STUDENT SUCCESS TASK FORCE

INSTRUCTION AND LEARNING SUBCOMMITTEE

REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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Examine the efficiency of instructional methods, support systems for faculty, learning technology, classroom facilities, and learning outcomes at the undergraduate level.

Overarching Goals

1. Enhance student success and retention
2. Help create a culture of caring across campus.

Recommendations

1. Enhance instructional quality, particularly in STEM, LEP, and first-year offerings.

The SSTF subcommittee on Learning and Instruction examined data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) as well as institutional data. NSSE data point to declines for SCSU’s first-year students and seniors in perceptions of the overall quality of instructional practices, and in their quantitative reasoning. One report from the Office of Management and Institutional Data, which listed the final grade distribution for all SCSU undergraduate courses for the past 5 years, showed disturbing trends. More than 36 separate courses were listed as having 40% or more of their students earning a D, F, or W (Withdrawal). A striking majority of these courses fall within the Science Technology Engineering Math (STEM) disciplines, including Biology, Earth Science, Computer Science, Exercise Science, and Mathematics, and several were offered at the 100 level, meaning first-year students were likely to be attending these courses. Many of these courses with high rates of failure now populate the Tier 1 of our LEP. And, part-time faculty with limited resources and limited access to space and information on campus typically shoulder the load for introductory courses in most disciplines.

Scholars of Teaching and Learning point to the traditional lecture mode of college instruction as contributing to student disengagement, particularly in STEM disciplines. They cite several more active and collaborative modes of student learning and engagement, including problem-based learning and Community Engaged Scholarship, as providing the hands-on training and real-world connections that college students need for learning, retention, and student success. Simultaneously, dozens of studies across disciplines point to the importance of the affective dimension of learning. If students feel cared about in the classroom, they are more likely to engage, persist, and succeed.

Based on faculty feedback and data generated during a brainstorming session regarding barriers to student success and retention (See APPENDIX A), three key areas of needs have been articulated for professional development. 1.) Understanding students, including their academic and personal backgrounds, and their academic and personal needs and preferences. Also
important is understanding students’ abilities and capacities for learning. Faculty need to know how to teach truly underprepared students (or those who faculty perceive as “not ready for College”), as well as to reduce the prevalence of unprepared students (those who choose not to complete course assignments). This topic also touches on teaching students who may have little initial interest in continuing in either a degree program or a career that deals with their particular discipline. 2.) Understanding best practices in teaching and learning, based on sound research and reflective pedagogy, including effective faculty-student communication, instructional design, and assessment. 3.) Providing all faculty, especially part-time and those teaching first-year students, with resources that can simplify and improve teaching and assessment strategies. This includes using emerging instructional technologies to model innovation in the classroom and help manage faculty workloads.

This faculty feedback should be followed up by a quick on-line survey of Chairs, and full-time and part-time faculty to help clarify their needs and interests, which will further refine professional development objectives. Data gained from the feedback process and through workshop dialogues will help target needs across disciplines and within disciplines.

Ownership and responsibility for student success and contributing to a culture of caring must be shared by faculty across all departments and schools. In the meantime, mechanisms should be devised to ensure instructional excellence. Department Evaluation Committees and/or Chairs should be called upon to examine their department’s student success rates, and when appropriate, create specific plans for attending to improvement. Faculty teaching first-year students should be assessed through their student evaluations of teaching, peer reviews of teaching, as well as student success measures. Along with the aims of the Faculty Annual Activity Review (FAAR) faculty should clearly identify how they have enhanced their teaching over the year.

Faculty who can document contributions to student success, particularly in “high impact practices” like student-faculty research, Community Engaged Scholarship, and community service, should be rewarded. Some rewards, incentives, and public recognition for faculty with documented records of student success should be created. We can also identify faculty currently employing best practices in teaching and learning to serve as potential mentors to other faculty. In addition, a “Student Success Training Manual” for faculty can be developed and distributed to all faculty, especially during New Faculty Orientations.

Faculty Development currently supports a Forum each semester, a Teaching Academy and Curriculum Innovation Retreat each year, Part-Time and Full-Time Faculty Orientation, a New Faculty Mentoring program, numerous workshops throughout each semester, and on-line resources for enhancing instruction. These resources should be promoted more heavily and can easily contain specific content stated above. In addition, Chairs and affinity groups should plan to take advantage of Faculty Development Advisory Committee grants offered each semester in order to provide specific training for their departments.
Given widespread reports of under-prepared students and/or lack of knowledge of what constitutes “college level work,” more communication must take place so students know what general expectations are. Perhaps a list of expectations and specific behaviors or actions that contribute to student success can be developed (or accessed) and shared with SCSU’s local “feeder schools” for high school students in their junior and senior years. This list of expectations can also be addressed explicitly during admissions processes, campus visits, New Student Orientation, and FYE/INQ courses.

Another recommendation for addressing students’ preparedness is to enlarge the peer mentoring and Student Ambassador participation beyond the FYE/INQ to include more courses taken in the first semester and first year. Student leaders can act as role models and mentors, directly addressing student concerns and serving as advocates, particularly if faculty and/or instructional delivery are problematic.

2. **Enhance instructional resources for on-line and hybrid teaching and learning.**

This subcommittee concurs with all of the recommendations made in the report by the recent SCSU Task Force on Online Teaching and Learning, chaired by Barbara Aronson, Nursing (See APPENDIX...). The following were direct recommendations suggested by this subcommittee on Learning and Instruction.

Faculty often assume students know how to use online Learn 9, while most students do not know how to use systems or learn on-line. Students need to learn how to learn on-line and often don’t understand the IT part, including username, and experience a lack of help when needed accessing e-mail, downloading, printing, or using key functions. Currently, IT does not provide this critical support for students. SCSU needs to hire individuals with instructional design expertise and training skills to offer regular workshops for both students and faculty on basics of using Learn 9, Excel, Word, PowerPoint, effective use of e-mail, and electronic collaboration tools, as well as proper methods for up-loading and downloading data.

Provide faculty and students with several concrete examples of instructional strategies and tools that enhance student learning. On-line assessment tools, which allow for frequent student quizzes, are documented to increase learning. They can also be completed with little student or faculty effort. Again, workshops by a professional with expertise in IT training should be offered.

As part of New Student Orientation, students should be provided with a face-to-face and an on-line introduction to on-line and electronic learning resources, as well as processes commonly used across campus, including “clickers” and SmartBoards.

Maintain physical classrooms and conduct regular checks of all classrooms and labs to see if technology (such as projectors, printers, and computers) is in good working order. Since the physical classroom set-up is not always conducive to active learning, some classrooms may need to be reconfigured for more active learning and better use of technology. Fixed tables facing forward to a lectern do not engage!
Increase Instructional Technology funding. Faculty and students need access to equipment, so laptop lending and/or steep discounts should be offered regularly for faculty and students. Given our students’ financial needs, special funds should be set aside for students’ technology needs.

Encourage more exchanges among faculty and students regarding innovative and collaborative teaching methods using instructional technology, as well as uses of social media and emerging technology.

Faculty need to teach effectively on-line and in hybrid modes. One promising approach is to work directly with the I-Teach program offered through Charter Oak to provide on-line instructional training for interested faculty on a regular basis. Find and provide funding for faculty stipends and incentives.

Increase visibility and knowledge of instructional resources, and promote the effective use of Buley Library facilities and resources.

3. **Increase student and faculty support, especially for writing across the curriculum, in the disciplines, and in quantitative reasoning.**

Although this seems to be a universal issue, SCSU Faculty tend to lament students’ poor writing skills. At the same time, students get mixed messages about how to write properly, which citation system to use, and how to revise their work. As stated above, they are often unclear about expectations for college-level work and experience faculty with multiple teaching styles and varying levels of helpfulness out of class.

For faculty, a more concerted effort is needed to train faculty in designing learning activities, writing to learn, offering effective student feedback, peer evaluation processes, reflective writing, and quick and ungraded learning assessments. Our Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) resources need to be promoted more widely, perhaps with workshops designed specifically for departments’ disparate needs.

For students, we must commit to helping them with better writing skills starting in the first semester. Basic content can be provided on-line and through Student Supportive Services and Buley Library. Topics identified were: how to write a thesis, effective research skills, editing one’s own work, and using feedback to enhance writing. Students also need support beyond remedial or basic writing skills, including writing longer research papers and honors theses.

Given SCSU students’ NSSE quantitative reasoning scores, and basic MAT grades, it appears that tutoring for specific topics may be in order. Along with the concept of WAC, it appears that Quantitative Reasoning Across the Curriculum models should be developed to encourage faculty in non-Math disciplines to integrate numerical literacy and analytical thinking skills into their curriculum.

If and when the above recommendations are implemented, a regular assessment of the impact of these changes through focus groups and questionnaires should be implemented.