

Transitions Dimension Feedback California State University-San Marcos

Dear Darren, Mark, Mary, Pam, Jennie, Sharon, Silverio, Marietta, Suzanne, Lisa, Gary, Michele, and Todd,

I have read your report on the Transitions Dimension. The report is extremely well organized and comprehensive. The hard work done by this committee is apparent throughout, and I hope the process of working on the various elements of this Dimension enabled you to learn more about this admittedly complex area. I hope that as soon as you have made any final changes or additions, you will upload the report into FoEtec and select the action items that you want listed in the final Dimension report. If you have any questions about this process, don't hesitate to let me know.

You acknowledged your focus as being more about "factual information." You were less clear about information being provided to students on the "lived experience" during the first year. You have offered a number of good suggestions (previous first-year student statements on the website, advice about "do's and don'ts" given to new students by those experienced upperclass men and women). I also like the "week in the life" idea and was wondering whether you could make that a little movie that you would show to new students during orientation, or even a short dramatic presentation. There is something particularly special about live theater. (Of course, given the current orientation format, I don't know WHEN you would do that – but I'll talk more about orientation later.) Also, I don't know whether your current campus tours include visits to first-year classrooms – both GEL and other courses across the curriculum. If you could do that without too much disruption, it would give students a bird's-eye view of the core experience in the first year.

I read through your institution's mission, vision, and values statements, and find those to be very easy to read and understand (at least from my perspective). I don't know whether students have an opportunity to "engage" with the mission, vision, or values. I note the various presentations, but I hope you can find a venue where you can involve students in discussions about things like: (1) the difference in public and private education; what special role does public higher education play and how is that different from private colleges and universities? (2) your statement that you combine the advantages of "large and small." Do students believe they are getting a personal experience with the advantages of a large campus? (3) the liberal arts. Do your students understand the value of the liberal arts and their relationship with the major? (By the way, this is an issue that the Roles and Purposes committee will deal with directly.)

You cite many ways in which the University communicates with parents and families, but I'm curious about student responses to the survey. About ½ of them report that the campus "has not helped their families feel a part of the college experience." What do you think accounts for that perception? What might you do differently? I note your

recommendations in this area, and I hope that you will gather students' opinions about ways you could improve this area of practice.

I'm glad to see that you are doing a good job in providing financial aid information. This is an area most of us know very little about, but it is one that is CRITICAL to today's students.

The student survey results agree with your finding that they are "getting" the importance of out-of-class engagement. While they seem to know about engagement opportunities on campus, they're reporting less connection with faculty and upper-level students. I hope that you can find ways to connect faculty and upper-level students with new students in these various out-of-class activities.

You questioned the degree to which the University communicates academic expectations. Creating a short document that describes such expectations might be a good exercise for your committee (or another committee). You can describe expectations broadly and then simply acknowledge that there are differences and additional expectations related to major. But students do need to understand that college is different from high school. They need to know that working too many hours will make it extremely difficult for them to manage their coursework. The focus on lecture (vs. textbook knowledge), the expectation of good note-taking, independent study, library research, and class attendance are only a few of some basic expectations that someone ??? needs to communicate to new students. (I'm not sure who is best positioned to give this information!) Perhaps this is an area that bears repeating from a number of different authorities, and perhaps upper-level students could be the most effective "messengers." Often new students don't believe us "old folks," and they're looking for the real truth about what they have to do in order to earn the grades they desire.

In terms of establishing connections, I note your concern about the minimal level of connection between tenured/tenure-track faculty and new students, and I share that concern. That connection is especially critical for students who have selected a major (or think they know what their major will be). If students' motivation for higher education is tightly linked to pursuing a certain major, they want early contact with faculty in that major. Without it, they are likely to become disinterested and bored.

I'm not surprised that students confuse part-timers with tenure-line faculty. I recall one of my students in University 101 at the University of South Carolina. A required activity in my section of this course (like your GEL course) was for students to "interview a faculty member." At that time, there were almost no adjuncts at the U of South Carolina, but we had many TAs involved in first-year instruction. Some of my students interviewed their TA (which was okay), but one of them interviewed the Director of Orientation. No one had ever described to this young man the difference between student affairs professionals and "faculty."

You are apparently doing a good job in connecting your students with other first-year students and with available services. Do some or most new students utilize these

services? Are they oversubscribed, or are service providers twiddling their thumbs? Somehow I doubt that!

In reading your report, I share your concern about the current format of orientation and what I would judge to be insufficient academic advising for new students. I honestly don't know how you can expect students to walk away from orientation with the information they need in order to feel secure as they begin their first year. This is likely to be especially true for students who know (or think they know) their major. What about advising during the rest of the first term and the first year? What is the current advisor/student ratio? Is it easy or difficult for a student to get an appointment with an advisor? Do students at any time in the first year have an opportunity to be advised by someone in their academic area of choice? By the way, this is in no way a criticism of your current advisors. If they are like the advisors I know, they are working as hard as they can to provide students essential information. But as your campus grows (and it will), this is an area that needs the attention of senior administration (and those who hold the purse strings). I do understand that the purse is shrinking, but this won't last forever.

Is there any way that orientation could be extended at least another half day so that advising could be done on the morning of the second day? Not only would this provide you more time to do some celebratory or fun activities, it would also give you the opportunity to do more than "basic training." Dramatic presentations, interaction with upper-level students, a "reading experience" are ideas that could be considered in an expanded orientation. If advising were on the second day, students would be much fresher and able to absorb the information they need. I note in the evidence library the LDR Roadmaps web site. This looks like a great tool for new students. How is it currently used by advisors and/or students?

I certainly agree generally with your recommendations, but the devil is in the details. Think seriously about whose responsibility it is to make the changes you recommend. Whose cooperation do you need, and what might be the barriers to implementing some of your ideas?

I do have one warning. Although you acknowledge the many benefits of the GEL course, proceed cautiously with requiring it of all students. We have a mound of evidence that these courses are less likely to be perceived as "engaging" by students or instructors. There are a number of reasons for this: student "attitude" about having to do anything that is required, the difficulty of attracting the "best" faculty to do the teaching. Sometimes required programs literally sink under their own weight – not always, and it doesn't have to be that way. But if you're going to require this course (and there are certainly reasons to do that), make sure that it can be sustained and that you have good mechanisms of quality control.

OK, that's enough. Working with your campus has been a joy, and your report is the last in a line of outstanding ones. KUDOS to each of you!

Let me know if you have questions about my comments. Best wishes.

Betsy

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