

Blue Ribbon Committee for Enhancing the Undergraduate Student Experience

First Year Experience Implementation Plan

October 28, 2014

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First Year Experience Implementation Committee

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Executive Summary

The Blue Ribbon Committee-First Year Experience Implementation Plan responds to the following recommended strategies identified in the BRC Report.¹ “First year experience” comprises the experiences of freshman, transfer students, and/or returning students. The following strategies are designed to improve the experience of students in their first year as undergraduates at UC Davis:

1. Provide ample, high-quality resources for students to develop a sense of community and belonging so they feel supported socially, culturally, and academically.
2. Augment the Orientation and Fall Welcome events to maximize student academic and social acculturation.
3. Develop a digital communications plan to make support services more visible and remove stigmatization from student perceptions of these services.

The BRC First Year Experience Implementation Committee is one of four implementation committees to be led by Senate faculty to plan implementation of the BRC report recommended strategies. The Committee on Committees nominated faculty representatives to join staff and, where appropriate, students for each of four committees: Advising, First Year Experience, Academic and Career Experiences, and Student Life and Co-curricular Experiences.

The First Year Experience Implementation Committee met three times between May and July 2014. Because this was a small committee, the full membership participated in all discussions, which resulted in the recommendation of the seven following objectives and strategies for implementation:

1. Learn as much as possible from University of Texas Austin’s efforts to improve and enhance support services to first-year undergraduates.
2. Pilot a first-year seminar with the intention of serving most first-year students under the auspices of the Academic Senate with support from the Vice Provost of Undergraduate Education and the Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs.
3. Coordinate first-year messages across the entire year.

¹ Report of the Blue Ribbon Committee for Enhancing the Undergraduate Student Experience. June 30, 2013, p. 18.

4. Pilot a “buddy system” to pair first-year students with appropriate student mentors.
5. Find more ways to increase interactions between faculty and first-year students.
6. Create more effective FAQ resources for staff and faculty to identify correct referrals for students needing additional academic and non-academic support.
7. Develop and implement mechanisms that proactively identify first-year students who are experiencing difficulties adjusting to campus life and academic rigor.

While the committee met with the goal of improving the first-year experience for all students, discussions centered primarily on improving support for students who may encounter difficulties in their first year at UC Davis. In addition to providing a better first-year experience for all students, improving this support may also increase retention and, ultimately, graduation rates.

Common difficulties relate to the pace of the quarter system, which is new to most students. Additional challenges include navigating the complex landscape that is a modern research university, and learning and adjusting to the academic expectations of a university. Students of diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, as well as first-generation college students, are less likely to be prepared for these demands than their peers.

The representation of students considered lower-income (as measured by Pell grants, for example) is expected to increase substantially due to demographic trends. Additionally, UC Davis’s enrollment-growth plan makes a concerted effort to diversify the student population such that it more closely reflects the rich diversity of the state. The added challenge of the 2020 plan, which calls for a significant increase in international students, will require additional strategies to address the unique cultural and language needs of this growing population.

The campus charge is to provide enhanced support for this increasing population at manageable cost. Therefore, the committee considered cost as well as potential impact when assessing the promise of each potential intervention. The following recommendations begin with those most likely to be low cost/high impact and proceed to those that are likely to be more costly and/or potentially lower impact. The committee likewise takes into consideration that certain proposed activities are under the jurisdiction of the Academic Senate, and therefore subject to Senate adoption and oversight.

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

Background

UT Austin is a similarly large university facing similar demographic trends and a low four-year graduation rate. The accreditation report recently released by WASC identifies increasing the four-year graduation rate as a priority for UC Davis over the next ten years. UT Austin also has some experience with interventions that, like our Special Transitional Enrichment Program (STEP), are effective but too costly to scale up for accessibility to all students. In response to the cost issue, UT Austin has begun experimenting with very low-cost online interventions to develop the resilience of students pro-actively, *before* those students have their first negative experience (e.g., a failed exam) at the university. Although the UT Austin "inoculation" program is in its infancy, it has begun to show effectiveness at extremely low cost.²

Strategies to meet Objective 1:

1. Invite David Laude, senior vice provost for enrollment and graduation management, UT Austin, to meet with campus academic and administrative leadership to share his experience and discuss how UC Davis could go about adopting a similar program.
2. Form ad-hoc committee of faculty and staff to research identified programs with potential for campus adoption.
 - a. Target Audience: Academic and Administrative Leadership in Student Affairs, Undergraduate Education, and interested faculty.
 - b. Responsible Party: Vice Chancellor, Student Affairs / Designee
 - c. Timeline: Fall/Winter, 2015

Rationale

A committee of appropriate faculty and staff representatives needs to evaluate the different programs for suitability to UC Davis. Once desirable programs have been identified, responsibility for program development will be assigned to appropriate unit heads.

² http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/18/magazine/who-gets-to-graduate.html?smid=pl-share&_r=0

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.

Background

The Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) has developed approximately 200 first-year seminars, the curriculum for which is driven largely by individual instructor disciplinary interests. In addition, course offerings are not clearly defined and lack a common set of learning outcomes, thus minimizing their potential impact on overall student success.

The BRC First Year Experience Implementation Committee expressed that the first year seminar should be designed to provide new undergraduates with a range of skills and knowledge to better navigate the university and improve their ability to succeed academically. However, there may be more fundamental questions beyond this that the faculty should answer. For example, should there be a discipline specific approach for developing this type of course?

Strategies to meet Objective 2:

1. Form an ad-hoc committee of Senate faculty to work on a reconfiguration of the first year seminar.
2. In preparation for this work, a committee of Senate faculty and academic advising staff with support from the Vice Provost of Undergraduate Education and the Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs will research and identify best programs nation-wide at institutions similar in size and scope to UC Davis (i.e., large, public research institutions with highly diverse student populations). Program success should be evidence-based, with measured success tied to learning outcomes. This information will help guide decision-making.
 - a. Target Audience: first-year seminar instructors
 - b. Timeline: Winter 2015 – Fall 2016

Rationale

The first-year seminar offers an ideal mechanism through which information first disseminated during orientation and Welcome Week can be reinforced and /or provided in greater detail. A strength of the first-year seminar is its ability to address the ongoing concern that different populations of students (international students, students who are parents or veterans, students with disabilities, etc.) have different needs that are difficult to address properly in a one-size-fits-all program. Because first-year seminars are small by nature, they can be offered in a variety of focused versions for these populations, and may be taught by people

who understand the unique needs of the targeted demographic.

While recommending diversity in instructors and in seminar emphases, the committee recognizes the need for quality control and a well-defined core curriculum for this seminar. It therefore recommends that this program be piloted and then expanded at a pace necessary to maintain quality and vetted by the Academic Senate.

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

Background

The committee recognizes that “unpacking” information presented in summer orientation is an ongoing process that should occur throughout the year. Much of this information should be available online as preparation for or follow-up to orientation, and reviewed later in greater detail when specifically needed. The committee’s recommendation is to make the first-year-messaging campaign even broader, taking into consideration where and how messages are best delivered throughout the entire first year.

Strategies to meet Objective 3:

1. Develop an oversight committee or appoint an existing committee to adopt a first-year messaging campaign for coordination of activities across campus.
2. Inventory first-year messaging needs, including deadlines and processes for registration, housing, receipt of academic warnings, and other general concerns typically encountered in the first year.
3. Research and identify best practices at other large, public research institutions with a diverse student body.
4. Identify all campus events / milestones presenting opportunities to reach first-year students with messaging, as well as electronic support resources, e.g., student portal, advising portal, etc.
5. Develop protocol to coordinate messaging activity, including assignment of primary responsibility for implementation.
 - a. Target Audience: schools and colleges, academic units, and student support units.
 - b. Responsible Party: Office of the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education and Division of Student Affairs.
 - c. Timeline: Spring 2015-Fall 2015

Rationale

The various parties involved in delivering first-year messages are already doing good work individually, so this integration may result in only incremental improvements to the first-year experience, but it is nevertheless a low-cost step with potential for enhancing existing activity. This campaign should support and smoothly integrate pre-orientation, orientation, Welcome Week, and other first-year milestones and ongoing activities. For example, students need encouragement to maintain standards of academic integrity, but the best time to broadcast these messages may be when students are taking their first midterms, rather than months earlier at orientation, which occurs before they have even arrived on campus for the quarter.

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

Background

First-year students feel that UC Davis is a very big place, but the campus community can be made to feel smaller if they have connections from the start.

Strategies to meet Objective 4:

1. Establish pilot advisory committee with representation from Office of the VC for Student Affairs; Office of the VP for Undergraduate Education (Director of Advising); Council of Associate Deans; and academic units. The advisory committee is charged with working with the external evaluator.
2. Develop pilot study in which first-year students are assigned appropriate mentors whose experiences are matched (e.g., a first-year transfer is assigned to a mentor who transferred at least one full year prior).
3. Mentors and mentees meet as early as possible, possibly even during summer orientation, so that incoming students feel they already have a connection when they arrive on campus.
4. The mentor checks in with their first-year student at least monthly and provides advice as needed.
5. Mentors require formal training, supervision, and a communication protocol that supports their work with on-going case management that covers the possibility of encountering an adverse experience and can provide appropriate, timely referrals for additional support.
6. Mentors should be paid for their time, possibly through work-study, so that the need to work does not exclude students from mentoring.

- a. Target Audience: Schools and Colleges with first-year undergraduate population
- b. Responsible Party: Chief of Staff, Student Affairs & Director, Academic Advising, with Council of Assistant Deans
- c. Timeline: Summer, 2015 for start of pilot / student assignments

Rationale

International students currently benefit from a formal mentorship program; a similar program for domestic students, many of whom find the culture of a large research university just as unfamiliar as do their international peers, would bring significant advantages to the first-year experience. Training of mentors should be provided by Student Health and Counseling Services.

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

Background

The group discussed a variety of mechanisms for increasing student-faculty interaction, including building on yield activity in which faculty call prospective majors at the time they have been admitted but have not yet accepted to enroll. Additional discussion included capitalizing on the offer of Student Affairs to release Dean Witter funds to support students inviting faculty to dinner.

Strategies to meet Objective 5:

1. In order to increase faculty engagement, department faculty leadership must be fully involved. Department faculty champions should create the type of support and reward systems to motivate and sustain faculty engagement with first year students.
2. In addition, more specific suggestions from the BRC Implementation committee included the following:
 - a. Create a field in MyInfoVault for faculty to describe and list their mentoring of undergraduates for inclusion in their merits and promotions package.
 - b. Encourage faculty who called students prior to Decision Day to meet with those students as follow-up when they arrive in the fall.
 - c. Hold student-faculty interaction events (one per quarter), in which students are provided with meal tickets to invite a faculty member to dine with them.

- i. Target Audience: Departments /Programs; Student-faculty Dining; Student Housing with Vice Chancellor Student Affairs
- ii. Timeline: Fall, 2015

Rationale

Strategies such as follow-up meetings with students targeted prior to Decision Day could improve the first-year experience for highly qualified students entering the major. This activity is currently directed at promising prospective majors. Further discussion and exploration of possible strategies are needed to extend this type of activity to the less prepared students who are more in need of attention.

Providing an incentive for students to host a faculty member at dinner will help overcome students' natural reluctance to engage with faculty. This incentive could also be extended to transfer students living off campus, requiring a strategy to publicize the offer to students who are not in the housing network.

Increased involvement by means of research internships and undergraduate assistantships is likely to have a small effect on freshmen, who may need more classes before they begin projects with faculty. More direct, ongoing faculty-student interaction via these opportunities may have a more significant impact on transfer students.

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

Background

This recommendation could be explored as an added feature to the advising structure and supplement the trainings that advising staff will now receive via annual professional development retreats. Faculty can benefit from these resources as well: having improved FAQ resources could incentivize more faculty, particularly those newer to campus, to engage more actively as advisors.

Strategies to achieve Objective 6:

1. Explore the development of FAQs as a tool for faculty, staff, and peer advisors.

2. Coordinate development of FAQs with professional development activity for academic advising staff and faculty.
 - a. Target Audience: Faculty and advising staff
 - b. Responsible Party: Director of Undergraduate Advising/
Associate Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs
 - c. Timeline: Fall-Spring 2014-15

Rationale

Committee discussion revealed that faculty members are sometimes reluctant to be advisors because they don't feel they have the knowledge necessary to make accurate referrals for students needing help with specific issues or concerns. Ideas for resources to support faculty and advising staff ranged from a quick, one-page "cheat sheet" with broadly categorized resources, to a reasonably sized binder that can be organized by types of issues (e.g., resources for international students; students needing accommodations for disabilities; students who are parents; new transfers; students on financial aid, etc.). There are likely materials of this nature in existence, and therefore the issue of access to and visibility of these resources is as important as the kind of resources that are available.

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

Background

The proposed recommendations are in addition to the effort already underway to identify potential electronic notification systems that would reach students via their cell phone and /or at the time they try to register for the next quarter.

Strategies to meet Objective 7:

1. Evaluate impact on retention rates of the College of Biological Sciences' recent policy that prior to registration for their second quarter, students meet with an advisor in their first quarter on campus. Consider adoption by other colleges.
2. To strengthen the ability to detect potential academic issues earlier in the quarter, each college examine possible vehicles for an "early alert system."
 - a. Target Audience: Faculty and advising staff
 - b. Responsible Party: Director of Undergraduate Advising/
Associate Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs
 - c. Timeline: Fall-Spring 2014-15

Rationale

Implementing the advising mandate would likely require increased resources for advising, but may well be cost-effective in the long run. The committee recognizes that just seeing an advisor may not be enough to identify students who are headed for academic trouble or depression, hence the recommendation to implement an “early alert system.” Identifying these strategies at the college level is warranted because college faculty and staff know best what constitutes an early warning sign. Ideally, instructors of large intro courses should work with college advisors to identify students who may need help already in the middle of their first quarter. These instructors and TAs are better able to address weaknesses that could lead to AP/SD status. Such an event in the first quarter is largely responsible for the attrition rate for first-year students.

Conclusion

Qualitative and Quantitative Evaluation Strategies

The First Year Experience Implementation Plan provides a work plan to be undertaken by the leadership of specific units and divisions, with recommended time lines. Metrics for measuring degree of success in meeting objectives will include both quantitative and qualitative data collection relating to student learning outcomes. Quantitative data such as counts and frequencies will determine the degree to which program enhancements have been successful by virtue of how these programs are accessed and used. Qualitative data collection via surveys and/or focus groups can elucidate the reasons why a specific strategy is or is not effective and reveal opportunities for program refinement.

When tied to student learning outcomes, qualitative analysis will help us to understand where a specific plan needs refinement to help students meet their educational objectives. Qualitative assessment will guide the evaluation team’s formative process so we can continually monitor and refine implementation strategies.

Evaluation Process

In its June, 2014 report, the BRC recommended engaging an external (to Student Affairs) evaluator to manage the formative and summative evaluation processes in collaboration with the offices of Academic Assessment and Institutional Analysis. This approach ensures objectivity and institutional transparency while maximizing available resources and the volumes of data already collected and analyzed under the auspices of Institutional Analysis. Funding resources will be required to staff the evaluation activity. The responsible parties identified under each plan item will be responsible for coordinating evaluation strategies with the chosen external evaluator, and in cooperation with the Academic Senate, the Office of the Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs, and the Office of the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education. It is recommended that the evaluator report to an evaluation oversight committee representing each of these units.