

January 30, 2015

ADELA DE LA TORREVice Chancellor – Student Affairs
Office of Student Affairs

Re: First Year Experience Implementation Plan

On October 31, 2014, the First Year Experience Implementation Plan was distributed to Academic Senate standing committees and the Faculty Executive Committee in each college and school. Responses were received from Committees on Admissions and Enrollment and Courses of Instruction as well as the Faculty Executive Committees from College of Biological Sciences, Engineering, and Letters and Science. The following summarizes responses and provides the Davis Division position/next steps.

Objective 1: *Learn as much as possible from University of Texas Austin's efforts to improve and enhance support services to first-year undergraduates.*

Several comments recognize the value in learning from existing programs. However, is University of Texas Austin the only exemplar?

Objective 2: *Pilot a first-year seminar, with the intention of serving most first-year students with a focus on general university navigation and academic success skills.*

Some respondents were confused. Is the intent to add a new type of first-year seminar in addition to current offerings or to eliminate current offerings and replace them with new curriculum? College of Letters and Science (CLS) stated: "It is not clear whether this proposal was to add a first-year seminar on "skills and knowledge to better navigate the university" or to replace the existing form of first-year seminars with a "common set of learning outcomes." The CLS is not comfortable with either outcome.

Undergraduate Council (UGC) pointed out: "Everyone agrees that the current brief orientation before classes start often overwhelms new students." Both the Committee on Courses of Instruction (COCI) and the CLS expressed concern with the recommendation to design a first-year seminar for new undergraduates. Both UGC and COCI questioned the idea of awarding academic credit for navigating the university. COCI stated: "Issues related to navigating the University may not have academic rigor and content to qualify for academic credit." UGC stated the Committee on Special Academic Programs may question the awarding of academic credit for such a seminar during special academic program review.

COCI and UGC offered alternatives to creating a new first-year seminar. COCI noted that a first-year seminar on "Navigating the Research University" has been offered at UC Davis for the last decade. The seminar was developed and piloted by a group of Davis Honors Challenge students under the supervision of the then Vice Provost-Undergraduate Studies, Fred Wood. Before establishing and tasking committees, perhaps the current offerings should be reviewed to determine if the content is relevant or should be updated. UGC suggested rather than developing a first-year seminar, the campus should consider repeating some of the material later in fall quarter and again in winter quarter for interested students. UGC suggested, "The presentations could be slightly different, but substantively the same. Similarly sometimes the best way to study is to re-read a complex paragraph or listen to a taped lecture."

Several responses disagreed with the generalization that current first-year seminar offerings “are not clearly defined” and the implication that lacking “a common set of learning outcomes” is a negative aspect. CLS stated, “We see no evidence that this system is broken and needs fixing, except perhaps to increase the number of students. The report complains that the present seminars are “driven by individual instructor disciplinary interests” and “lack a common set of learning outcomes.” While this is true, we do not see it as a problem. A diversity of offerings is a positive feature, not a bug.” COCI believes it may be difficult to attract faculty to teach a freshman seminar if course content is predetermined by a committee. COCI also stated, “Such a situation would likely be perceived as micro management of course content.” Providing incentives is a natural solution to such a situation; however, the campus already offers a modest incentive for teaching a first-year seminar.

CLS suggested careful thought is needed as to who would teach the seminar described in the plan and how they would be compensated. If the aim is really to “serve most first-year students,” this is going to very rapidly become expensive, at least under the present incentive system for first-year seminars. We would not support attempting to impose teaching of such a course/seminar on the faculty as a required, uncompensated teaching overload, and imagine doing so would result in departments being forced to divert teaching away from existing discipline-specific courses.

There is agreement the information provided to first-year undergraduates should be tailored to the different student populations. UGC opined, “Although transfer students are as new to the campus as are freshmen, these two groups are quite different. For example, around 33% of those freshmen who ultimately graduate do so in the major in which they entered, whereas that percentage is 75% for transfer students. Clearly, advice about selecting or changing a major needs to be different for the two categories, and probably that is true for all other aspects of advising these groups.”

Objective 3: *Coordinate first-year messages across the entire year.*

We have no comment at this time.

Objective 4: *Pilot a “buddy system” to pair first-year students with appropriate student mentors.*

Most responses expressed support for the concept. However, the College of Biological Sciences cautioned, “We strongly agree that adequate training and screening is needed for peer mentors. There is concern that an incompatible mentor/mentee pairing could expose the University to liability.”

Objective 5: *Find more ways to increase interactions between faculty and first-year students.*

College of Engineering expressed concern regarding additional efforts to incentivize faculty student interaction (mentoring, general social interactions, etc. Specifically, “where the three pillars (teaching, research, service) of faculty merit and promotion are proposed to be revised.” The inclusion of a special field in MIV in which faculty are asked to describe and list their mentoring of undergraduates unintentionally establishes yet another individual category.

COCI believes Objective 5 may be in conflict with Objective 2. The current freshman-seminar program was specifically designed to increase faculty interaction with first-year students, particularly interactions that are meant to be intellectually meaningful.

College of Engineering expressed serious concern regarding strategies to meet Objective 5. Specifically, “Overall, the report is engaging in many relevant considerations, but it is overstepping professional

boundaries in places; e.g., when it specifically encourages (and thereby institutionalizes) social interactions (including incentivizing dinner invitations) between students and faculty.”

Objective 6: *Create more effective FAQ resources for staff and faculty to identify correct referrals for students needing additional academic and non-academic support.*

The Academic Senate previously stated its position that the faculty’s advising role is to provide transformational advising (curriculum advice specific to the student’s goals, career, background or advice on graduate school). The College of Engineering provided the following salient comment, “While faculty is concerned about general student welfare, the implied additional workload of attaining and exercising formal competency in areas of non-academic issues, e.g., social difficulties and physical/mental health challenges, is beyond the focused qualifications of faculty. We are further concerned about faculty interfering with the consistency and competency of staff advising, which needs to be *the* program authority on how students navigate the educational bureaucracy. The same concern is found with respect to faculty interfering with qualified campus assistance in cases of, e.g., social and medical difficulties.”

Objective 7: *Develop and implement mechanisms that proactively identify first-year students who are experiencing difficulties adjusting to campus life and academic rigor.*

The comments provided under Objective 6 also relate to Objective 7.

Qualitative and Quantitative Evaluation Strategies:

The Committee on Admissions and Enrollment indicated the evaluation process should look for admissions characteristics that correlate to a boost in a student’s success at UC Davis, and that information should be fed back into the admissions process. Doing so will allow the admission process to take into account the impact of a program.

Davis Division Position:

Objective 1: We are supportive of exploring similar university programs. However, focusing only on the UT Austin program caused some concern. We would like to see if additional programs can be identified to provide guidance.

Objective 2: We appreciate and agree with the plan’s acknowledgement that curriculum is the purview of the faculty. It is clear the Freshman Seminar Program needs to be reviewed soon given the concerns raised by those creating the plan and the differing opinions expressed by Academic Senate committees. The Committee on Special Academic Programs is scheduled to review the Freshman Seminar Program in 2016-2017. The Academic Senate will look into rearranging the review schedule such that the review can be move forward to 2015-2016. Such a review will allow the Academic Senate to engage the administration in a meaningful discussion regarding the Freshman Seminar Program.

Objective 3: The strategies for coordinating communication during the first-year seem reasonable.

Objective 4: There is value in creating a buddy system; however, we strongly encourage the administration to carefully create such a program in a manner that limits UC Davis liability.

Objective 5: As COCI commented, objective 5 may be in conflict with Objective 2 (i.e. “The current freshman-seminar program was specifically designed to increase faculty interaction with first-year students, particularly interactions that are meant to be intellectually meaningful.”) It is always desirable to create new and intellectually meaningful ways to increase faculty, first-year student interaction so long as

the methods suggested are sensitive to professional boundaries. However, the plan fails to recognize the intense and increased pressure on faculty at UC Davis, which poses a significant challenge to increase their involvement with lower-division students outside of the classroom environment. Student enrollment has increased and faculty hiring has not yet kept pace. We believe efforts to increase faculty engagement with first-year students at a significant scale should unfortunately be put on hold until the number of faculty needed to simply teach our students are hired and in place.

Objectives 6 & 7: As stated in our January 28, 2015, response to the Advising Implementation Plan, “We must agree on terminology that will find universal acceptance and will clarify the respective expectations of professional advising staff and faculty engaged in student advising.”

Professional Staff Advisor Role: “...the campus must distinguish between advising services to be provided by professional staff advisors and those by faculty. We believe “transactional” advising such as course planning, minimum progress, particularly across majors/colleges, and degree certification are best provided by professional staff advisors.” Furthermore, faculty need to know how to respond when they believe a student is experiencing social and medical difficulties consisting of list of resources and contact information to enable swift referral to a professional trained to effectively assist or treat the student.

Faculty Advising Role: “Faculty should provide “transformational” advising such as the type of courses or experience that will prepare undergraduates for particular post-graduate training or careers, advice on graduate programs, research areas that may interest the student, etc.”

Qualitative and Quantitative Evaluation Strategies: We endorse the Committee on Admissions and Enrollment request sited above.

Sincerely,



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Davis Division of the Academic Senate
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c: Chancellor Katehi
Provost/Executive Vice Chancellor Hexter
Vice Provost/Dean of Undergraduate Education Thomas