

Our committee was charged with developing a “philosophy for the first year” that:

- *Approaches the first year in ways that are intentional and informs relevant institutional policies and practices.*

A vision that is:

- *Explicit, clear, and easily understood; consistent with the institutional mission; widely disseminated; and, as appropriate, reflects a consensus of campus constituencies.*

Specifically, we sought to:

- *Identify the most relevant current policies, practices, and programs at ASU (and specifically in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences) that forward our philosophy for the first year;*
- *Identify ways in which our philosophy for the first year is currently communicated; and*
- *Provide recommendations for what should be our college’s philosophy on the first year, how this philosophy should influence the way the first year experience is organized, and how this philosophy should be communicated.*

Our committee’s work

The committee met six times from November 2014 to April 2015. In preparation for those meetings, committee members reviewed various artifacts and evidence relative to ASU’s and our college’s philosophy for the first year including: results from the *Foundations of Excellence* surveys of ASU administrators, CLAS faculty/staff, and our college freshmen; the programs/policies detailed in the *Current Practices Inventory (CPI)*; along with various departmental, college, and university website and print materials related to the first year experience.

We also dedicated parts of each meeting to provide opportunities for our committee members to learn more about specific college and university initiatives focused on student success and improving the first-year experience. Meetings included presentations and discussions on the following ASU/CLAS programs and policies:

- CLAS Residential College Program
- New Student Orientation
- ASU 101 (our 1-credit freshman success course required of all first-year students) and fall semester class “blocks” (2 to 4 courses linked as part of student’s course schedules)
- eAdvisor and ASU’s “Critical Tracking” policies
- Project LEAD – a pilot program centered around a fall semester 7-credit linked course “block” targeted toward our university’s least academically prepared freshmen
- CLAS Early Start Program – a 2-week residential “pre-move-in” program, disciplinarily-focused and launched last fall by three academic units within CLAS
- Various course support programs currently available through ASU – tutoring, supplemental instruction, writing center support
- First-Year Success (FYS) Coaching Program

In addition, we reviewed the previous five years of institutional data on first- to second-year retention for CLAS undergraduates, disaggregated by important subpopulations of CLAS freshmen, including:

- CI score “bands” (CI refers to “Calculated Index” – a measure of academic preparedness based on a combination of high school grades and SAT or ACT test scores)
- Race and ethnicity
- First-generation status
- Financial need (specifically Pell Grant eligibility)
- Residency status (Arizona resident, out-of-state student, or international student)

Finally, committee members shared their expertise and experiences participating in or helping to develop and lead programs and policies in support of first-year students sponsored through their particular academic and administrative units.

ASU’s vision for the *New American University*

Arizona State University has a strong and well-articulated vision, most clearly communicated by our university president Michael Crow (now in his 13th year at Arizona State) through his conception of ASU as the *New American University*.

The central principles of the *New American University* are summarized through the *ASU Charter*:

ASU is a comprehensive public research university, measured not by whom we exclude, but rather by whom we include and how they succeed: advancing research and discovery of public value: and assuming fundamental responsibility for the economic, social, cultural and overall health of the communities it serves.

The various elements of the *ASU Charter* and the vision for the *New American University* are shared with ASU faculty, staff, and student widely through various university reports, news articles, presentations, along with specific faculty/staff/student vignettes housed on our university’s websites (see for example: newamericanuniversity.asu.edu).

This vision for the *New American University* was articulated more thoroughly through a recently published book authored by President Crow and William Dabars:

- *Designing the New American University*. Johns Hopkins University Press, April 2015.

Through news articles and other media outlets, the cutting-edge reforms currently underway at ASU are also gaining national recognition by growing bodies of policy makers and diverse audiences beyond our institution. Articles about some of these efforts published in just the past month include:

- “Reshaping Arizona State, and the Public Model,” *New York Times*.
- “Arizona State University to Offer Freshman Year Online, For Credit,” *The Washington Post*.
- “Barista to Bachelor’s: Starbucks-ASU Partnership Offers Full 4-Year Online College Degrees,” *Forbes Magazine*.
- “Arizona State University in Talks to Take Over Thunderbird School,” *Wall Street Journal*.

Measuring success

The *ASU Charter* and its accompanying *Mission and Goals* (newamericanuniversity.asu.edu/about/asu-charter-and-goals) provide the framework and metrics for evaluating our institution’s success. Listed here are the goals as they relate to ASU’s mission of providing *academic excellence* and *accessibility* for our students:

- Maintain the fundamental principle of accessibility to all students qualified to study at a research university
- Maintain university accessibility to match Arizona’s socioeconomic diversity
- Improve freshmen persistence to 90 percent

- Enhance university graduation rate to 75 to 80 percent and 25,000 graduates
- Enhance quality while reducing the cost of a degree
- Enroll 100,000 online and distance education degree seeking students
- Enhance linkages with community colleges so as to expand baccalaureate degree production to national leadership levels
- Enhance measured student development and individual student learning to national leadership levels

By all accounts, the tenets of the *New American University* provide the driving principles behind the policies and practices adopted at our institution and serve as the underpinnings for ASU's philosophy for the first year experience.

Access and academic excellence: a shared institutional vision

As was discussed in several of our committee meetings, the mission and goals that Arizona State University has established for itself are well recognized and broadly shared by faculty and staff. In fact, a number of the committee members commented that a main reason why they came to ASU was because of this vision and in particular the institution's central focus on undergraduate access and student success.

The *Foundations of Excellence* survey of faculty and staff provides additional evidence for the widespread "buy-in" for ASU's student-centric mission. On the two survey questions* that ask:

- To what degree is a formalized institutional philosophy for the first/freshman year of college valuable?
- To what degree do you believe that this institution is committed to the success of first-year students?

Remarkably, fewer than 10 percent of the surveyed faculty and staff responded "Not at all" or "Slight."

* Note: For these questions and others in the faculty/staff survey, respondents were provided five response options – "Not at all," "Slight," "Moderate," "High," and "Very high."

Uncertainty as to how the ASU vision and mission are being achieved

There appears to be greater uncertainty, however, as to how the ASU mission and vision operate in practice. As the results from the *Foundations of Excellence* survey show, faculty and staff seem somewhat unsure as to how ASU's goals for access and academic excellence translate to programs and policy in support of first-year students or what those goals specifically mean for their academic/administrative units or for them personally.

On the three questions that ask:

- To what degree has a department/unit philosophy for the first/freshman year of college been communication to you?
- To what degree does the institution operate from a commonly held philosophy for the first/freshman year?
- To what degree does your department/unit operate from a commonly held philosophy for the first/freshman year?

Between 30 to 40 percent of administrators, faculty, and staff indicated "Not at all" or "Slight."

Our CLAS faculty appear to be *particularly* "out of the loop" in terms of their involvement in this work. When asked:

- To what degree has an institutional philosophy for the first/freshman year of college been communicated to you?

Just over 50 percent of CLAS faculty indicated either “Not at all” or “Slight.” By contrast, only 23 percent of professional staff (that is, student affairs professionals, academic advisors, etc.) responded “Not at all” or “Slight” and only 9 percent of administrators chose those two response categories.

First-year student success: everyone’s job and no one’s responsibility

The discussions at our committee meetings echoed the findings from the *Foundations of Excellence* survey of faculty and staff. In fact, when reviewing the *Current Practices Inventory*, a number of the committee members indicated surprise at the variety of programs currently in place. They also expressed concern that they had not been involved with (or even heard of) many of them.

They also shared some level of unease at the number of different administrative units involved. With over a dozen different offices offering programs in support of CLAS freshmen (this in addition to the efforts of the college and our academic units), committee members voiced worry over the difficulties associated with program coordination, duplication and waste of time and financial resources, and doubt in the overall effectiveness of the myriad reform efforts underway.

Our philosophy for the first-year

With the backdrop of ASU’s vision for the *New American University* along with the evidence provided through the *Foundations of Excellence* surveys, institutional data on retention for CLAS undergraduates, and the *Current Practices Inventory*, our committee spent the majority of its time discussing what elements *should* be included in our philosophy of the first-year along with possible new/revised programs and policies to help achieve our goals for the freshman year.

FOUR IMPORTANT ELEMENTS

1. Foster in students a “gestalt” or “big picture” view of the opportunities available at Arizona State University and in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

Provide CLAS undergraduates with a metacognitive perspective on what college really means, why their decisions matter, and how to make best use all that Arizona State University and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences have to offer. Excite their intellectual curiosity and show them how the various pieces of their education fit together. Provide them the tools to appreciate, navigate, and seek out meaningful curricular and co-curricular connections. Clarify and help students appreciate how the knowledge and skills they are learning apply to their interests, possible career paths, and real world circumstances.

Rationale and evidence

We believe that connecting with students early on about why they are here, what they hope to accomplish, and encouraging them to see how their course and extracurricular choices fit into larger frameworks (from the beginnings of their academic careers) are critical to success.

Too often, students regard the courses they must take to fulfill general education and requirements in their degrees as just a series of hoops they must jump through. The result, students become more concerned with their grades and getting things “out of the way” rather than with the content of their learning. For many CLAS students, the various pressures on them – family responsibilities, awareness of the competitive nature of the job market, financial stresses that can lead to excessive work hours, and so forth – can deadened students’ interests in learning and leave too little time to devote to their courses or planning for their academic careers.

Students need to be provided with a “future orientation” regarding their learning – supporting their understandings as to *why* college engagement (both inside and outside of the classroom) is so important

(for example, the value of resume building through doing research, participating in study abroad, involvement in our CLAS Residential College and academic unit clubs, building networks through internships, etc.).

Unfortunately, as data from the *Foundations of Excellence* survey suggest, we currently are not offering students enough opportunities for exploration or self-reflection, or adequate preparation for careers or their futures as citizens. Faculty and staff indicate that the institution isn't doing as good of a job as it could in providing our students the knowledge or opportunities for "personal growth" (question 50), achieving "life goals" (question 54), experiencing "out-of-class learning opportunities" (question 56), or connecting them to people "outside of this institution" (question 41).

Students expressed similarly negative responses with the degree to which faculty, staff, and advisors have helped them to examine "personal reasons" for getting a college education (question 62), how college can help achieve "life goals" (question 34), how to become a more "involved member of the community" (question 65), or how they might "contribute to the betterment of society" (question 66).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. We recommend that the college support and encourage academic departments to work across academic/administrative units and disciplinary lines to create more integrative first-year learning opportunities (for example, linked courses, thematic course blocks, interdisciplinary team-taught classes, etc.) and to connect these new classroom experiences more closely with co-curricular and extracurricular opportunities available in their units and at ASU, and to future career possibilities.
- b. We recommend that each academic unit redesign their various ASU 101 courses and first-year seminars to include information about resources and opportunities specific to their majors: opportunities for job shadowing and internships, research and study abroad options, chances for students to network with alums and prospective employers, and information about potential career paths.
- c. We recommend that the college and academic units make strategic investments to expand the number of available engagement opportunities to make sure every student has access to a rich array of curricular and co-curricular learning experiences inside and outside of the classroom.
- d. We recommend that academic units look for opportunities to connect their freshmen with successful upper class students in their majors as early as possible. Peer-to-peer mentoring (through leading small group discussions; helping as undergraduate TAs in ASU 101 course, freshman seminars, and introductory courses to the major; presenting on student panels; serving as peer advisors; etc.) may be the most effective way to motivate new students and provide our CLAS freshmen deep and meaningful understandings of the possibilities available at ASU.
- e. We recommend that the college and our academic units make improvements in the electronic communications we send to students about the various enrichment opportunities available. Emails, as we all know, are not always read, especially when they contain too much material. Ways to make notifications more tailored to specific student interests need to be explored. Online calendars should be more easily searchable by topic and students should be provided with a more complete set of electronic links to items of particular importance to them. These should easily accessible from myASU and organized in a way that makes them clear, attractive, and user-friendly.

2. Ensure that students are in the "right" places academically.

Create a comprehensive advising and evaluation system to ensure that undergraduates are in the best majors suited for their interests and particular skill sets. Right now, more than a third of CLAS

undergraduates will change their majors during their academic career. When it is clear that a student needs to transition to another major, we need to make sure that the movement between academic units is seamless, coordinated, and supported. Integrate this system into key courses (for example, ASU 101, other freshman seminars, introductory courses to the major, etc.) within the first-year curriculum.

Rationale and evidence

We believe that the college can do better to ensure that our all of first-year students find an academic home that best suits their goals and talents. Unfortunately and all too frequently, students – particularly those who are the first in their families to attend college or university – come to ASU without a realistic picture of student life, workload expectations of their courses, the consequences of irresponsible behavior, etc. They are often underprepared in core academic areas and lack a deep understanding of the rigors or focus of the majors they have chosen. The result, these students receive a rude awakening when they struggle on exams and other assignments, uncertain then where to turn for help.

The results from our retention analyses support these beliefs. First-generation college goers, students of color, less academically prepared students, students with higher financial stresses (Pell Grant eligible students), and so forth all experience significantly lower success rates (fall semester GPAs, fall-to-fall retention rates, six-year graduation rates, etc.). Our faculty and staff, through the *Foundations of Excellence* survey, echo these results as well suggesting that we currently do not serve these student populations well (for example, see responses to faculty/staff survey questions 44 and 48).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. We recommend that admitted students and their families receive more detailed information about student life, academic services, expectations for the time and work effort needed to be successful in college courses, along with the importance of enrichment activities to long-term success (internships, research experiences, etc.). Important especially in the case of first generation students, where providing their families with an accurate picture of what university education entails and the benefits it can provide (well in advance of their arrival to campus) could narrow the gap between outcomes of first generation college-goers and students whose parents attended university. Ideally, much of this information would be major-specific.
- b. We recommend that placement and diagnostic tests be improved to produce more accurate and actionable information. Students should receive transitional advising after these tests if the outcomes suggest that they might be in the wrong degree program. Students should be made comfortable with the idea that it is okay to reconsider their major, and that their choice to do so would be met by their advisor and faculty with support and non-judgmentally.
- c. We recommend the development of stronger and more formalized links among our advising offices – creating an intentional “hand-off” and a continuity of support for students when they transition between academic majors.
- d. We recommend expanding enrollment capacities in programs designed to ease the transition to college (for example, CLAS Early Start Program, LEAD Program, “exploratory” majors, etc.) along with the “loosening” of critical tracking requirements (for example, start students in Track Term “0”) for less academically prepared freshmen. We need to provide students the time and opportunity to remediate their academic deficiencies and experience success completing college-level work without having to change majors or suffer the stigma of being labeled as “off-track.”

3. Build stronger networks among faculty/academic advisors and CLAS students.

Create an intentional first-year curriculum – courses and experiences outside of the classroom that allow students to get to know faculty and advisors to a greater extent. Select faculty and staff to teach ASU 101, other first-year seminars, and key introductory courses to the major who are engaged, enthusiastic, and want to work with first-year students. Find ways to recognize and reward faculty and staff for these important engagement activities and service to their units.

Rationale and evidence

We believe that faculty and academic support staff at the unit level need to “own” the first-year successes of the students in their majors. Departments and schools must develop a purposeful and academically rich first-year experience in their majors – selecting the right people at the right time to mentor and engage with their students and connect them to the academic resources and opportunities within their units and more broadly at ASU.

Evidence from the *Foundations of Excellence* surveys suggest that faculty and staff indicate less satisfaction in the amount of individualized attention we currently provide to our first-year students (question 55). They also express more negative attitudes when asked the degree to which “involvement with first-year students” is considered important by “institutional leaders” (question 62) and their “colleagues” (question 64).

Students for their part voiced similarly negative responses to questions that asked how well the institution connected them to ASU “faculty and staff” (question 43) and the degree to which course instructors “encouraged students to participate in course-related, out-of-class, for example, lectures, concerts, exhibits” (question 77) or “providing individual attention” (question 69).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. We recommend that CLAS units link their ASU 101 courses and other freshman seminars intentionally to the introductory courses for their majors. These one-credit options should be developed and team taught by faculty, advisors, and peer undergraduate leaders and organized to provide undergraduates knowledge and access to the curricular and co-curricular opportunities within their academic units and more broadly at ASU.
- b. We recommend that each academic unit “re-imagine” the content and structure for their introductory courses to the major. These redesigned courses (targeted specifically to undergraduate majors) must be developed and led by faculty, enrollments need to be small (when possible), they should include break-out sections and other opportunities for students to gather in smaller cohorts, and the courses should be resource rich learning environments (for example, experiential or project based, infused with opportunities for active learning and engagement with peers, assigned significant support by TAs or undergraduate peer mentors, etc.). Faculty who are chosen to teach these courses must be demonstrated outstanding teachers, experts in their subject matter, passionate about their disciplines, and invested in supporting students as they transition into college.
- c. We recommend that the college and academic units explore ways to reward faculty who dedicate themselves to teaching introductory courses to their majors and incorporate this form of service more fully into the promotion and merit review processes.
- d. We recommend that the college sponsor regular workshops and gatherings for faculty and staff who are working with first-year students to meet, share best practices, and engage in sustained and supported professional development opportunities (providing monies to attend conferences on the

first year experience, inviting national experts to campus, conducting research on student success, writing reports/journal articles to promote initiatives that are effective, etc.).

4. Integrate student services and identify obstacles earlier.

Evaluate student services programs for their effectiveness and efficiency; avoid program “siloing” and duplication of effort; adapt, integrate, or expand services as needed. Create a common, centralized informational database for faculty, staff, and students, focused on providing students solutions. Use early and timely indicators to forecast potential difficulties and obstacles to student success. Communicate this information quickly and effectively to faculty, advisors, and other student support staff.

Rationale and evidence

We believe that ASU has made significant investments developing programs and policies to support student success. As our review of the *Current Practices Inventory* suggests, there are a wide range and growing number of services focused specifically on supporting first-year students. Unfortunately, these programs are not always well coordinated, often don’t work in tandem with one another, and are largely unknown and unconnected to the work of our faculty in the classroom.

The decentralized nature of CLAS as a college makes coordination of student services difficult. Currently, there are 19 advising offices in the college comprising anywhere from 1 to 9 advisors per office. This variance in the number of advisors creates differences in terms of the stress experienced during peak advising times and during staff absences. The decentralized structure and differences in staffing levels also create widespread unevenness in terms of the quality and range of services provided by major (for example, internship advising, career counseling, access to research opportunities, etc.).

Additionally, with so many separate advising offices, our campus partners (Financial Aid, Career Services, Residential Life, University Academic Success Programs, tutoring, Disability Resources for Students) simply find working with CLAS too complicated and logistically difficult. As a result, the various programs and services students *could* access in the college and at ASU appear (at best) as a patchwork quilt – managed by multiple offices, located in all areas of campus, uncoordinated and unconnected in their functions, rarely sharing meaningful information, and too often isolated in how they connect with students.

Our faculty and staff appear to be particularly frustrated with the current design. Questions that asked the degree to which the institution effectively organized itself to develop an integrate first year experience (through routine communications among discrete first-year functions and through collaborations between academic and student affairs units –questions 29 and 30) were some of the most negative responses provided in the entire survey.

There was significant variability as well in the degree to which students understand how all of the support pieces fit together. While CLAS freshmen appear to know where to find help with coursework (tutoring, other forms of academic support, etc.) (question 52) and where to go to have administrative questions answered (financial aid, course registration, tuition payments, etc.) (question 50), they seemed to be less sure about where to go if they want to be involved with institution-sponsored organizations or events (question 54) or to get help with non-academic matters (time management, family matters, etc.) (question 53).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. We recommend that the college explore ways to create more student-centric service models by consolidating some aspects of CLAS academic advising along with other important student services functions (financial aid counseling, study abroad advising, career counseling, internship or research

exploration, etc.) into larger advising “hubs.” Any redesign will need to maintain the strong ties our advisors have with our academic units, to majors, and disciplinary specific opportunities (research, internships, etc.). These larger hubs would provide us the opportunity to co-locate essential student support services into convenient, one-stop settings and could be formed based upon natural affinities between academic units, disciplinary areas, or service units.

- b.** We recommend developing an early warning system that instructors in ASU 101 courses, freshmen seminars, and introductory courses to the major along with advisors and other student support staff could use to identify students who may be struggling (academically, financially, socially, etc.). Too often, students who encounter academic, financial, or other difficulties do not seek assistance until it is too late to prevent negative consequences. Through this early warning system, information would be immediately shared with the appropriate academic and administrative offices so that targeted and individualized support could be provided to students in need.
- c.** We recommend that the college appoint a standing committee on the first-year experience. This group would report to the dean and meet regularly. The group would be comprised of faculty, advisors and other student services professional, CLAS and other ASU administrators, and students and would be charged with prioritizing and suggesting ways to implement recommendations advanced through the First Year Forward initiative, communicating these efforts widely and soliciting feedback from the various constituencies in CLAS (faculty, staff, and students) on their effectiveness, and seeking out additional ways to improve student success and the overall first-year experience in our college.