

HIT THE GROUND RUNNING

STUDENT-CENTERED ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

Submitted by the Student-Centered Academic Excellence Committee

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INTRODUCTION

This white paper has two objectives: (a) providing specific examples to stimulate stakeholders' discussion of possible strategic objectives under the broad goal of *achieving student-centered academic excellence*; and (b) providing specific evaluation criteria to set some broad parameters for objectives proposed by stakeholders as part of this strategic planning discussion. These objectives inform the paper with its two primary sections: (a) *five* possible strategic objectives, and (b) *nine* possible criteria for evaluating proposed strategic objectives.

POSSIBLE STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

Enhance Student Preparation for FIU

Strategic efforts to enhance the preparedness of students coming to FIU would seem to benefit from thinking in terms of *developing networks* rather than *building pipelines*. The network metaphor properly emphasizes the importance of creating and maintaining complex, dynamic systems of relationships in FIU's communities rather than the simple linear transmission of students between institutions.

The success of a university is as much dependent on the current students as on the prospective students. In addition to promoting its own success, FIU is also dedicated to increasing the opportunities for success of its local community, in part through education. Thus, in order to ensure FIU's ongoing success and to increase opportunities for educating the Miami community, it is vital to focus on both middle and high school students and future transfer students from community colleges and other institutions.

FIU is currently engaged in several pre-collegiate programs, including Partners in Progress, Upward Bound, and GEARUP Homestead, among others. Thus far, a range of positive outcomes can be identified in each program. For instance, FIU students in the Invitational Scholars scholarship program, who completed two summers of Partners in Progress while in high school, have higher-than-average FIU GPAs and graduation rates. Likewise, GEARUP Homestead participants have a 100 percent college application rate and are equally proficient in applying for financial aid.

In addition to strengthening our existing pre-collegiate programs, particular attention must center on FIU's foremost feeder middle and high schools. This involves having closer relations with schools, such as Miami Coral Park Senior High School and Southwest Miami Senior High School, as well as studying the recurring attributes and features of all students admitted to the University in order to identify incoming students' areas of need.

Specific ways to improve relationships with feeder high schools and middle schools include: (a) increasing parent and student financial aid education, (b) emphasizing the need to take math every year in school, (c) promoting time management and study skills, (d) intentionally creating relationships with the principals of feeder middle and high schools, and (e) celebrating FIU High School Day with both public and private school counselors.

Similarly, we must work with Miami Dade College and Broward College, our two primary transfer feeder schools, and with FIU transfer students in general. For example, this work could include: (a) emphasizing the importance of taking proper course sequences in compliance with agreements between FIU and community colleges; (b) working more closely with Dual Degree students to maximize success, perhaps by finding ways to make them feel more a part of the University (e.g., FIU clubs at Miami-Dade College and Broward College so as to have early engagement of our future transfer students); and (c) bringing together discipline-specific faculty from MDC and FIU for greater communication about teaching and course expectations.

Enhance Learning through New Pedagogies

The nature of students' experiences in their courses is clearly a major factor in their retention and progress toward graduation. The influence of this experience is particularly robust at urban universities, such as FIU, where many students commute and courses are often the primary point of contact for the university with its students.

A fundamental focus of any university intent on enhancing student academic success must be on intentionally improving pedagogy at the university.

Of course, good teachers must first and foremost know their subjects adequately--basic content mastery being a fundamentally necessary, but not sufficient, characteristic of good teachers.

However, this emphasis on the teacher's content mastery easily overshadows the development of other essential characteristics of good teachers.

Good teachers see themselves as facilitators of learning rather than disseminators of knowledge.

They focus on student learning (where neural networks in students' brains actually change). They do not reify knowledge and act as if knowledge can be transmitted from teacher to student as if it were an object. They understand that learning is something that the student must do and that the good teacher's role is to facilitate that learning in the student.

This approach means that good teachers must know what it is they are trying to facilitate (*viz.*, learning) before attempting to facilitate it, and therefore, an explicit theory of learning should inform their curricular and instructional design.

So in addition to content mastery, FIU's teaching faculty must also have a deep understanding of learning and how to facilitate it in students.

Fortunately, a good deal is known about learning and how to facilitate it, and FIU should strategically support broad instructional development initiatives which help faculty to learn more about teaching effectively and which ultimately support student academic success.

Broadly speaking, teaching faculty need to learn to use ***active learning pedagogies***. Programs which support this development in faculty should be created. Faculty participation should be explicitly rewarded.

This instructional development could occur within the context of curricular initiatives and related programs. For example, FIU faculty who are teaching the pilot Global Initiative courses (as part of the SACS Quality Enhancement Program) have had the opportunity to learn the instructional strategies of Team-Based Learning, a powerful new pedagogy for using active learning in large enrollment courses. The increasing occurrence of large enrollment courses at FIU creates opportunities for faculty to learn new pedagogies for these large enrollment courses.

Other programs and curricular initiatives which provide excellent contexts in which to promote the learning of active learning pedagogies by FIU teaching faculty include: (a) mentored undergraduate research and creative work, (b) community-based (or service) learning, (c) study abroad, and (d) online learning.

Enhance Learning through New Curricula

Curriculum revision is inevitably interlinked with the adoption of new pedagogies because the introduction of innovative teaching will incorporate and generate innovative curricula, and vice versa. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify numerous approaches to curriculum reform and

improvement that might respond to the overarching objective of enhancing student-centered academic excellence. These might include the following:

- Improving the University Core Curriculum to be more cohesive, with greater interdisciplinarity and expanded global learning components.
- Integrating the curriculum so that students, while still able to take a variety of course offerings, can see the links among courses and follow related networks to build a cohesive undergraduate education (this approach is called “integrative learning” by the American Association of Colleges & Universities and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching).
- Expanding curricular learning communities such as Freshmen Interest Groups (FIGs), cohort programs, the Honors College, or (Quantifying Biology in the Classroom (QBIC)).
- Developing interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary courses that allow students to learn outside departmental silos.
- Building research into all courses and specifically training students to critically analyze and make appropriate judgments about online research sources.
- Creating widespread opportunities for mentored undergraduate research and creative activities.
- Aggressively matching students with internships and other hands-on learning experiences.
- Establishing mechanisms for team-teaching, especially across the disciplines.
- Injecting global and civic learning throughout the curriculum.
- Expanding study abroad opportunities for more students.
- Further incorporating service learning into the curriculum.
- Reviewing degree structures for possible 3+3 and 4+1 programs that can energize top students, minimize costs, and help students with clear career goals move toward them efficiently.

Enhance Learning through Technology

The proper use of today's learning technologies can be invaluable in achieving a student-centered approach to teaching and learning. For example, Learning Management Systems (such as Blackboard) leverage the Internet to enable content delivery and communication outside the traditional classroom. Also, whether through lectures, notes, presentations, demonstrations, discussions, or simulations, a wide variety of technological tools exist to enhance all types of content delivery. The resulting re-distribution of content to an arena outside the classroom allows an instructor to use class time to implement methods that are project-based and constructivist in nature, focusing on multi-sensory hands-on activities and higher-order thinking. Providing content through the use of multimedia technologies, including electronic text, audio, and video, enables students who learn at different rates and in different styles to review the material as many or as few times as needed. Furthermore, these technologies allow students to access course material at any time and at any place. Technologies can also be used to create a much needed opportunity for students to learn collaboratively from one another. The instructor, as a facilitator, can then use class time to focus on difficult material and higher-order thinking skills, while out of class time can be a venue for more effective study of the material and real world application.

Innovative technologies continue to have a significant impact on higher education. There are many different technologies that can help improve instruction. The following are a just few examples of how some of these technologies can be used in a synchronous or asynchronous setting:

- Lecture capturing technologies such as class capture, green screen recording studio, whiteboard recordings, and interactive software authoring tools can be used to create Web-based Reusable Learning Objects (RLOs) that facilitate learning and can appeal to different learning styles. These technologies allow instructors more flexibility in how to present content and students more flexibility in how they interact with it.
- Second Life is a virtual world that enables its users to interact with each other through avatars. Users can explore, meet other residents, socialize, participate in individual and group activities, or “travel” throughout the world. Applied to education, Second life is an example of a trend toward immersive learning. Educators can develop courses that are not constrained by physical space or the location of their students.
- Digital Repository is an example of software that can be used to maintain a knowledge base of content that can be shared by faculty for use in courses or for professional development. Content sharing will help organize course material, encourage best practices, and improve efficiency by reducing replication of work. A digital

repository can help achieve improved use of technology in courses and at the same time meet the goal of reducing cost.

FIU should increase student learning and reduce instructional cost by, at a minimum, enhancing every course with a course management system.

Raise Retention and Graduation Rates

FIU should develop strategic and tactical frameworks to raise the six-year graduation rate into top quartile of public urban universities.

- Recommended data sources for analysis are: (a) the federal Integrated Postsecondary Education Database System (IPEDS), and (b) the Student Tracker tool (for students who leave FIU prior to completion and finish degrees elsewhere) which is available through the National Student Clearinghouse.
- Currently, the university has posted on the Office of Planning and Institutional Research (OPIE) website a list of 30 Carnegie benchmark institutions for comparison purposes. According to IPEDS, these institutions have an average first year retention rate of 78% and an average 6-year graduation rate of 49%. FIU's first year retention rate (84%) is already within the top quartile; however, its 6-year graduation rate falls below the top quartile by 7%. These data suggest that support for the success of first-year students is currently adequate, while a problem may exist in the support for sophomores and upper division students.

FIU should develop approaches (systems and services) to ensure continuous enhancement of progress-towards-degree through initiatives such as the following:

- Conducting student satisfaction surveys and focus groups to determine what is working and what needs re-engineering or re-emphasis from students' perspectives.
- Establishing a One-Stop Student Academic Support Center. Various units can be organized into a single support stop to enable students to conduct their university business along the enrollment-to-graduation pathway smoothly, efficiently, and effectively. This concept integrates assorted enrollment and financial services in the common cause of welcoming students and ensuring their navigation through the university with ease and comfort. Other functional areas of the university, such as Panther ID services, health services, parking and transportation, international student support services, wellness center, university housing, and dining services can be represented on-site during peak enrollment periods as well.
- Developing degree audit/tracking systems for use by students and advisors.

- Implementing new efficiencies in graduation certification processing, degree posting, and diploma processing.
- Enhancing student-centered activities on campus to engage students in university communities and encourage success.
- Creating a holistic approach to collaboration in assessment and retention planning among faculty, staff, and administration, complementing these with integrated services and messages to encourage student success.

CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING PROPOSED STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

As the FIU community engages the initial strategic vision provided in “Hit the Ground Running,” by President Mark B. Rosenberg, it seems important to identify some fundamental parameters for the discussion. The following discussion describes nine suggested criteria for evaluating proposed strategic objectives. We recommend that suggestions which comply with these criteria should be favored over those that do not.

Actualizes the Overarching Goal (Student-Centered Academic Success)

An obvious criterion for evaluating a proposed strategic objective is the degree to which it addresses the goal of student-centered success, those objectives that clearly address the goal being favored over those that do not.

Actualizes More than One Overarching Goal

Proposed objectives that address the objectives of more than one overarching goal (or pillar of “Hit the Ground Running”) would be favored over those that address only one goal area. For example, enhancing mentored undergraduate research and creative activity is an active learning pedagogy that addresses both the goals of improving student-centered academic success and enhancing the quality and impact of research. Developing an academic affairs unit that helps to administer credit-bearing community-based (or service) learning courses would promote another active learning pedagogy that addresses both the goals of enhancing student-centered academic success and community engagement.

Incorporates Best Practices in Undergraduate or Graduate Education

In 1987, Arthur W. Chickering and Zelda F. Gamson published their research-based, landmark essay, “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education,” in the *American Association for Higher Education Bulletin*. It remains the standard by which excellence is judged in undergraduate education.

Best practices in undergraduate education:

- Encourage contact between students and faculty.
- Develop reciprocity and cooperation among students.
- Encourage active learning.
- Give prompt feedback.
- Emphasize time on task.
- Communicate high expectations.
- Respect diverse talents and ways of learning.

The results of the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate (CID) are synthesized in the volume, *The Formation of Scholars: Rethinking Doctoral Education for the Twenty-First Century* (2008), by George E. Walker, Chris M. Golde, Laura Jones, Andrea Conklin Bueschel and Pat Hutchings. This volume is intended to disseminate lessons learned from the CID, to promote the transformation of graduate and doctoral education in the United States.

Best practices in doctoral education:

- Promote the examination of programmatic purpose and evidence for effectiveness.
- Support the progressive development of research and teaching expertise, as well as professional identity among students.
- Provide integrative and collaborative learning opportunities.
- Emphasize the significance of excellent mentoring from multiple sources.
- Create and sustain vibrant intellectual communities.
- Require engagement on the part of faculty, students, staff, and administration.

Addresses the Needs and Contexts of Students

A student-centered university (or more precisely, a learning-centered university) reverses many of the assumptions upon which institutions of higher learning operate. Proposed objectives should, wherever possible, empirically describe the needs and contexts of FIU students as it relates to their learning and place those needs and contexts foremost in terms of expected outcomes.

Sets Highest Expectations for Faculty Teaching and Student Learning

All proposed objectives should continue to advance and uphold FIU's traditional academic rigor in terms of both faculty instruction and student performance.

Addresses Identified Areas of Concern for Student Learning

Mathematical and writing competencies are the two most frequently mentioned areas of concern for FIU students, but they are by no means the only areas that need attention. Undergraduate students need those skills and others to excel in college and to transfer learning from one area to another. Disciplines that cross boundaries and refuse to function as silos of discrete learning should be encouraged and supported. Recent research shows that students who are encouraged to articulate the transfer from one area to another achieve transfer more successfully than those who are not so encouraged.

Students also need help and support to develop the skills that will make them competitive beyond college. A recent survey of employers (conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management, Partnership for 21st Century Skills, Corporate Voices for Working Families, and Conference Board) ranks skills the employers value most highly in employees with baccalaureate degree preparation. These highly-valued skills include (in rank order): (a) oral communication, (b) teamwork/collaboration, (c) professionalism/work ethic, (d) written communication, (e) critical thinking/problem solving, (f) ethics/social responsibility, (g) leadership, (h) information technology application, (i) creativity/innovation, (j) lifelong learning/self direction, and (k) diversity.

Includes a Data-Based Plan for Assessing the Effect on Student Learning

Proposed objectives that attend to the need to identify data-based assessment plans and procedures should be favored over those that do not. Depending on the initiatives, a multitude of data sources could be used for initial benchmarking, goal setting, and measurement indices. These data sources would need to be identified prior to the implementation of any initiative. An example of various data resources that could be incorporated are often in-house sources such as: PantherSoft, queries, surveys, reports, DataMart, and academic research and recommendations for improvement.

To be able to assess impact on student learning, it may be important to first review basic concepts surrounding assessment. *Assessment for Continuous Quality Improvement* is a *formative* evaluation process designed to support improvement. Assessment is continuous, focused on the improvement of student learning and student development and should keep the institution and its people central.

Fifteen elements have been identified as being needed in order to achieve a culture of assessment: (a) clear general education goals, (b) common use of assessment-related terms, (c) faculty ownership of assessment programs, (d) ongoing professional development, (e) administrative encouragement of assessment, (f) practical assessment plans, (g) systematic assessment, (e) the setting of student learning outcomes for all courses and programs, (f)

comprehensive program review, (g) assessment of co-curricular activities, (h) assessment of overall institutional effectiveness, (i) informational fora about assessment, (j) inclusion of assessment in plans and budgets, (k) celebration of successes, and (l) responsiveness to proposals for new endeavors related to assessment.

Assessment of the impact of any initiative or program should include the impact on student learning. Assessment plans should provide for a methodical process; the process recently implemented at FIU currently is establishing itself as a consistent, on-going, broad-based approach to assessment on student learning. This model requires the following four elements: (a) defined student learning outcome, (b) assessment method, (c) results (data summary and analysis), and (d) use of results for improving student learning. This model provides a framework with which to think about proposed strategic objectives.

Is Sustainable in Terms of Required Resources

Proposed strategic objectives that address the provision of resources that are required to sustain them should be favored over those which do not. Resources should be thought of in the broadest terms possible with due consideration given to the systemic effect of the investment of resources in the proposed objective. What are the true costs of the proposed objective and what are the consequences over time of committing to that objective? What are its benefits? Is the cost-benefit ratio favorable and will it remain favorable over time?

Includes Internal and External Partners

To what extent does the proposed strategic objective embrace networking among potential internal or external partners? The former may include, *inter alia*, university academic units, administrative and service offices, and student and faculty organizations. External partners may include businesses; foundations; governmental entities; medical facilities; other colleges, universities, and schools; think tanks; national and international NGOs; and so forth. Establishing such partnerships can create internships and other curricular options that reach beyond the campus, build internal communities, enhance advancement opportunities, set a fruitful model of teamwork and collaboration, develop potential employers for our graduates, and build political support for FIU initiatives.

CONCLUSION

This white paper intends to stimulate discussion of possible strategic objectives (i.e., encourage divergent thinking) as well as to provide a means for focusing that discussion by providing evaluation criteria (i.e., facilitate convergent thinking). We hope that readers have found themselves engaged by the paper in a productive interplay of divergent and convergent thinking about the strategic future of students' academic success at FIU.