

# Foundations of Excellence

## Executive Summary

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California State University San Marcos began a Foundation of Excellence in the First Year of College® self-study in AY 2007-08. The task force for this project included over 100 faculty, staff, administrators and students. Every division in the University was represented in, and contributed to, the work that is described in this report. The University has gained from this participation in several ways:

- We have a clearer understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the First Year at CSU San Marcos, and a detailed set of plans for building upon the former and addressing the latter.
- We have broken down some silos between and within divisions, and come together to work collaboratively on a problem of urgency for the University. The Foundations of Excellence (FoE) self-study may serve as a model for work on other initiatives that cut across divisional lines, and which need to be approached from a campus-wide perspective.
- The Foundations of Excellence self-study and the simultaneous work on WASC Theme III (Improving Retention of First-Year Students) have advanced campus efforts to improve the First Year. Indeed, several of the action items suggested by the FoE Task Force are already underway even as this report is being prepared.

The self-study consisted of nine independent studies of key aspects (“Foundational Dimensions”) of the First Year, which were then reviewed and synthesized by the Steering Committee, which paid particular attention to the recommended action items. The nine dimension reports (attached as appendices to this final report) highlight a number of existing strengths:

- Units that are organizationally distant from one another have a proven record of working well together on issues pertaining to the First Year.
- The University provides prospective students with thorough information on available services, especially including financial aid.
- The campus employs a variety of methods to communicate its mission to first-year students.
- There are many examples of instructors employing innovative and engaging pedagogical methods in first-year courses.
- Service learning opportunities are available to first-year students; out-of-class engagement is stressed in contacts with prospective students early in the recruitment process.
- On campus housing is a source of co-curricular programming for first-year students, and students who live in UVA have higher one-year continuation rates.

- Significant progress has been made in ensuring that students who need remediation in English and/or mathematics are placed into the courses that they need to take to become proficient.
- Lower-Division Roadmaps (LDRs) help students to customize the first-year curriculum according to their intended major and incoming proficiency levels in English, mathematics and a language other than English.
- Learning communities are being developed, and these have led to retention improvements.
- Roughly 70% of first-year students take the GEL course, and this is associated with retention gains – especially for students with deficiencies in English and/or mathematics.
- Supplemental Instruction has been introduced to help science majors in what have historically been regarded as “gatekeeper” courses.
- The University offers a number of innovative programs to help students begin their studies in the Summer before the first year.
- The University provides students with a safe and secure campus. It offers a strong set of support and wellness services/programs designed to meet the needs of its students.
- CSUSM has a diverse student body, and the university is committed to maintaining an inclusive environment for all students.

There also are a number of areas in which the campus has room for improvement:

- The University has the opportunity to develop an organizationally more integrated, coordinated and coherent approach to the First Year.
- Information that is particularly useful to first-year students is fragmented across many different web pages, and students may miss much of it.
- The campus can reach out and more fully engage the families of its first-year students.
- We do not have an official philosophy for the First Year, but there was substantial support for having such a formal statement.
- Lecturers and teaching associates, who offer most of the instruction to first year students, do not receive or take advantage of the training and support available to tenure-line faculty.
- The academic advising which occurs prior to students registering for their first semester of courses is not sufficient. Students are often registering for classes without knowing whether they will be required to enroll in remedial coursework.
- Lower-division roadmaps are not being used to their full potential.
- We lack good “early warning” systems to help us identify students in need of additional help before it is too late.
- Connections between first-year students and tenure-line faculty are limited.
- Student performance in remedial/developmental courses can be improved. The mathematics sequencing should be constructed so that every student has the opportunity to become proficient within two semesters.

- Co-curricular programming can be better integrated with academic coursework in the first year.
- There are no “honors” courses available to first-year students.
- The University is not performing well in terms of ensuring that first-year students experience diverse worldviews and cultures; the curriculum does not deal with diversity nearly as much as the faculty/staff believe that it does.

The single most important action recommended by the Steering Committee is the creation of a First Year Council (FYC) which will pull together key individuals from units in Academic Affairs and Student Affairs to coordinate first-year efforts. The FYC is expected to be much more than an information-sharing clearinghouse. It will be the problem-solving, decision-making body that sets the direction for all units involved in the First Year at San Marcos. Its charge might be stated informally as:

See what needs to be done, make certain that someone is getting it done, and that we are not all working in isolation. The job of the FYC will be to see that the work gets done, not necessarily to do all of the work itself.

The FYC will inherit the remaining recommendations of the FoE self-study, which have been prioritized by the FoE Steering Committee. Three of the most important of these are addressing the following needs:

- A comprehensive website to pull together and organize for first-year students the resources that they need to succeed;
- More training and development opportunities for the faculty most likely to be in contact with first-year students; and
- Greater student-advisor interaction, especially before students register for their first courses.

In light of the current state budget crisis and its impact on CSUSM, it is reassuring to see that several of the recommendations being entrusted to the FYC do not carry a heavy cost. The University can make significant progress toward improving the first year through inexpensive actions such as:

- Completing and disseminating the Philosophy Statement for the First Year.
- Making faculty and staff more aware of the range of services available to help students.
- Supporting the redesign of courses known to have high rates of failure/withdrawal.
- Examining the possible use of community college courses for the last stage of remediation in mathematics.
- Developing more programming for first-year students centered on diversity.
- Developing a set of first-year learning goals; developing and documenting learning outcomes for co-curricular programs.
- Making it possible for students to save their individual Lower-Division Roadmaps.
- Producing a newsletter for the families of first-year students.

Finally, we conclude by relating that at the beginning of our FoE self-study, at a meeting held in Asheville, NC in August, 2007, one of the Policy Center advisors told the FoE Launch Team that his experience with other campuses was that the very act of putting the First Year 'under the microscope' had the effect of making the institution more deliberate in how it addressed issues relating to the success of first-year students. It is evident that the FoE self-study at CSUSM has not only allowed us to assess the current situation and determine a set of next steps, but it has also already served as a catalyst for improving the First Year. Even before the completion of this report, work has already begun on several of the proposed action items. A sampling of these follows:

- Work has begun on development of a website for first-year students.
- The Evidence Library in the FoEtec data platform has given us a great start in creating an archive of key First Year policies, data and reports.
- Students are directed to Lower-Division Roadmaps prior to coming to Orientation, and the custom text for GEL includes information on LDRs.
- A one-day safety module delivered by the University Police Department is now included in GEL classes.
- First-year students are being encouraged to participate in SLL/ASI events.
- Incoming students are being urged to take the EPT and ELM exam earlier (if they are not exempt from having to take these exams).
- Students needing to take three remedial courses will now be placed into a Fast-Track pair of mathematics courses (Prealgebra and Beginning Algebra) in the Fall, so that they can complete their remediation in the Spring.
- The addition of Supplemental Instruction to MATH 051 is being piloted.
- Registration processes for remedial mathematics courses and for learning communities have been simplified, and work on further simplification is continuing.
- The possibility of offering summer housing in UVA to Summer Academy students is being investigated.
- Learning Assistance Centers have adopted more varied hours of service.
- GEL instructors are being encouraged to take attendance in their classes.

The Foundations of Excellence self-study stands as an example of what is meant by a "University First" approach guided by the University's strategic priorities. We have worked together on the FoE Task Force across divisions to support our first-year students, and the First-Year Council, in continuing the work that we have begun, will foster and nurture the collaborations between all of the different units whose collective efforts are necessary for the University to achieve its goal of enabling first-year students to succeed.