

Philosophy Dimension Report

California State University-San Marcos

Foundations Institutions approach the first year in ways that are intentional and based on a philosophy/rationale of the first year that informs relevant institutional policies and practices. The philosophy/rationale is explicit, clear and easily understood, consistent with the institutional mission, widely disseminated, and, as appropriate, reflects a consensus of campus constituencies. The philosophy/rationale is also the basis for first-year organizational policies, practices, structures, leadership, department/unit philosophies, and resource allocation.

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Current Situation:

At the beginning of the Foundations of Excellence self-study, there was no campus-wide statement of philosophy/rationale for the first year. Here we use the Policy Center's definition of such a statement:

A [philosophy] statement [for the first year] should embody the institution's beliefs about the purpose of this period in the undergraduate experience. Some, but not all, philosophy/rationale statements will include specific first-year learning goals. A philosophy or rationale statement is not merely a recitation of what the institution is doing for first-year students nor is it the institution's mission statement. A campus-wide statement, in effect, "speaks" for the entire institution. Such a statement differs from a departmental or unit statement in that it was created and endorsed at the campus level. Examples of origins and endorsements for campus-wide statements are: faculty senates, executive cabinets, board of trustees, etc. In comparison, a unit/department statement speaks for one or more divisions of a campus but has not been endorsed at the campus level. Department/Unit statements may impact every student, as in the case of an institution with a "university college" or "first-year dean," and the statement may have been created with representation from multiple constituencies. No difference in effectiveness can be automatically inferred between campus-wide and departmental/unit statements.

There were several questions in the Faculty/Staff survey that shed some light on informal philosophies that might exist, and on the desirability of adopting an official philosophy.

- Approximately a third of the respondents indicated high or very high agreement with the statement that an institutional philosophy for the first/freshman year of college had been communicated to them - even though the Philosophy Committee members were unable to find any formal written philosophy. Across units, the means ranged (on a 1-5 scale; 5=High Agreement) from 2.44 in the College of Arts and Sciences (CoAS) to 3.38 in Student Affairs.
- Respondents were split almost equally into the no/slight agreement, moderate agreement, and high/very high agreement camps in reacting to the statement that the university operates from a commonly held philosophy for the first/freshman year.
- In thinking about the first two bullet points, it is important to note that - since there is no written University-level FY philosophy - we have no way of knowing whether the faculty/staff survey respondents had the same philosophy in mind when they were answering questions about "a" FY philosophy. Indeed, it is likely that there are several unofficial philosophies in circulation.
- Slightly over two-thirds of the respondents indicated high or very high agreement with the statement that CSUSM is committed to the success of first-year students/freshmen; only 10.6% expressed no or slight agreement with this statement. Across units, the means ranged (on a 1-5 scale) from 3.56 in the College of Education (CoE) to 4.14 in Student Affairs.
- Slightly over three-quarters of the respondents replied that a formalized institutional philosophy for the first year of college was valuable to a high or very high degree; less than 10% felt that it was not valuable or slightly valuable. The mean response was 4.12 (on a 1-5 scale); when disaggregated by work role, all groups were above the mean except for "Faculty" (for whom the sub-mean was 3.92), and all units were above the mean except for CoAS (for which the sub-mean was 3.84).

In contrast to the situation for a campus-wide philosophy statement, the Philosophy Committee was able to find some departmental statements which fit the description (e.g., the First-Year

Programs Mission Statement) and others which, while not specific to the first year were quite applicable (e.g., the Career Center Mission and Vision Statements).

The proof of non-existence of anything is generally a tricky matter. To be certain that we were not overlooking some forgotten statement, the committee broadcast a call to the President's Executive Council, the Academic Affairs Leadership Council, and to the Student Affairs Senior Management Team with a request that it be passed on to sub-units. This call did not yield anything previously unknown to the Philosophy Committee other than materials provided by the Career Center.

The documents reviewed by the Philosophy Committee include the following:

- A Plan for Freshman Success at Cal State San Marcos (2003) - this plan was aspirational, but unfortunately it came out just as the last state budget crisis was beginning. Some parts of it were delayed, and others were set aside, but we have been able to implement large portions (growing learning communities and introducing summer start for students needing remediation) were implemented with minimal resources
- CSUSM General Education Philosophy Statement (1994) - not a good place to look for an existing statement of a FY philosophy for a number of reasons: it wasn't originally framed as a FY philosophy, and it was based on certain assumptions and projections about the campus growth that ended up being different from how the campus eventually developed
- CSUSM WASC Proposal (1995) and CSUSM WASC Capacity and Preparatory Review Report (2007) - both documents discuss initiatives aimed at increasing first-year continuation, but do not have an overarching philosophical framework.
- University Strategic Priorities - the first objective under the Student Life strategic priority is a written statement of how the University values the first-year experience
- Career Center Mission and Vision
- Career Center GEL Outcomes
- Academic Affairs Strategic Plan

CSUSM sent a sizable delegation to the Foundations of Excellence and First-Year Experience meetings in San Francisco, and participants were asked to look for examples of philosophy statements from other institutions. Following this, a collection of Philosophy Statements (and similar statements) from 14 other institutions was assembled and reviewed:

- Central Michigan University
- Salisbury University
- Northeastern Illinois University
- Old Dominion University
- West Virginia University
- Pulaski Technical College
- Mississippi State Technical Community College
- Fayetteville State University
- Missouri Southern State University
- Indiana State University

- Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis
- State University of New York College at Brockport
- California State University, Northridge
- University of Wisconsin Colleges

Opportunities and Challenges

There is a strong sense among the members of the Philosophy Dimension (and, as it happens, among other of our FoE dimensions as well) that there exists a wide variety of curricular and co-curricular activities for students on campus that are first-year oriented, but such events are not always explicit, and - perhaps because these efforts are distributed across several units - students aren't always aware of what's available. We have the opportunity to begin developing a philosophy statement that will offer guidance to the University on matters concerning the first year, and which will also help students to understand the resources and expectations that the University has for them.

One challenge is a certain tension between (a) access, (b) helping students through the HS-to-University transition, and (c) facilitating graduation efforts to keep time-to-degree short.

We originally intended simply to make recommendations about what should be included in a Philosophy Statement. After realizing that most other Foundations of Excellence institutions go further than (a) observing that there is no existing philosophy statement and (b) cataloging existing statements which capture many of the desired ingredients in such a statement, the Philosophy Committee began to draft a Philosophy Statement. In doing so, we are well aware that at several of the other institutions, the version finally approved by the institution varied somewhat from the original Philosophy Committee recommendation.

In drafting our philosophy statement, we were guided by language that we found in a number of our campus documents, especially the 2003 Freshman Success at Cal State San Marcos, the First-Year Programs Mission Statement, the University Strategic Priorities, and the Academic Affairs Strategic Plan. We also drew considerable inspiration from several of the other philosophy statements, especially Indiana State University (and the way that it included Learning Goals) and Fayetteville State University (and the language it used to describe how students set goals and develop a sense of purpose during the first year).

Before beginning to draft a Philosophy Statement, we spoke rather generally about what it should (and shouldn't) be and about some of the core principles that we wanted to see in such a statement:

- A philosophy statement is what we believe to be the primary purpose or rationale for the first year. It speaks to ideals that should be independent of exactly how many freshmen students enter CSUSM each Fall.
- A FY philosophy should speak to exposing students to an enriched environment which helps them to make educated choices about degree paths and which facilitates a commitment on the part of students to their given paths.

- Retention is not the over-riding goal. If we are going to write a Philosophy statement, it should be phrased in terms of helping students 'learn to be learners,' and if we can do that, improved retention should follow.
- Students need to make certain that they are on 'the right track' for ensuring development of proficiencies and properly beginning the preparation coursework for their chosen major. They need access to support networks (e.g. learning assistance centers).
- One basic question is the extent to which the FY is 'just like' or 'different from' any other year of college. An important part of the first year should be helping students cross the bridge from high school studies to discipline-specific, university-level ways of learning.
- A philosophy should speak to establishing an environment that helps students through the HS-to-University transition, supports development of academic skills, facilitates students making progress toward graduation, and leads to students returning for the second year of college.
- One implicit philosophy might be that we want to retain FY students, rather than "weed them out" (Access is a key part of the CSU mission). At the same time, we recognize that for some students, a different educational/career path might be appropriate, and we want to help students discover which pathway is best for them.
- The philosophy should include support for advising, intentional learning experiences, mentorship, developing the skills of and valuing life-long learning, and fostering campus life engagement.
- The audiences for the philosophy statement include faculty, staff, administrators, first-year students, prospective students, and the families of incoming and prospective students. Both academic departments and service departments should find it useful in guiding how they interact with first-year students.

Discussions Which We Hope Are Addressed in Other Dimensions

1. The balance between expectations for study and other obligations our students have. Our students seem to work more and study less (see, e.g., the NSSE data). Is the relationship between the number of hours students spent studying and our expectations for student work a chicken-and-egg problem? It has been observed that, on the one hand, students who have no additional responsibilities sometimes do the poorest job of managing time, and on the other hand, we have FY students who are required to contribute to family finances. Cal Poly SLO has a "25-35 Program for New Students." [See links to websites available in the Evidence Library: #94-96] Is such advice (expecting students to spend roughly twice as much time studying out-of-class as they spend "in class") realistic given what we know about our students work schedules? 2006 NSEE data [link to website is in the Evidence Library: #6] shows that our FY students are less likely than FY students at our selected peers to spend more than 10 hours/week studying (41% versus 49%) and the longitudinal tables in the NSSE report show that our students are more likely to work more hours off-campus. In light of this, maybe we should be encouraging students to take out loans so that they aren't working as much while enrolled at the University, or to take lower course loads if they are working.
2. Diversity of our student body. There was some discussion about how our proportion of first-generation FY students (22% according to Table F-1 in the CPI) compares to other

CSU campuses. The sense was that our student body is not atypical in comparison with other regional comprehensive state universities, and certainly less diverse than that of community colleges. To what extent are campus faculty and staff (especially front-line faculty) aware of the variety among our student in terms of their level of academic preparation? For example, we see in Table F1 (FY Cohort Student Profile) in the Current Practices Inventory that while 13% of our incoming FY students have AP credit, 65% need remediation in mathematics and/or English.

3. Involving parents. Admissions counselors are frequently asked by parents about the extent to which students can work while taking classes. Parents want to know about the balance between work, allowance and school.
4. Centralization and accountability need to be a part of our approach to the first year. Someone needs to be responsible for ensuring that programs for first-year students are coordinated, coherent, effective and 'known about.'

The Draft Philosophy Statement

Over a set of four meetings between February 25 and March 11, the following working Philosophy Statement was drafted, discussed and extensively revised, with only minor changes after this point. This initial construction included the concept of adding Learning Goals, and dividing these into foundational skill, knowledge and dispositional goals; the actual lists of goals included below were developed afterward and should be regarded as more tentative than the first paragraph of the Philosophy Statement.

First-Year Philosophy

California State University San Marcos is dedicated to helping first-year students make a successful transition to the University. We connect our first-year students to the campus community, the faculty, their fellow students, and services that support their success. We create learning environments - inside and outside the classroom - in which our students begin to cultivate a vision of their own academic goals, career aspirations, and life's purposes. We enable them to develop the foundational skills, knowledge, and dispositions they need to succeed at the University and to contribute positively to its mission.

First-Year Learning Goals

Foundational skill goals:

- Mathematical/quantitative skills
- Written communication skills
- Oral communication skills
- Critical thinking skills
- Computer competency skills
- Information literacy skills
- Time management skills and University-level study skills

- Financial literacy skills
- An academic plan aligned with personal and professional goals

Knowledge goals:

- Basic familiarity with a language other than English
- Understanding of difference and cultural diversity
- Understanding the roles and responsibilities of a University student
- Understanding the roles and responsibilities of the University, and the availability of campus resources

Dispositional goals:

- An openness to and curiosity about the breadth and diversity of human knowledge and experience
- Appreciation of diverse viewpoints and experiences
- Engagement in campus life and learning opportunities outside the classroom
- Engagement in the academic community; development of a sense of responsibility for their academic learning
- Understanding the importance of civic engagement within the context of local, national and global issues

Key points in the discussions that took place during these meetings are provided below.

- One key factor that distinguishes a Philosophy Statement for the First-Year from a more general Philosophy Statement (for the University) is the notion of student development.
- We discussed whether we should say that the transition is "from high school to the University" or simply "to the University." A reason for including a reference to high school is that 97.5% of our FY students are traditional in that they come to the University directly from high school [see item 61, and also 59, in the Evidence Library]. On the other hand, the remaining 2.5% follow a different path. If the philosophy emphasizes development, it should be able to guide how we work with both groups. Although we did not use language that referred to high school, we generally had the first-time University student in mind.
- We deliberately worded the Philosophy Statement to be explicit about what we wanted students to learn in the first year. We chose to follow the model of the statement at Indiana State University and develop a relatively short Philosophy Statement with a set of learning goals (and perhaps outcomes). These goals might come from several dimension committees, not just the Learning Dimension (esp. Diversity, Transitions, and Roles & Responsibilities). The syllabi for key first-year courses might be another source of these goals, as might be the Career Center materials.
- We borrowed the language about students cultivating a vision of their goals, aspirations and life's purposes from a draft Philosophy Statement being developed at Fayetteville State University.
- We decided not to include a sentence of the form "Our first-year programs are guided by the University's core mission values: intellectual engagement, community, innovation,

inclusiveness, and integrity" since this is not particular to first-year programs; these values are presumed to be infused into everything we do.

- We wanted to be explicit that learning takes place both inside and outside the classroom.
- Mirroring the Academic Affairs Mission Statement which speaks of preparing students to be "productive contributors to a global society," we thought that it made sense to regard the University community as a microcosm of this larger global society and to speak in the FY Philosophy Statement of students positively contributing to the University.