

Foundations of Excellence

Findings and Recommendations

I. Rationale for Undertaking the Foundations of Excellence Self-Study

California State University San Marcos did not admit first-year students until the fall semester of 1995. Since then, we have faced many challenges related to ensuring the success of our first-year students, and our one-year continuation rates for first-year students are among the lowest in the CSU system.

Despite periods of severe budgetary constraints, we have responded with a variety of programs and initiatives. Examples include a comprehensive college success course, summer programs for rising high school seniors, the first residence halls on campus, a living-learning community for residential students, increased training and certification for our math and writing tutors, a detailed on-line academic planning tool, several co-curricular activities, and a new Office of First-Year Programs. There is considerable collaboration between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs units (which were housed for a few years together in a single division), and the combined efforts seem to be having a positive effect as evidenced by a recent increase in one-year continuation rates. However, we have yet to develop a campus-wide framework and vision for the first-year, and the rapid increase in the size of the first-year class (more than doubling over the past five years: from 722 in fall 2004 to 1695 in fall 2009) makes it essential for us to make well-informed decisions regarding which of these programs are the ones that need to be scaled-up, and what new initiatives are needed.

In 2006-07, Provost Cutrer encouraged First-Year Programs to submit a strategic planning proposal to obtain funding for CSUSM to participate in Foundations of Excellence (FoE) in the First College Year®¹, a project developed by the Policy Center on the First Year of College. Participation in FoE was intended to allow our campus to undertake a comprehensive year-long self-study and improvement planning process designed to enhance our ability to serve first-year students attending Cal State San Marcos. Guided by the Policy Center's professional staff and proven assessment tools, the campus would create a Foundations of Excellence Task Force that would attend special conferences, inventory and assess our current first-year practices, and survey faculty, staff and first-year students. In addition to providing the campus with a much needed comprehensive picture of what was

¹ For more information on Foundations of Excellence, see <http://www.fyfoundations.org/>.

happening in the First year arena, participation in FoE was highly aligned with University Strategic Priorities² and with our third WASC theme: Improving Retention of First-Year Students. This proposal was ranked first among all of the Academic Affairs strategic planning proposals, and was approved at the University level.

CSUSM was one of thirteen four-year institutions selected by the Policy Center to participate in the 2007-08 National Select Four-Year Cohort. Using the FoE framework, we set out to both confirm the strengths of our program and to determine where we needed to improve (and how best to accomplish this). This framework called for us to pursue separate lines of inquiry into nine key factors (called “Foundational Dimensions”) that are crucial for excellence in the First Year.³ Each dimension was addressed by a committee that used the study questions (called “Performance Indicators”) to examine the status of campus efforts pertaining to that dimension and to suggest improvements (or “Recommended Action Items”) for the University to undertake.⁴ This systematic study of the First Year at CSU San Marcos is intended to be foundational, in that by improving the first year, we are also improving the entire undergraduate experience.

Every PowerPoint presentation made by the FoE Launch Team and Steering Committee began with the following slide

The Basic Questions

As a Campus Community

- How do we know what is working for our first-year students?
- How do we know what our next steps should be for improving our first-year?

The promised end result of the FoE self-study was the answers to these questions and the creation of a comprehensive action plan to enhance our programs and services for first-year students. This report fulfills that promise by presenting the findings of the Task Force and its recommendations.

² Strategic Priority 1.7: Provide academic and student support services for student retention, success and graduation.

Strategic Priority 2.1: Engage and support first year students to improve retention and connectedness.

³ The Foundational Dimensions are Philosophy, Organization, Learning, Faculty, Transitions, All Students, Diversity, Roles and Purposes, and Improvement.

⁴ An account of exactly how our campus organized this self-study, assembled an FoE Task Force and divided it into Dimension Committees – each charged with researching one of these key Foundational Dimensions – is provided in Appendix A.

II. Summary of Findings – by FoE Dimensions

In this section, we provide brief summaries of the reports of each dimension committee, and highlight the findings that led to the action items deemed most important by the Steering Committee.⁵ For each dimension, we also provide the “grade” assigned by the committee to the campus.⁶

Philosophy (Grade: C)

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.

Cal State San Marcos does not currently have a document which fits the description of what the Policy Center calls a statement of philosophy/rationale for the first year, but over three quarters of the respondents to the faculty/staff survey responded high or very high when asked about the extent to which they agreed that a formalized institutional philosophy for the first/freshman year of college was valuable.

The Philosophy Committee examined related CSUSM documents, as well as the first-year philosophy statements of over a dozen other institutions, and developed a draft Philosophy Statement to be used as a starting point for conversations with the entire University community on the CSUSM First-Year Philosophy. In the discussions surrounding this development, the committee sought to address multiple audiences (prospective and first-year students and their families, faculty, staff, and administrators) and speak of an ideal: nurturing students through the high school-to-university transition and exposing them to an enriched environment in which they are helped to make educated choices about degree paths and in which they commit to following these paths. The abbreviated version of this statement reads⁷:

California State University San Marcos is dedicated to helping first-year students make a successful transition to the University. We strive to connect

⁵ The full reports for each committee (including a list of action items) and the feedback received from our Policy Center advisor are attached as appendices, as are reports of the Student Focus group (for those dimensions addressed by the Student Focus Group.)

⁶ If the dimensions are equally weighted, then the overall campus FoE grade is 2.033 (where A=4.0).

⁷ See the appendices for the full draft statement, which consists of this statement followed by a list of first-year goals.

our first-year students with the campus community, the faculty, their fellow students, and services that support their success. We are committed to creating 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. Our goal is to enable our first-year students to succeed at the University and to contribute positively to society by acquiring foundational skills, knowledge, and dispositions.

One of the highest priority action items following the conclusion of the FoE self-study will be the completion of the philosophy statement and its adoption by the University.

Organization (Grade: C+)

Foundations Institutions create organizational structures and policies that provide a comprehensive, integrated, and coordinated approach to the first year. These structures and policies provide oversight and alignment of all first-year efforts. A coherent first-year experience is realized and maintained through effective partnerships among academic affairs, student affairs, and other administrative units and is enhanced by ongoing faculty and staff development activities and appropriate budgetary arrangements.

Cal State San Marcos provides a considerable number of resources and oversight agencies in service to first-year students, but coordination among and between them is inconsistent – solid in some cases and porous in others. In reviewing the campus organizational structures, the committee found several instances where units – even though they were organizationally distant from one another – working together in a highly coordinated fashion. In other cases, partnerships between critical units are wanting, or exist only to the extent that individuals within those units work together out of practical necessity to provide oversight for distinct aspects of the first-year.

At CSUSM, there is no single "First-Year Program" – but rather there are many such programs, offered in various settings, to serve various purposes – and there is no single office, oversight committee, or "formalized structure" charged with responsibility for envisioning, designing, delivering, maintaining, and assessing all of our "First-Year Programs." Even within the single Division of Academic Affairs, organization and communication can be difficult and the challenge is compounded when the multiple resources housed in Student Affairs are also taken into account. These challenges, though, often seem to be met through the dedication of the multiple offices and key individuals who successfully reach out to bridge large organizational distances.

The Organization Committee recognized the need for a single, centralized, comprehensive coordinating council to identify operations and resources that are not already part of the informal first-year network, and then to foster

communication and interchange between these areas and the rest of the first-year enterprise. The First-Year Programs Advisory Council (FYPAC) was suggested as a possible model for a body that would be created to coordinate the multiple offices and resources within Academic Affairs and Student Affairs.⁸

Learning (Grade: C)

Foundations Institutions deliver intentional curricular and co-curricular learning experiences that engage students in order to develop knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors consistent with the desired outcomes of higher education and the institution's philosophy and mission. Whether in or out of the classroom, learning also promotes increased competence in critical thinking, ethical development, and the lifelong pursuit of knowledge.

The many findings of the Learning Committee include the following:

- Although many courses or departments have goals or outcomes, there is little evidence of common University-wide outcomes specifically developed for first-year students. The student focus group was clear in their belief that learning goals were not communicated to students. The committee suggested, and our Policy Center advisor concurred, that it would be fruitful to differentiate between requirements, goals and outcomes.
- The GEL course was reviewed in detail.⁹ The course has strong outcomes but is not taken by all students. Specific suggestions were made for examining the content of the course, as well as the suggestion that most first-year students be advised to take the course in the Fall semester.
- In reviewing instruction, the committee noted that there was room for improvement, particularly in the areas of providing new lecturers and teaching associates with more mentoring and training on instructional methods appropriate for first-year classes and in section-to-section consistency of course content. Regarding the latter, our Policy Center advisor cautions that balance needs to be sought between instructor autonomy (academic freedom) and fairness to students (academic responsibility).
- Discussions concerning courses with “high DFWI rates” and student placement practices largely converged on the related issues of mathematics remediation

⁸ The charge and composition of the First-Year Programs Advisory Committee (convened in AY 2006-07, but disbanded while the FoE self-study was being conducted) can be found in an appendix to the Organization dimension report.

⁹ GEL 101 (The Student, The University, The Community) is a freshman success seminar designed after the nationally renowned University 101 program at the University of South Carolina (www.sc.edu/univ101). It is specifically designed to help students navigate the high school-to-university transition. GEL 101 and related summer versions (GEL 110 and 120) are certified in Area E (Life-long Learning) of General Education. It is open only to students with freshman standing, and it is the third most highly enrolled course taken by first-year students (after the written and oral communication courses: GEW 101 and GEO 102). Approximately 70% of CSUSM first-year students take a GEL course by the end of their first year.

and student success in the first baccalaureate-level mathematics/quantitative reasoning course (the B4 course in the General Education program). It is critically important that we do a better job of encouraging (or perhaps requiring) students to complete the CSU proficiency tests earlier than they currently do. We also need to re-examine our remediation practices, especially in mathematics, and especially with respect to the campus requirement that students who arrive mathematically deficient must either pass MATH 051 (or 051C), retake and pass the ELM exam, or take and pass a B4 course at another institution.

- Another placement issue concerned the use of Lower-Division Roadmaps (LDRs) as a method for helping to give students course selection advice prior to signing up for classes at Orientation. The student focus group felt that these were very useful, and the committee suggested that incoming students be informed about these prior to Orientation so that LDRs could be used there as the primary tool when registering for classes.
- With the exception of service-learning courses, the learning outcomes associated with co-curricular activities are not well-documented.
- The committee noted that data showed a 12% increase in first-year retention for students in the San Marcos Experience (SME) learning community and suggested increasing the linkages between courses and co-curricular programming through the development of more learning communities.

Faculty (Grade: D)

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.

A study of the courses with the highest first-year student enrollments showed that 70% of first-year instruction is currently delivered by non-tenure-track lecturers (with an additional 15% delivered by Teaching Associates, i.e., graduate students). This is a significant change from the first decade, when almost all tenure-track faculty were expected to participate in lower-division General Education. There are still some academic departments that regularly rotate tenure-track faculty through such courses, but this no longer is common practice across the campus. Whereas there are examples of specific first year courses which offer retreats and workshops (or, in the case of graduate student instructors, credit-bearing courses) focusing on the first-year experience and on pedagogies of engagement, such opportunities do not reach many instructors. Faculty Center programming is focused primarily on tenure-track faculty, yet most instruction of first-year courses is delivered by lecturers and teaching associates (graduate students). The extent to which lecturers

are provided with a formal orientation and made aware of levels of expectation for student performance varies by department.

While there are many excellent lecturers on campus (a President's Award for Outstanding Lecturer was recently created), too often there is a lack of acknowledgment of the challenges associated with teaching first-year students and insufficient recognition of excellence in these teaching assignments.

The advising structure – in which students receive much of their lower-division advising from staff advisors – can also be an obstacle in the development of a relationship between the department's faculty and its first-year students.

The campus needs to establish a set of learning goals for the first-year, disseminate these widely, and assess regularly to determine the extent to which these are being achieved and where improvement is needed. There is a need for a single entity to be completely engaged in the planning of all aspects of the first-year experience, including all of the basic General Education courses.

Transitions (Grade: C)

Foundations Institutions facilitate appropriate student transitions through policies and practices that are intentional and aligned with institutional mission. Beginning with recruitment and admissions and continuing through the first year, institutions communicate clear curricular and co-curricular expectations and provide appropriate support for educational success. They are forthright about their responsibilities to students as well as students' responsibilities to themselves and the institution. They create and maintain curricular alignments with secondary schools and linkages with secondary school personnel, families, and other sources of support, as appropriate.

In reviewing how the University communicates to prospective students what the experience of being a student at San Marcos is like, the committee found that our website, admissions materials and the campus tour tend to concentrate on factual information (availability of financial aid and campus services, majors offered, etc.) to the exclusion of providing insight into what it is like to be a first-year student at CSUSM. The campus does a good job of communicating to students the University mission, financial aid information (noted as CRITICAL [in caps] by our Policy Center advisor) and the importance of out-of-class engagement. Communication with students could be improved if there was a clear set of academic expectations that could be provided to these students. Considerable resources are devoted to providing high school personnel with information so that they can assist students in the high school-to-University transition from their side. One audience with whom communication efforts could be bolstered is the families of first-year students; almost half of the students surveyed responded not at all or slight when asked about the degree to which our institution has made their family feel a part of the college experience.

The campus does a good job of fostering connections among first-year students and between first-year students and academic support services. Two important campus communities with which our first-year students report not being connected are (a) sophomores, juniors and senior, and (b) faculty. Over half of the students report that the university has only slightly (or not at all) connected first-year students with upperclassmen; the percentage is a little over 40% for connections with faculty, but the committee pointed out that students are probably referring to lecturers (and maybe even teaching assistants), and that connections between first-year students and tenure-track faculty are likely to be even less frequent.

One of the most important advising sessions that first-year students receive comes near the end of a long Orientation day, immediately before students register for class, and for many students long after the point in that day at which they are no longer able to absorb new information. Among the comments on this point from our Policy Center advisor are the suggestions that we (i) consider devoting additional resources to advising as the budget improves, (ii) consider extending Orientation by a half day to allow for advising on the second morning, and (iii) use LDRs.

The committee noted that students enrolled in GEL are provided there with information on course selection, majors and careers and in this way have a qualitatively different experience than students who do not enroll in this course. Additionally, retention data shows that students who take GEL have higher continuation rates than students who do not. The committee suggested requiring all first-year to take GEL, but our Policy Center advisor urged caution, citing “a mound of evidence that these courses [when required] are less likely to be perceived as “engaging” by students or instructors” and the difficulty involved in sustaining program quality.

All Students (Grade: C)

Foundations Institutions serve all first-year students according to their varied needs. The process of anticipating, diagnosing, and addressing needs is ongoing and is subject to assessment and adjustment throughout the first year. Institutions provide services with respect for the students’ abilities, backgrounds, interests, and experiences. Institutions also ensure a campus environment that is inclusive and safe for all students.

The first-year student population at CSUSM is fairly diverse according to data collected through the CIRP (Freshman Survey) and CSU Mentor (student application database) and there is a campus commitment to fostering multicultural awareness and inclusivity. Over five-sixths of students felt that the instructor in the class held immediately prior to taking the survey treated all students fairly regardless of gender/race/ethnicity, almost four-fifths felt respected by others at CSUSM to a high or very high degree, and over two-thirds felt (to a high or very high degree) that

they could express their beliefs without concern about how others will react. CSUSM now offers three cultural centers that seek to increase the inclusivity of campus life.

The campus offers a wide range of services, but despite the outreach efforts of these student support centers, they are reactive in that students must generally seek these services through self-identification. Especially for first-generation students, the campus needs to make it easier for students to learn about and obtain these services, such as organizing all of these services on a single webpage and giving instructors (especially lecturers and teaching associates) training on how to identify student needs and how to refer students to the appropriate services. Additionally, whereas service centers record the numbers of students that they serve, the quality and effectiveness of these services (how well they meet the needs of first-year students) is not consistently measured.

With many first-year students living on campus and noon to 1 set aside on Tuesdays and Thursdays for University Hour, opportunities for students to get involved in campus activities have expanded in recent years. In light of the connection between campus involvement and retention/academic success, the development of additional co-curricular programming and its integration into the first-year curriculum seems especially promising.

The student focus group reported feeling safe on campus, not just physically but also in terms of being able to express themselves freely. They expressed a desire to see more student organizations, and shared concerns with advising – principally difficulty getting appointments with advisors and getting information on what classes they need to take.

Diversity (Grade: C-)

Foundations Institutions ensure that all first-year students experience diverse ideas, worldviews, and cultures as a means of enhancing their learning and preparing them to become members of pluralistic communities. Whatever their demographic composition, institutions structure experiences in which students interact in an open and civil community with people from backgrounds and cultures different from their own, reflect on ideas and values different from those they currently hold, and explore their own cultures and the cultures of others.

An analysis of the responses to similar questions on the student and faculty/staff surveys pointed out an interesting disconnect between their respective perceptions of student exposure to “diverse ideas, worldviews, and cultures as a means of preparing them to become members of pluralistic communities.”¹⁰

¹⁰ The quotation is taken directly from the FoE guidelines for the Diversity dimension. The Diversity committee went on to recommend the use of a broader definition that includes sexual orientation,

In aggregate, students responded to questions about exposure to world cultures, political perspectives, and issues regarding social class and economic privilege with roughly one-third reporting slight or not at all, roughly one-third answering moderate, and roughly one-third answering high or very high. In contrast, almost two-thirds of faculty/staff thought the level of exposure to diverse ideas and world views in the curriculum was high or very high, and while only a little over a majority felt similarly about out-of-class activities, only one-fifth thought that the level of exposure in co-curricular activities was slight or none at all. When the results were disaggregated by race and ethnicity, it was observed that white students tended to be more critical of institutional efforts to expose students to diversity, while Asian/Pacific Islander students were least critical, with Hispanic students in the middle. A different pattern emerged in the faculty/staff responses. White, Non-Hispanic faculty and staff were much more likely (2 times as likely for the curriculum and 1.7 times for out-of-class activities) to rate the university high or very high on providing exposure to diverse ideas and worldviews than Hispanic faculty and staff.

To understand why so many student did not believe that they were being exposed o diverse ideas and worldviews, the committee reviewed syllabi for first-year courses and found little evidence that cultural diversity was addressed in the courses – despite the fact that these were General Education courses into which the treatment of race, class and gender was supposed to have been infused. In interviews with faculty teaching some of these courses, the committee discovered that while diversity was a covered topic in the course, it might be covered in-depth by some instructors and superficially by others; the reasons for the latter include not enough time to cover the topic because there are too many other topics that the class is required to cover and lack of training for dealing with some of the controversial aspects of this material. Only a few of the courses examined appeared to encourage students to participate in co-curricular events that might expose them to diverse cultures and ideas. Interestingly, there were no significant differences in this respect between students living on campus and commuters.

Roles and Purposes (Grade: B)

Foundations Institutions promote student understanding of the various roles and purposes of higher education, both for the individual and society. These roles and purposes include knowledge acquisition for personal growth, learning to prepare for future employment, learning to become engaged citizens, and learning to serve the public good. Institutions encourage first-year students to examine systematically their motivation and goals with regard to higher education in general and to their own college/university. Students are exposed to

gender identity and expression, diversity of ability, and consideration of the intersection of race, class and gender.

the value of general education as well as to the value of more focused, in-depth study of a field or fields of knowledge (i.e., the major).

Three challenges that the University faces are (i) almost two-thirds of the first-year class needs remediation in English and/or mathematics, (ii) a high percentage of our students are first-generation college students, and many of these hold outside employment, and (iii) most students are commuters, which undermines campus engagement. Some of the key ways in which these challenges are being met (and, in some cases, can be better met) are through the pre-enrollment Orientation program, GEL 101, communication campaigns directed at students needing remediation, service-learning courses, the Career Center, and a safe and secure campus environment with a range of wellness programs.

The campus does a good job of explaining the “what” of the various requirements (e.g., the development of LDRs, which map out the first two years of each major), but more work is needed on the “why” behind these requirements. The student focus group specifically recommended that the instructors in introductory major’s courses explain what can be done with the major. Advisors were asked to explain the rationale for requirements. In both the context of first-year coursework and advising sessions, efforts should be made to help students examine their own personal reasons for being in college. The focus group felt that “the campus as a whole needs to find a better way to get the students involved in the campus community,” and also pointed out that involvement in campus organizations could be a vehicle for personal growth and discovery.

In the faculty survey, the items which elicited the least positive responses concerned the extent to which the University helps students explore their motivation for getting a college education in terms of active engagement in the community and contributing to the betterment of society. Although the University has an active and well-recognized service-learning program and is a participant in the American Democracy Project, the faculty response may be indicative of a reluctance of some faculty to participate in these programs. The student group expressed the opinion that it was important for students to see that their instructors were also involved in campus activities.

Finally, the committee, noting higher remediation and retention rates as well as overall performance for students who take GEL 101, recommended requiring this course for all first-year students. Our Policy Center advisor sounded a note of caution that the campus would “need to be prepared for “push-back” from student ... [and be certain that it could] attract enough student-centered faculty to teach the number of sections” that it would need to offer.

Improvement (Grade: C+)

Foundations Institutions conduct assessment and maintain associations with other institutions and relevant professional organizations in order to achieve ongoing first-year improvement.

This assessment is specific to the first year as a unit of analysis—a distinct time period and set of experiences, academic and otherwise, in the lives of students. It is also linked systemically to the institutions' overall assessment. Assessment results are an integral part of institutional planning, resource allocation, decision-making, and ongoing improvement of programs and policies as they affect first-year students. As part of the enhancement process and as a way to achieve ongoing improvement, institutions are familiar with current practices at other institutions as well as with research and scholarship on the first college year.

Among the many findings of the Improvement Committee are the following:

- The University offers a number of Summer programs before the first year. There are strong hints from the Board of Trustees that all CSU campuses will be asked to run programs like these for students who have not satisfied proficiency requirements. In conjunction with the FoE self-study, an analysis of pre- and post-ELM exam data for students participating in the Mathematics Acceleration Program in the Summer (MAPS) shows that the average increase of more than one level of remediation is statistically significant. MAPS has been run on a shoe-string budget since 2003 and is now a cornerstone for several different Summer programs.
- Through the creation of the First-Year Academic Support Coordinator great strides have been made in ensuring that students who need remediation are getting it. Work on simplifying processes and removing unnecessary and confusing barriers is continuing.
- Staffing limitations preclude much one-on-one advisor and student interaction at the registration period at Orientation. One tool that can be used there are the Lower-Division Roadmaps (LDRs). These plans of study take into account student preparation in English, mathematics and a language other than English and provide students with an optimized plan for integrating and sequencing General Education and Preparation for the Major. To quote from the Policy Center advisor's feedback, seem to be "and excellent aid that students can use both to develop and follow a systematic plan toward degree completion. But it's probably unrealistic to expect students to use these aids on their own with only one introduction at Orientation." The campus was encouraged to present this idea and its implementation at conferences.
- First-Year Programs has been growing learning communities and where data is available, these are seen to improve retention rate. There are no explicit learning goals for these communities (other than the goals for their constituent courses) and there are currently no tenure-track faculty teaching in these.
- There is no University policy mandating that attendance be taken, but our Policy Center advisor encourages us to be serious about attendance in first-year courses: "This is SO basic to student academic performance."

III. Action Items and Next Steps

We found the FoE dimensions to be a useful standard set of lenses through which we could examine the First Year. When we began examining the 150+ action items,¹¹ however, it quickly became clear that several issues appeared in repeatedly in a number of different dimensional contexts, which led to repetitions among the recommended action items. We have thus organized the action items and next steps, not along the lines of the original (external) *foundational dimensions*, but rather according to a new set of *themes* which are organic to the campus.

The action items were grouped into 25 different clusters,¹² and as the Steering Committee reviewed these in October 2008, a consensus developed that some of these were “must-haves” – items upon which the campus must act. In particular, four umbrella needs were identified:

- A body to coordinate campus first-year efforts;
- 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.

A small workgroup continued following up on the suggestions made by the Steering Committee and consolidated the 150 action items and 25 clusters into a smaller number of themes with 97 (consolidated and multifaceted) action items. Several of these were endorsed by the Steering Committee as being “Highest Priority.”¹³ The key recommendation of the Steering Committee when it reconvened in January 2009 was the creation of a First-Year Council to provide general stewardship of the First Year at CSUSM.

¹¹ In addition to the original 146 action items developed in the nine dimensions, six more action items were added based on feedback received from an Academic Affairs Town Hall (November 2008) and the General Education Committee, and from recommendations of CSUSM team that attended the CSU Proficiency Conference (October 2008).

¹² In decreasing order of the number of recommended action items in each cluster (some items were placed in more than one cluster): further research and assessment; organization/coordination, communication with students, pro-actively warning students, faculty development/training; student learning goals/outcomes; philosophy/goals; student services; advising (general); advising (at Orientation); GEL; increasing campus expertise on the First Year; learning communities; remediation/testing/placement; campus life/co-curricular activities; faculty/staff – student interaction; communication with families and high schools; service learning opportunities; registration processes; connections between students; recognizing excellence; supplemental instruction; standards of behavior; University Village Apartments (UVA); and miscellaneous.

¹³ So there are four priority levels: Low, Medium, High and Highest. There are a total of 18 highest priority items.

The First-Year Council (FYC)

The Provost/Vice President for Academic Affairs and the Vice President for Student Affairs should endorse the creation of a council that would pick up where the Foundations of Excellence self-study leaves off and see that its recommendations are followed through. By bringing together many of the key players in the first-year experience at San Marcos, the FYC will provide a forum that helps to counteract a drift to working in silos by bringing to the forefront opportunities for collaboration. 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 FoE Steering Committee explicitly refrained from writing a formal charge for the FYC, preferring to let that develop out of the work of the council. The FYC would be asked to use the prioritized and grouped lists of FoE recommended action items as an initial springboard, but it would continually re-evaluate the situation of the First-Year at San Marcos and take appropriate steps/actions. Some action items originally proposed as being of medium or low priority might in time rise in importance, and additional actions might be proposed as new developments arise.

The Steering Committee spent considerable time discussing how the council might be best “plugged in” to existing University structures. The committee recommends that the council whose initial composition is given further below be led by the Associate Vice President for Academic Programs, and that the AVPAP report on the work of the council directly to both the Provost/VPAA and the VPSA. To the greatest extent possible, the FYC should work through existing University structures, asking existing organizations as appropriate to take specific actions and deliver periodic reports to the council. The FYC should be asked to review policies and practices that affect first-year students, and it should recommend changes to specific units and to the vice presidents.

The council membership should be sufficiently broad to provide it with a reasonable degree of expertise in the issues it is likely to confront. When dealing with issues that require cross-unit teams for which there is not already an existing work group, the FYC will create ad-hoc teams to specifically address the issue; these ad-hoc teams should be disbanded when their work is complete. Once assignments of the initial action items have been made, the council might meet once each month to check progress and determine next steps, but a more frequent meeting schedule might be necessary for the first semester.

FYC Membership

The Steering Committee tried to balance a desire to get as many important stakeholders around the table with a sense that if the council was too large, it would get bogged down too easily and become ineffective. A proposed initial membership for the First-Year Council is given below. As the council evolves, it may decide that some of these representatives are no longer needed, and that others should be added; the FYC should regularly review its membership, balancing inclusivity against nimbleness.

- Associate Vice President for Academic Programs (FYC Chair)
- GEW Director
- GEO Coordinator
- Associate Director of First-Year Programs
- Mathematics Department Chair
- Chair of another academic department serving over half of the first-year class¹⁴
- Associate Dean, Instruction and Academic Programs, College of Arts and Sciences
- General Education Committee Chair
- Outstanding Lecturer(s)¹⁵
- Faculty Center Director
- Diversity and Equity Coordinator
- First Year Academic Support Coordinator
- Undergraduate Advising Services Director
- Registration and Records Director
- Student Life and Leadership Director
- Associate Vice President for Student Development Services
- University Village Apartments Director
- Institutional Planning and Analysis representative
- Associated Students, Inc. representative
- President of Freshman Honor Society¹⁶

Action Item Themes (and the highest priority items under each theme)

These themes (or domains) capture the areas in greatest need of attention at CSUSM. There are multiple action items associated with each of these themes; only those rated as “Highest Priority” are listed here, and only in an abbreviated format. Complete lists of all action items under each theme, and further elaboration of the particular action items listed immediately below, can be found in the appendices.

¹⁴ To be appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. This seat is intended to rotate through all of the departments that see a majority of students in their first year at San Marcos.

¹⁵ To give continuity to this representation, the term will run from the Spring semester immediately following receipt of the award through the end of the following Spring, so there is one lecturer in the Fall and two in the Spring.

¹⁶ Alpha Lambda Delta rules require that the officers be sophomores, so this would be a student who completed his/her first year at CSUSM.

- **Communication with First-Year Students and Their Families** – We need to ensure that students get the information that they need in order to be successful.
 - Collect all of the campus web resources for first-year students and make these available directly from the University homepage.
- **Information Collection and Dissemination to Campus Personnel** – We need to improve the sharing of information about the First Year.
 - Ensure that the goals of all first-year initiative and student service centers are aligned with the First-Year Philosophy Statement.
- **Faculty Development and Recognition** – We need to recognize the special challenges of teaching classes for first-year students.
 - Establish initial and ongoing development programs to better prepare all faculty who teach first-year courses
- **Advising First-Year Students** – We need to strengthen the advising of first-year students.
 - Increase staffing in Advising to promote greater student-adviser interaction at Orientation and throughout the first year.
 - Increase the use of Lower-Division Roadmaps (LDRs) by first-year students.
 - Address issues involving the advising/registration process at Orientation.
 - Involve and make better use of faculty advisors.
- **Proficiency and Placement** – We need to develop and promote strategies for first-year students to achieve proficiency and success in basic skill areas, especially English and mathematics.
 - Encourage students to take the ELM exam and EPT earlier.
 - Investigate the possibility of allowing student to complete mathematics remediation by passing community college intermediate algebra courses.
- **Summer Programs** – We need to expand Summer programs that enable first-year students to start university studies earlier and to become better prepared for the start of classes in the Fall.
 - Continue funding the purchase of the software licenses on which the Mathematics Acceleration Program in the Summer (MAPS) depends.
- **Student Life and Co-curricular Programs** – We need to develop and promote opportunities for first-year students to learn outside of the classroom.
 - More fully develop co-curricular components for first-year students which are aligned with the First-Year Philosophy Statement and which support first-year milestones.
- **First-Year Curriculum** – We need to continue improving the curriculum and scheduling of key first-year courses.
 - Examine suggestions relating to requiring GEL of all students and/or only offering GEL in the Summer (before the first year) and the Fall, and make recommendations.
 - Deconstruct and reconstruct the first-year curriculum.
 - Develop a process for adding more first-year learning communities.
 - Provide input to the General Education Committee (GEC) as it leads the development of General Education Learning Outcomes (GELOs).

- Ensure that class schedule planning for all typical first-year courses is coordinated, and that there is sufficient course availability.
- Encourage departments to include an explicit orientation to the major (the nature of the field, and the career options it presents) in introductory major's courses.
- **Miscellaneous** – A handful of items that did not fit under the headings of the seven other themes.
 - Complete the development of the First-Year Philosophy Statement.