

Faculty Dimension Report

California State University-San Marcos

Foundations Institutions make the first college year a high priority for the faculty. These institutions are characterized by a culture of faculty responsibility for the first year that is realized through high-quality instruction in first-year classes and substantial interaction between faculty and first-year students both inside and outside the classroom. This culture of responsibility is nurtured by chief academic officers, deans, and department chairs and supported by the institutions' reward systems.

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Current Situation:

The first step in the Faculty Dimension review was to assess the current status of the campus relative to faculty and the first-year student. The committee reviewed the faculty/staff survey data and added to the discussion of these points based on their experiences at Cal State San Marcos.

It is clear from the survey results that the campus faculty and staff believe senior academic leaders consider the unique challenges involved with teaching first-year students to be important. We have an Office of First-Year Programs, but this group administers only the GEL classes and some related programs for first-year students. We recognize that First-Year Programs and other classes and programs that focus on first-year students are fighting for the same budget dollars as all other programs across campus. Without a senior administrative champion in the budget building process, first-year programs is not recognized by the campus as a high priority among senior academic leaders.

Campus Level Encouragement from Senior Academic Leaders

We begin with a discussion about the faculty who typically teach first year courses. Roughly 70% of the first year courses are taught by adjunct faculty and another 15% are taught by teaching associates, i.e. graduate students. Most adjunct faculty have little or no interaction with senior academic leaders, the small amount of support they do receive coming directly from the department. Though adjunct faculty are assigned space to hold office hours on campus, there is no other formal space or time for these faculty to interact with students. Most typically, student faculty interaction occurs exclusively via email or chat venues between adjunct faculty and their students.

In terms of teaching skills, departments do examine teaching experience, style and philosophy as criteria for hiring. However, once at the University, there is little opportunity for adjunct faculty to update their skills. Faculty development opportunities through the Faculty Center are focused on tenure-track faculty, and there is no funding for workshops on any topic aimed at adjunct faculty. Adjunct faculty do not have a campus orientation. Some programs have written adjunct handbooks and/or have training sessions to prepare instructors. However, there is really no consistent program that adequately prepares adjunct faculty for delivery of a course using campus resources such as the library or the smart classroom facilities or web-based programs designed to augment or even deliver their courses. Even having a tenure-track faculty teaching a course does not ensure a higher quality of course. Faculty are taught subject matter in their training, but they do not necessarily receive formal training to understand successful teaching skills. To understand these skills better, faculty may take advantage of workshops offered through the Faculty Center, such as the Technology Brown Bag series.

In certain courses, there is a focus on the first-year experience or on pedagogical style. For example, GEL instructors have retreats and frequent meetings and GEW teaching associates are enrolled in LTWR 602 in which they learn how to teach. In general, all of these programs are initiated and supported by departments, including the Library, or by the First-Year Programs leadership.

With the exception of the few courses cited above, instructors receive little direction or support in teaching first-year students specifically. This does not mean pedagogies of engagement are not used. In fact, many classes across campus, including some first-year classes, are using the latest in technological approaches, community service learning and other engaging pedagogies to keep the interest of the students piqued even in the face of increasing class size. Several faculty awards typically go to faculty who are using innovative or high-quality teaching methodologies to reach their students. Beyond these awards, senior academic leaders have done very little to encourage faculty to keep up with the best pedagogical practices or with their understanding of the needs and culture of first-year students.

Even with the focus on strategic goals at all levels and on student learning outcomes for each course and individual major, senior academic leaders are typically silent to the instructors as related to campus-wide learning goals. Various colleges and departments have external association standards which guide their work, and every department has developed a set of student learning outcomes for their majors, but there are no campus-wide goals with respect to student learning beyond competency requirements in computer and language skills. First Year Programs has goals for the GEL course, and perhaps these would be considered more broadly as goals for all first-year students. However, most faculty do not know what these goals are even if they have a sense that they are out there somewhere.

We see attention being paid to the first-year experience through the creation of the Office of First Year Programs and through participation in the Foundations of Excellence process, but – overall – our campus is not engaged in giving faculty an understanding of the characteristics of our freshman class and not specifically encouraging effective pedagogy for first-year students. In the past we have had campus presentations on surveys which had statistics on our incoming students. We have data about our freshman classes on the Institutional Planning and Analysis website, including those from the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA survey and from NSSE. Unfortunately, these data are not known to the typical faculty member, so it is difficult to imagine that senior academic leaders are discussing the characteristics of the first-year students with the faculty teaching first-year courses.

Unit-Level Encouragement from Unit-Level Academic Administrators

Throughout the survey, faculty and staff recognized that the departments and programs are the main point of contact between the University and the faculty who teach the first-year students. In responding to question 055, 62% of faculty/staff respondents felt that department/program leaders consider faculty involvement with first-year students to be important, very similar to the response with respect to senior administrators and colleagues. However, when it came to acknowledgement and recognition of excellence in teaching first-year students (Q058-Q060), we do not do as well overall. Only 25% of respondents felt that institution leaders and colleagues acknowledged, recognized or rewarded excellence in teaching first-year students to a high or very high degree. Department/program leaders were thought to do a little better (40%).

Department/program leaders encourage all faculty to use pedagogies of engagement at all levels. This happens more directly than encouragement from administrators, e.g. through departmental support of technology and suitable teaching assignments.

In further discussion of the extent of unit-level encouragement, we recognized that faculty typically discuss teaching strategies and content for discipline-specific entry-level courses, but the same discussion is not likely to happen among faculty colleagues or with department chairs when it comes to first-year courses which are not seen as entry-level courses for a specific department. Only 3-4 of the 20 courses with the highest freshmen enrollment are truly entry-level courses for a discipline. The others are in the lower-division general education program or used to fulfill graduation requirements, such as language courses. With respect to the discipline-specific courses, there was little tangible evidence, but plenty of anecdotal evidence that

department chairs and program directors discuss pedagogy and expectations about skills and abilities of the students with respect to the entry-level courses with the faculty assigned to these courses.

Expectations of Involvement with First-Year Students

During the first decade on campus, all full-time faculty were expected to participate in lower division general education (LDGE). Courses for majors and for non-majors were discussed regularly in departmental and even divisional meetings. We no longer hold this expectation for all faculty, though some departments still rotate faculty through LDGE courses on a regular basis. When tenure-track faculty are hired, they are typically hired with an expectation to teach or develop a certain set of courses. If these expectations include first-year courses, this is typically communicated at the interview stage.

New tenure-track faculty attend the New Faculty Institute before their first Fall semester. During this 3-day orientation, faculty learn about the CSU system and the campus, including the available technology and library resources available to support their teaching. There is nothing specific to the first-year students, but the faculty are encouraged to attend the various workshops on pedagogy offered by the Faculty Center throughout the year.

Part-time/adjunct faculty teach 70% of the first-year classes on the campus. These faculty are typically hired to teach specific courses, so they are told if they are teaching predominantly first-year students. The first time an adjunct faculty teaches a course, they are also typically told what to expect as far as the make-up of a class in terms of majors, assignments they would expect students to have difficulty doing well, challenges in teaching this class, etc. Adjunct instructors are not typically given any expectations for long-term involvement with first-year students or any expectations for involvement with these students outside of class and office hours.

Our campus does make expectations to continuing faculty known, but those expectations are predominantly that they will not have involvement with the first-year students. Only 15% of first-year courses have a tenure-track instructor, meaning that only 1.7% of the approximately 200 tenure-track faculty actually teach first-year students. As a campus, we initially had expectations for all tenure-track faculty to be involved in our general education program, with about half of our tenure-track faculty teaching introductory courses. Over the past decade, as growth in student numbers has outpaced the growth of tenure-track faculty and upper-division/graduate course demands increased, we have lost this expectation for tenure-track faculty to be involved with first-year students. In some departments, there is an expectation that faculty will rotate through introductory courses for the discipline, while others have tenure-track faculty assigned specifically to the introductory course and others have introductory courses taught exclusively by adjuncts.

Rewards

Though we have a number of awards that recognize excellence in teaching, there is no award system in place that specifically rewards good performance in instruction of first-year classes. A new award was implemented this year for adjunct faculty. Given that 70% of first-year classes are taught by adjunct faculty, this is a step in the right direction. In addition, departments do reward good performance with good evaluations and often then make repeated teaching assignments based on these evaluations. However, continuation in your current job is not considered to be a genuine reward.

Though there may be some recognition in the retention, tenure and promotion process for teaching first-year classes well, it is typically phrased in terms of service to the department as much as it is considered in the teaching portion of the process. Excellence in teaching first-year students may be a consideration in the RTP process, but it is typically not singled out as compared to other classes in the award of tenure or promotion.

Though upper-division student advising is typically part of the job expectations of every tenure-track faculty member, faculty do not typically have a role in advising first-year students. Some departments do have welcome receptions specifically for or that include first-year students, and group advising is typically a part of these activities. We also have some faculty advising sessions in the student housing in coordination with the Faculty-in-Residence. Even with these limited programs, there is really no reward structure in place or even any form of recognition for participation in these activities.

To our knowledge, there is no reward for out-of-class interaction with first-year students either formally or informally.

Opportunities and Recommendations

Campus-level Opportunities

The most important factor that will keep the campus from progressing toward a more cohesive and higher quality first-year program is the lack of involvement of the faculty who are teaching first-year students in the campus culture. In addition to taking every opportunity to include adjunct faculty in the culture of the campus, a formal training and support program with a focus on adjuncts and teaching assistants should be created. The results of the survey and subsequent discussions with department chairs clearly demonstrated a need for more orientation for adjunct faculty. Potential training/orientation topics include: characteristics of our students, both first-year and transfer; learning goals across the curriculum and for individual classes; student development theory and learning styles; technology in the classroom; support structures on campus; creative teaching techniques and assessment of pedagogical strategies. This must be followed up with professional development opportunities for all faculty with some incentive

system that encourages faculty to continue learning about teaching strategies. A portion of the New Faculty Institute for tenure-track faculty should also have a first-year focus, recognizing that this expansion would require additional resources. Another option would be to create a first-year presentation on MediaSite that could be shared with all faculty as they receive an assignment to teach a first-year class.

If the campus is serious about examining success of a first-year program, a set of learning goals for the first-year should be established, disseminated widely and then assessed regularly. Effective strategies and the faculty who implement them should be recognized and rewarded. Currently, there is no method of acknowledging excellence in teaching first-year students beyond a good evaluation. The campus needs a consistent method of recognizing those faculty who are teaching first-year students. Another gap identified throughout this process was in the area of dissemination of information about the first-year students and how to reach them effectively. The campus collects data about our freshman class, but these data need to be shared with the faculty who are actually teaching first-year students in a more formal way.

It seems that a simple meeting of faculty who are teaching first-year students would fill many of these gaps by offering a venue to disseminate information, to recognize faculty who have been doing a good job teaching first-year students and to discuss effective strategies and how faculty might go about learning these techniques if they involve some technological training. The statistics about the first-year students could also be included with a few screens at convocation to encourage the entire campus community to keep up with the ever-changing culture of our freshman class. The Office of First-Year Programs should be completely engaged in all aspects of the first-year student experience, including GES, GESS, GEW and GEO as well as GEL. This office may be the ideal candidate to develop a first-year faculty meeting.

Department-level Opportunities

Expectations for faculty involvement with first-year students should be communicated to faculty as clearly as possible and should be included in the RTP process. Support structures that foster development of effective teaching strategies should be identified to the faculty. Department chairs and program directors in the College of Arts & Sciences should include a yearly discussion of the first-year students in their monthly meetings. Opportunities for the tenure-track faculty to welcome new students to the major should be established, and faculty should be encouraged to engage with first-year students as much as possible.

Advising structures are a barrier in the building of a relationship between the major department and the first-year students. Departments and programs should seek ways to work with advising staff to offer group advising sessions or to provide students with a friendly introduction to their expectations of the majors using some other means, perhaps a web introduction or a welcome reception. Faculty who are teaching first-year students should be invited to meet new students at an orientation session, perhaps inviting the faculty to have lunch with the students.