Academic Senate of the California State University
Academic Affairs Committee

Access to Excellence – Commitment 6:
Preliminary Review and Recommendations

Introduction

The California State University's strategic plan, Access to Excellence (A2E), first composed and approved in 2008, is updated biennially with summaries of key initiatives and outcomes that have been achieved or modified in the intervening years. The next progress report will commence in Fall 2015. With that upcoming report in mind, the Academic Affairs Committee has developed a preliminary review and recommendations concerning those parts of the plan relevant to the purview of the committee.

Of the eight stated commitments in Access to Excellence, four deal most directly with academic goals of the CSU:
Commitment 1) reduce existing achievement gaps;
Commitment 6) enhance student opportunities for "active learning";
Commitment 7) enhance student opportunities for global awareness; and
Commitment 8) act on the CSU's responsibility to meet post-baccalaureate needs, including those of working professionals.

Of these four commitments, the Committee believes it is most appropriate and critical to report, and to provide advice on, the Commitment related to active learning (Commitment 6). It is worth noting that preliminary results from CSU Fullerton, detailed below, demonstrate success in achieving the goal of reducing existing achievement gaps (Commitment 1), as well as in partially achieving the goal of global awareness (Commitment 7). Thus, the committee will concentrate on Commitment 6 concerning active learning, understanding that it is something of an umbrella goal that can encompass other Commitments of Access to Excellence. What follows is a report that suggests some of the achievements in realizing a commitment to active learning, and advice as we work towards the next biennial review.

Preliminary Review

Some of the initiatives that encompassed "Active Learning" in the 2008 A2E document have evolved into "High Impact Practices." These kinds of educational practices are aimed at increasing

student engagement and more efficient and effective learning. The Association of American Colleges & Universities has listed ten High-Impact Educational Practices (HIPs) that have provided the model by which many campuses, including those of the California State University, have developed their efforts toward realizing some of the opportunities for active learning. Those ten practices are:

      1) First-Year Seminars and Experiences

      2) Common Intellectual Experiences

      3) Learning Communities

      4) Writing-Intensive Courses

      5) Collaborative Assignments and Projects

      6) Undergraduate Research

      7) Diversity/Global Learning

      8) Service Learning, Community-Based Learning

      9) Internships

      10) Capstone Courses and Projects

CSU Fullerton has provided partial reports (2014) on two High-Impact Practices they have initiated. Kuh (2008) recommended that students participate in at least two HIPs while they are in college, and CSUF used that recommendation for this initial report, concentrating on **freshman learning communities** and **supplemental instruction.** CSUF, working particularly to narrow the achievement gap between underrepresented and non-underrepresented students in high-risk gateway courses, focused on the above practices because they "are theoretically based on [the] collaboratively-disposed culture of historically underrepresented students."

Data that tracked student progress toward graduation revealed "significant and persistent effects" of **freshmen learning communities** (FLC). Significant differences in both one-year and two-year retention rates were observed between participants and non-participants. In addition, the disparity in six-year graduation rates between participants as opposed to non-participants was ten percentage points. These differences persisted even after controlling for previous GPA and for parent education; thus, the interaction effects between underrepresented students and FLC participation was a significant predictor of student success in terms of retention and graduation. However, all participants in FLC, regardless of ethnicity, showed significant improvement in retention, graduation, and college GPA. Thus, although the CSUF report called freshman learning communities a "culturally-responsive practice," it is clear that its benefit is evident for both underrepresented and non-underrepresented freshmen.

This across-the-board benefit was also the case for **supplemental instruction** (SI). Supplemental instruction was provided in a Biology high-risk gateway course. Course success and grade were examined, and the results confirmed prior research findings concerning SI. In a collaborative group learning environment—an environment that is believed to align with the cultural characteristics of underrepresented students—SI was shown to be a practice that "promotes student active engagement in learning, peer-to-peer interaction, and peer-to-leader interaction." The positive outcomes of SI persisted even after controlling for student previous GPA. This HIP, as reported in this initial data, helped to facilitate student learning outcomes and reduce the achievement gap for underrepresented students.

Additionally, the CSUF report contained positive results for some other academic and co-curricular practices deemed to be High-Impact Practices: **Study Abroad programs, freshman scholarship athletes,** and **on-campus housing.** Positive results were reported also for students in one cohort of graduates who had participated in **undergraduate research**. Those who had participated consequently enrolled in graduate school at a significantly higher rate than those who did not. Finally, a mandatory freshman orientation course (Thtr 4788.9) for Theatre/Dance freshmen cohorts for three years, beginning in Fall 2010, revealed no difference in one- and two-year retention rates, or in the percentage of students in good academic standing after one semester, compared to those who, rather than taking that course, took UNIV 100, a general freshman orientation course. However, the first-year GPA of Thtr 4788.9 students was higher than that of other comparison groups.

In addition to the efforts to gather data on High Impact Practices, the Accountability Plan Update issued in May 2014 indicates some specific initiatives being worked on with regard to active learning. Those initiatives are: STEM Collaboratives; work toward increasing student participation in service learning and community engagement; the Course Redesign with Technology Program; sustainability efforts such as "Campus as a Living Lab"; the Graduation Initiative in its efforts to promote and highlight active learning in the CSU, especially in its effect on closing achievement gaps; and the appointment of a new Assistant Vice Chancellor for Research Initiatives and Partnerships who will promote active learning and particularly undergraduate research.

Recommendations

These reports so far provide some evidence of the success and effectiveness of High Impact Practices. Moreover, the list of active learning strategies being employed on campuses indicates the commitment of the CSU to improving student learning outcomes. In moving forward, we would like to provide the following recommendations for consideration and implementation:

- We recommend that the CSU, in order to effectively discover which practices actually contribute to student success, be much more robust in its research methods and data collection and analysis. What we have to date in the way of results for the A2E update due this year is not enough to say with certainty that Commitment 6 is being fulfilled. Additionally, while the level of activities instituted and implemented is high, participation and success are two different effects, and we must start trying to discover the latter so that we understand where our resources should go.

- We recommend also that retention and graduation rates not be the major and certainly not the sole measure of the success of High Impact Practices and active learning. What these practices are intended to do is improve student learning and to promote intellectual, social and moral development. Global measures such as graduation rates or job success are a proxy, rather than a direct, measure of student learning.

- We are happy to see that, included among the expected outcomes from reports and data to be gathered in 2015, are "rigorous definitions and taxonomies" in order to gather data on service learning, technology-enhanced learning, and faculty-mentored student learning.

The definitions of these and other active learning activities do need to be developed, and by CSU faculty in conjunction with directors and administrators. This will help to ensure that these curricular initiatives bear the imprint of faculty expertise, and demonstrate the governance of faculty over the curriculum of the CSU. It is important that we be mindful about the following criteria in relation to active learning for student success: 1) course classification (undergraduate vs. graduate enrollments based on an offering as a lecture, seminar, or supervision course); 2) faculty workload (do supervision courses such as internships and culminating experiences courses count for WTUs?); 3) space management needs (faculty offices, creative arts, writing centers and laboratories, science laboratories, studios, sustainability sites; and 4) technology infrastructure (availability and accessibility of computers, computer refresh programs, videoconferences, etc.).

- What the results, as well as the list of practices listed above suggest most clearly is the need for faculty to have close contact with students. (Kuh 2006, 2008) has demonstrated that student success depends on the amount and quality of interaction between faculty and students. We recommend that the CSU reaffirm its commitment to hiring faculty, and thus to reducing the student-faculty ratio. AS-3207-15, passed by the ASCSU in May 2015, calls for a reduction in student-faculty ratio to 18:1 over the next 10 years. This goal is driven by the faculty's awareness that student success through active learning requires such a ratio.

- We recommend also that the CSU gather data that accounts for the commitment of time and expertise by faculty in the successful implementation of active learning. This data should help in determining the ways in which those faculty should be recognized and compensated for the commitment involved in, for instance, mentoring undergraduate research and service learning projects, in developing and enhancing sustainability curricula, or in developing successful online courses.

- We recommend that the CSU be prepared to offer the resources beyond faculty hiring to provide effective High Impact Practices for students. For instance, a campus cannot provide supplemental instruction without the resources to hire leaders or teachers for the SI sessions. Likewise, there is a need for faculty development, whether in the way of release time or stipends, in order to institute and carry on the linked learning that goes on in FLC experiences. The same needs exist for the mentoring and community collaboration necessary to offer service learning courses. Targeted resources are efficiently used when they are provided for the implementation and enhancement of High-Impact Practices.

- We recommend that it always be kept in mind that High Impact Practices and active learning take place every day in our classrooms through our curricula, our teaching, our one-on-one conversations with students, and our uncounted, more intimate time outside of class in conferencing with students to help them improve their learning and achieve success. We note that the second phase of CSU Fullerton's effort to report on High Impact Practices includes an "app" for students to record, with faculty verification, when an active, engaged learning moment has taken place. While it is uncertain yet whether the data gathered from this "app" will be reliable, we applaud the effort to record in some way the

interactions between faculty and students that would otherwise escape notice in the research we do on the success of active learning.

We hope that the data for the success of these initiatives, when more fully provided, will confirm other research information showing that learning is enhanced when such activities and methods are used. The data, we believe, will indicate that active learning should be supported with resources and the active commitment of administrators, faculty and staff of the CSU. As faculty, we understand how such learning holds the promise for our students to gain that which we work for every day in the classroom. Active learning should provide the capacity to increase critical thinking, written and oral communication skills, quantitative reasoning, and a sense in our students of a social and moral investment in their communities.

Respectfully submitted:

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