Purdue University’s Foundations of Excellence: A Roadmap for Excellent Beginnings

Executive Summary

We have high expectations for our University and our students. To accomplish our strategic plan goals, we must remove institutional barriers that may hinder our students’ ability to achieve these goals. In turn, students must be responsible for engaging in the programs that will help them succeed.

BACKGROUND

Purdue University has a unique culture of strong college-level leadership related to curriculum, advising, and course offerings in addition to highly regarded support programs for first-year students. Historically, these curricular and co-curricular efforts have been decentralized, resulting in an environment in which students must navigate a fragmented academic, housing, and student affairs landscape. For instance, many first-year academic programs are aligned under the Office of the Provost, yet are dispersed and disconnected. It is also noteworthy that Housing and Food Services is aligned under the Office of the Vice President for Business and Finance, Treasurer. This organizational complexity, with regard to the first year, creates challenges for both students and the University.

Additionally, the vast majority of new students are admitted directly to one of Purdue’s 283 highly individualized bachelor’s degree programs when they enter the University (91% vs. 9% who are admitted to the Undergraduate Studies Program). Upon matriculation to Purdue, 63.1% of students are quite certain of their choice of major and graduate with a bachelor’s degree for that program of study. However, students who are less sure of their path or who decide to change their major opt to explore different programs of study. At Purdue, 11% of our students change their major (CODO – Change of Degree Objective) within their first year of college, and overall, 36.9% of our students will CODO at least once in their academic career at Purdue. Students who CODO take an additional half-year to graduate from Purdue, and on average, take 7.5 more course credits than students who graduate from their initial entry college. This has

---

1 At Purdue, curricular efforts refer to those that support and enhance foundational courses and provide stronger coordination of first-year programs and academic programs. Co-curricular efforts refer to student success and development programs that provide intentional activities beyond the classroom and contribute to overall learning outcomes.
contributed to Purdue’s average time to degree being 4.27 years and our four-year baccalaureate completion rate standing at only 40%.²

During this academic year, Purdue has engaged in an intentional, extensive, reflective, and systemic review of the experience of first-year students via the Foundations of Excellence process. While Purdue’s first-to-second-year retention rate has improved significantly over the past few years (from 85% in 2007 to 90% in 2011), Foundations of Excellence looks well beyond the narrow focus on retention. Rather, it is a “comprehensive, externally guided self-study and improvement process for the first year” facilitated by the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education.³ Through this course of action, we have evaluated the first-year experience at Purdue with respect to the goals of enhancing learning, creating a solid foundation for personal and professional development, and building connections between entering students and the institution.

Currently, the undergraduate experience at Purdue begins with the high-quality curricular efforts found in our academic colleges, specifically student interaction with faculty in the classroom and program-level advising. Of equal importance is the participation and dedication of housing and student affairs in providing robust co-curricular efforts that lead to successful creation, implementation, and maintenance of an excellent and cohesive first-year experience. Thus, the leadership of the four campus units with the highest level of interaction with first-year students—Student Affairs, Housing and Food Services, Diversity and Inclusion, and Undergraduate Academic Affairs—have come together to sponsor this vital undertaking at Purdue. While these four units are principally responsible for coordinating the recommendations set forth in this report, the academic units’ continued ownership and delivery of the specific actions is crucial.

A broad group of representatives from across the campus community contributed to the findings and recommendations contained in this report. Starting in August 2011 a task force of more than 200 Purdue faculty, staff, and students studied methods to align Purdue’s resources to enhance the first-year experience. Participants spent thousands of hours studying, researching, collecting data, collaborating, deliberating, and reporting on the first-year experience at Purdue. A steering committee of 34 University leaders guided discussions around nine aspirational standards for excellence in the first year known as “Foundational Dimensions”: Philosophy, Organization, Learning, Faculty, Transitions, All Students, Diversity, Roles & Purposes, and Improvement.⁴ Dimension Committees were charged with evaluating and rating specific performance indicators, as well as producing a formal report. More than 50 recommendations and action items were submitted. The reports and recommendations were closely examined, evaluated,

---

² The six-year graduation rate for the 2004 cohort of Purdue students was 70.4%, with an additional 7.4% of students who left Purdue completing a degree at a different institution.
revised, and synthesized by the Steering Committee to generate the findings, recommendation, and responsibilities included herein.

This report lays the groundwork for a new campus culture focused on excellent, intentional, and integrated curricular and co-curricular efforts for all students, according to their specific needs, so that they can achieve academic and personal success. In addition, it provides a blueprint for coordinating assessment and dissemination of findings to foster continuous improvement among the University’s overall student success efforts.

The results of the Foundations of Excellence deliberative process provide a broad framework for the first-year experience at Purdue. The task force’s recommendations closely align with Purdue’s strategic plan to “promote excellence in learning experiences and outcomes, fostering intellectual, professional, and personal development to prepare learners for life and careers in a dynamic, global society.”

---

5 President France A. Córdova, introduction to “2008-2014 New Synergies Strategic Plan” (Purdue University, 2008), 1.
FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATION, AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The task force’s recommendation is that a single point of leadership be designated for undergraduate student success that has responsibility and accountability to coordinate and integrate curricular and co-curricular efforts in order to provide an intentional, cohesive first-year experience that results in success.

This organization will report to the Provost and will be charged with coordinating responsibilities in three thematic areas, which are listed below and described in greater detail in the balance of this report.

1) Specialized and heightened focus on the experiences of first-year students
2) Coordination of curricular, co-curricular, and academic success efforts for first-year students
3) Focus on an environment of improvement based on innovative evidence-based decision-making and scholarship

We acknowledge that this is a fundamental change to Purdue’s organizational structure. The benefit of this change is that Purdue will have an intentionally developed, coordinated, University-wide strategy that encourages students to pursue excellence and supports them in their endeavors. Thus, academic and support units will be invited to fully and collaboratively participate in the first-year experience.

Consistent with the three themes, we have developed the following proposed philosophy statement as part of the Foundations of Excellence process to guide Purdue as it creates and implements the undergraduate student experience.

At Purdue we believe every student's first-year experience should build a solid foundation for a successful life through learning experiences and support services both in and out of the classroom.

We believe that beginning in the first year, students acquire the knowledge and skills to succeed academically, build confidence and resilience to accept and embrace challenges, and develop personal and academic identities.

We believe that students should be welcomed into and expected to participate in a vibrant and intellectually challenging community in which all members feel a sense of belonging.

We believe that becoming interdependent, critical thinkers with the ability to locate, assess, and apply knowledge resources will help students develop into productive global citizens.
As a campus community we hold our University accountable for providing experiences, support services, access to faculty and staff, and a safe learning environment whereby students can achieve these goals.\textsuperscript{6}

\textsuperscript{6} Modification of Proposed Philosophy Statement, “Philosophy Dimension Report” (Purdue University, 2012).
Theme 1: Specialized and Heightened Focus on the Experience of First-Year Students

First-year college students face numerous challenges associated with their transition to college. There are adjustments with regard to academic expectations, learning a new system and environment, career refinement and development, and negotiation of interpersonal relationships with faculty, staff, roommates, new peers, and family members. This high level of adjustment warrants a significant and meaningful effort on the part of Purdue to provide appropriate support, guidance, and information.

In particular, an Undergraduate Outcomes-Based Core Curriculum (approved by the University Senate on February 20, 20127) will provide students with a similar general education experience, and in doing so will achieve a set of common learning outcomes required of all graduates. The Undergraduate Curriculum Council (UCC), a faculty committee that reports to the Educational Policy Committee, was also established as a central coordinating entity to approve foundational courses that meet particular outcomes and to oversee other policies related to the curriculum.

Responsibilities

1. **Support the implementation and expansion of the core curriculum to improve portability of courses across majors.**
   - The Foundations of Excellence Steering Committee views a core curriculum with a high degree of portability as essential to effectively enhance undergraduate student success throughout all other recommendations in this report.
   - Coordinate academic success programs (such as Purdue Promise, Academic Success Center, Learning Communities, HORIZONS, Science Bound, supplemental instruction, college-level programs, and tutoring) with foundational courses and advise the Provost’s Office on allocation of appropriate resources.

2. **Ensure that every student has a consistent and coordinated first-year orientation course and the opportunity for a coordinated seminar experience.**
   - A first-year orientation (or transition) course provides an opportunity for Purdue to build a foundation for undergraduate student success by conveying important institutional values and expectations to all first-year students. Every program that admits first-year students should offer such a course.

---

• An orientation course could take several forms (traditional first-year seminar, discovery seminar, research seminar, etc.), but would be a combination of topics determined by Purdue to be appropriate to facilitate first-year student success and establish core principles (e.g., academic expectations, academic integrity, student rights and responsibilities, diversity awareness, information literacy, common reading, career clarification and/or exploration, skills, interests, personalities, learning preferences, and campus resources), coupled with unit-appropriate content. Topics would be developed with input from all academic and student success areas and reviewed on a continuing basis in order to remain relevant.

• A discovery seminar is an authentic, faculty-led seminar that exposes students to various disciplines across the campus. It allows faculty to introduce students to the concepts and methods of their discipline as applied to faculty members’ current research interests. Such a course will be most successful if led in each case by an instructional team of appropriate faculty and staff members.

• Course content should be sufficiently common across all majors so that a change in major would not require a student to take an additional seminar. This effort should be guided by a faculty-led committee, and specifically connect to the aforementioned core curriculum.

3. **Expand admit-to-university opportunities.**

• The experiences and understandings of first-year students are that many are unaware of their options. Moreover, many talented students have yet to narrow their scope to a single major. While some first-year courses easily transfer to other majors, other first-year courses have limited portability, leading to increased time to degree. Thus, given the uncertainty among our students, it is incumbent on the University to provide the opportunity for students to discover their career interests.

• We recommend a hybrid model of admission by which a significantly larger number of students is admitted to a University-level program in the first year and organized in thematic areas to provide opportunity for exploration.
Theme 2: Coordination of Curricular, Co-Curricular, and Academic Success Efforts for First-Year Students

The decentralized nature of support programs, advising, and overall practices for working with first-year students has led to a lack of a unified message and experience for first-year students. The disparity of programs, course offerings, support (such as tutoring or supplemental instruction), and advising experiences can lead to competing goals, resulting in confusion and frustration for students. Additionally, specific needs differ among student groups. This distributed model can lead to an uneven experience for students concerning advising, orientation-type courses, and success programs across campus.

Responsibilities

1. **Coordinate undergraduate academic success programs.**
   - Bring together the various undergraduate academic success organizations that exist at the University level. Coordinate and synchronize their efforts across the entire University, based on specific needs of different student groups.
   - Coordinate the activities of decentralized programs at the unit level (colleges/schools/departments) that affect student success.
   - A primary function should be to involve faculty and staff from across the University (in both undergraduate academic and support programs) toward the common goal of student success.
   - A committee comprised of campus partners and leaders (e.g., Associate Deans for Undergraduate Education and leadership representatives from Housing and Food Services, Student Affairs, Diversity and Inclusion, and Academic Advising) should be created to advise the Provost, establish policy, and develop guidelines for initiatives and programs.

2. **Coordinate undergraduate academic advising in the first year.**
   - Coordinate undergraduate academic advising in the first year, which should be guided by policies established by the University and provided through a staff of professional advisors who would have a manageable and appropriate advisee load in accordance with professional norms.
   - In addition, college/school advisors will provide a similar set of advising opportunities, guided by the same professional norms, to students admitted directly to academic programs.
3. **Ensure appropriate availability of course spaces that allow students to make progress toward degree completion.**
   - Offering more sections appears to be a simple solution, but it would not resolve dilemmas that arise from the large number and specificity of the varied programs of study, and the resulting abundance of course offerings.
   - Formally establish a process that ensures that undergraduate course space needs are identified well in advance, offered in a timely fashion, and distributed in such a way that students, particularly in the first year, are able to make satisfactory academic progress.
   - It will be especially important to provide space in foundational courses as approved by the Undergraduate Curriculum Council (UCC).

4. **Develop programs targeted at removing disparities in success among identified groups of students.**
   - Provide the appropriate amount of information and options to students through support programs that value and resonate with students’ unique senses of identity.
   - Coordinate, acknowledge, and plan for up-front niche or specialized initiatives to meet the specific needs of targeted populations.
   - Coordinate collaboration among colleges and schools, Housing and Food Services, Student Affairs, and Diversity and Inclusion, among others, to target programs at removing disparities.

5. **Oversee the streamlining of communication to first-year students.**
   - After an exhaustive review of campus communications to prospective and admitted students (publications, mailers, brochures, websites, etc.), it was determined that, beyond Admissions, there is little University-wide coordination of these efforts.
   - Support and collaborate with colleges, schools, and departments in order to enroll admitted students, based on specific needs of different groups.
   - Coordinate communications common to all students (e.g., orientation programs, housing, dining, student health, technology/computing, financial aid/bursar, and academic advising/registration), based on specific needs of different groups.
Theme 3: Focus on an Environment of Improvement Based on Innovative Evidence-based Decision-making and Scholarship

We believe that the recommendations above will result in significant improvement of the first-year experience of Purdue students. As a matter of course, and consistent with Purdue’s extensive research focus, all implemented recommendations must be closely monitored and carefully evaluated. A particular emphasis should be placed on the assessment of diversity and inclusion and the examination of the success of specific groups including students from underrepresented groups, international students, honors students, and athletes, among others.

These efforts should be guided by the Provost’s Office, which would also direct needed offerings and determine supportive funding. The formal process should include participation by representatives from all stages of the process, including the Office of Enrollment Management, the college/school Associate Deans, and the Office of the Registrar. The process should monitor the outcome of meeting student course needs and use that information, in conjunction with other data, as a feedback loop into future enrollment management and programmatic funding decisions.

Responsibilities

1. **Encourage professional development opportunities for all instructors and staff that interact with first-year students.**
   - Establish programs in which instructors and staff are encouraged and rewarded for trying new methods and experimenting with pedagogical techniques, creating a culture of innovation across all aspects of the University. This effort should include the continued discovery of best practices and more efficient ways to help students adjust to Purdue and to the academic culture.
   - Provide new ways of helping instructors and staff adapt to the growing diversity of the student body and provide training and information to better meet the specific needs of different student populations.
   - Provide means to help instructors and staff enhance the overall quality of instruction to first-year students.

2. **Establish a coordinated effort to collect and disseminate information on best practices, data useful for faculty instructing first-year students, and assessment to enhance program efforts.**
   - This information can help guide internal decisions as well as contribute to peer-reviewed literature about teaching, learning, and student success efforts.
   - Establish a set of research studies on the first-year experience and student success and provide assessment for decentralized programs. The research series should be carried out on a regular basis and coordinated with existing assessment offices and interested faculty.
• Coordinate a central team for assessment that will provide support and data for all units.
• Disseminate assessment results through a four-pronged approach, consisting of a web-based repository, an annual print publication, a subscriber-based email distribution, and access to course-level data.

3. **Commit to advancing and rewarding research on teaching and learning.**
   • Purposefully blend improvements in student learning with support for the scholarship of teaching and learning in order to elevate the experience of students at Purdue and establish Purdue as being in the vanguard of superior educational practice and research.
   • This commitment will provide opportunities for extramural funding that should be aggressively pursued. It also has the potential for large-scale exportation of our successes to the global academic community.
CONCLUSION

It is clear that the campus community is deeply committed to the goals of Purdue’s strategic plan, including the success of our undergraduate students. Just as our strategic plan provides a roadmap for the future of our University, the Foundations of Excellence Steering Committee believes that the recommendation and responsibilities in this report pave the way for a new campus culture.

By building on Purdue’s existing strengths we will transform our culture into one that views undergraduate experiences holistically, fully integrating excellent programs. In this campus environment, we will form intentional links between student learning both in and out of the classroom, provide the opportunity for students to develop their competency, and help them achieve confidence through practice.

By addressing the unique needs of a diverse campus community, we will enhance learning, create a solid foundation for personal and professional development, and build connections between entering students and the institution. As a result, our students can achieve academic and personal success and become contributing members of society.