Foundations of Excellence Organization Committee Report

This version: February 5, 2018

Section 1. Process summary.

Our committee divided into three sub-committees to gather information about how CU works as an organization. The sub-committees were 1) advising, 2) housing/residence life and related services, and 3) large classes. We hope that the real value we can provide is not in micromanaging the operation of any one unit, but in helping surface useful connections between units. We picked the three sub-committees because *advising* touches 100% of first years, *housing* more than 90%, and *large enrollment gateway classes* more than 75%. We shared information primarily electronically and also convened a few times in person to discuss our findings.

Section 2. List of committee members and their affiliations (departments, etc.).

- Laura Kornish, Professor and Division Chair, Marketing (Committee Chair)
- Lon Abbott, Senior Instructor and Research Associate, Geological Sciences
- Laurie Langdon, Director, Learning Assistant Program
- Barbara Marshall, Assistant Director of Compliance and Fiscal Operations, Financial Aid
- Michael Simmons, Director, University Exploration & Advising Center
- Vicki Vanderwerf, Assistant Director, Residence Life
- Kristi Wold-McCormick, University Registrar

Section 3. Narrative of committee opinions on each question the FoE website asked it to address.

a. Dimension Questions

PI 2.1 Description. Which of the following statements best describes your campus's first-year organizational structure?

Our answer: *Multiple Administrative Structures cooperate to administer and align first-year policies, practices, and programs.*

Summary of committee opinion: Our campus has some good examples of coordinated efforts. For example, the New Student and Family Welcome programs are a centralized and standardized offering for all students. However, we also have much lower levels of coordination with other efforts, including first year advising which is college- or school-specific.

PI 2.2 First-Year Students. To what degree does your institution's first-year organizational structure facilitate the following actions as they apply to first-year students?

Our answers:

- Coordinated, timely communications: *Low*
- Academic advising that includes special attention to first-year students: *Medium*

Summary of committee opinion: As with many of our questions, it is challenging to rate CU as an entire institution, since first year practices differ across colleges. The committee's opinion is that students receive timely general communications from a new student and enrollment management perspective, but communication is not well-coordinated across the university.

PI 2.3 Integration. To what degree does the structure indicated in PI 2.1 result in an integrated approach that crosses division/unit lines (e.g., student affairs and academic affairs)?

Our answer: *Low.*

Summary of committee opinion: There are a lot of examples of missing connections between units that could be cooperating. For example, the campus has not widely settled on a system of academic or career advising that leverages the administrative efficiency of professional advisors and the disciplinary knowledge of faculty. Another example is the inefficient coordination of support for disability accommodations. Overall, the committee felt that different units on campus don't operate under specific shared goals or assessments. There are broad shared goals (like supporting student growth), but those take really different forms in different units.

PI 2.4 Effectiveness. To what degree is your current first-year organizational structure an effective mechanism for coordinating and delivering the first year at your institution?

Our answer: *Medium*.

Summary of committee opinion: We rated this one medium instead of low, our rating of the previous question, because there are so many examples of programs that serve the students well (despite lack of broad coordination). One example is the support offered by Hall Directors and Resident Advisors (RAs); the Hall Directors are live-in professional staff and they supervise a large number of RAs, who are older undergraduate students. Here we also acknowledge the hard work of our faculty colleagues who work with first year students. The academic components of courses don't rely on institution-wide coordination for high quality delivery.

PI 2.5 Faculty/Staff Development. Which of the following statements best describes the role of the first year structure noted in PI 2.1 in providing faculty/staff development to increase understanding of first-year issues?

Our answer: *The first-year structure provides faculty/staff development that. . .conforms to only some of the conditions noted above.*

Summary of committee opinion: Committee members had only very narrow examples of any faculty/staff development opportunities related to first-year issues.

PI 2.6 Financial Resources.
Which of the following statements best describes the financial resources to support the first-year?

Our answer: *Insufficient evidence exists to judge the adequacy and consistency of funding (e.g., the structure(s) is/are newly established or highly dependent on external grant funding).*

Summary of committee opinion: The default answer to any question about resources on campus is at best "insufficient evidence," with a bias toward "insufficient resources." Faculty and staff widely recognize that our organization is a lean, mean operating machine. Advisors work with hundreds of students, service offices operate with fewer staff than many peer institutions, and intro classes can be massive. Those examples alone suggest more resources could improve the experience for students.

PI 2.7 Policy. To what degree is each of the following policies enforced?

- Transferring programs or changing majors

- Class repeat
- Class drops, semester withdrawals
- Academic standing

Our answer: *These policies are enforced at the college or school level, not at the university level.*

Summary of committee opinion: These are all enforced, but the rules are different in the different academic units. Those differences create inconsistencies in how they are handled and communicated to students. This creates the most problems for students who are interested in changing majors or schools, a significant portion of our student body.

PI 2.8 Policy. To what degree does each of the following policies [above] support first-year student success and retention?

Our answer: *The inconsistencies across units are a problem for many students.*

Summary of committee opinion: Because first-year students often either begin undecided, begin as ACOs or change their minds after matriculation, it would make sense to explore ways to streamline the major change process for students. This would need to be negotiated between the colleges/schools and the Office of the Registrar, which maintains student academic records and degree audits. Creating ease in finding a new major can contribute to increased student retention.

Section 4. Sources of evidence.

Advising subcommittee: Committee members' knowledge (especially Mike Simmons), Evidence Library #4 (Campus Advising Report from 2012), Evidence Library #11 (Overview of & Links to Advising Units), Evidence Library #6 (Data/Experience with First Year Advising Model in A&S).

Housing/Res Life subcommittee: Interviews with directors for Honors and Farrand RAPs, Student Conduct staff, and OVA Counselor staff.

Large-classes subcommittee: Interviews with faculty in PHYS, CHEM, ATOC, ECON, PSYC. FCQ database for class enrollments and section sizes.

Overall: Student Survey Results, Foundational Dimension = Organization (Q050-Q055).

Section 5. Committee recommendations.

1. **Try new models of advising to strike the best balance we can of personal attention, appropriate type of advice, and financial feasibility. Commit more seriously to the model of advisor as first-point-of-contact.** Our campus has paid close attention to improving first year advising, making deliberate choices about centralized vs. decentralized systems, specialist vs. generalist advising, and advisor caseloads. In 2012, a Campus Advisory Exploratory Group presented a report to Provost Moore (Evidence Library #4) recommending a highly centralized system. That report also offers a warning about the importance of setting appropriately circumscribed expectations with students and families about what advising can deliver.

   We have the opposite conclusion about the "circumscribed role" for advising. We think the best service for our students comes from an expansive advisor, one who can serve as a gateway to the incredible resources we have on campus. Imagine the simplicity for students if the guidance we give them is

“when you have a question about your experience at CU, start with your advisor.”

The FoE student survey showed that students trust caring adults willing to point them in the right direction.

We offer this recommendation recognizing the risks in it. CU is a large and complex institution, and the policies reflect that. It may not be reasonable for all advisors to be adequately kept current on the vast array of university-wide policies as well as all department policies. That complexity creates a risk of misinformation. Our thought is that the advisor would not be an expert in all things, but would model for the student the approach to finding answers, resources, and support within our system. In one of our other recommendations, we suggest ideas for making policies more uniform and better communicating them; those changes would reduce the risks of misinformation.

Our committee pondered how advising, housing, academics, and possibly student conduct could systematically collaborate. A purely technological approach would be to use “The Hub” (Salesforce) to capture input from these different parties. But with that approach, who is accountable for acting on the shared information? We think that role naturally falls to the advisors because 100% of the student body are served by advising.

While advisors would be a first point of contact and would be able to handle many types of questions, we also urge reopening the discussion about establishing a cohort of faculty mentors who can provide students with career advice. For the most directed students, faculty mentors can share valuable information about career options in the student’s discipline, the key skill sets necessary for success in the field, and discipline-specific strategies to applying for jobs and to graduate schools.

This expansive role would be a big change in the advisors’ jobs. But it is a change intended to make sure no student falls through the cracks. It is a change that could maximally leverage the existing resources (e.g., financial aid support, residence Hall Directors, even Wardenburg) by directing students to use these resources. Students often don’t know about the resources, so they miss a chance to get support from a resource already in place.

Would this change be financially prohibitive? We believe no, that it could be done with some efficiency. The first efficiency is to increase the use of group advising settings. The 2012 Advising Report also suggests group settings. Realistically, the most efficient and economical way to get students to participate in group advising is to require the sessions as part of a one-credit pass/fail course. We understand the A&S Faculty have not viewed such an option favorably, but we recommend another pass at convincing them of its merits.

2. **Systematically get real-time academic performance information from cooperating large-enrollment classes. Use it to give personalized and highly relevant coaching for student success.**
   Some large enrollment classes are highly coordinated in the sense of using the same materials, assignments, and tests; and also frequently report academic performance data to students. Not all large enrollment classes behave this way, but many on campus do (e.g., PHYS 1110 with 4000

over the two years, PHYS 1120 with 3000, and MATH 1112 with 2500). We estimate that a significant fraction of the first year students are in one of these large, coordinated courses. Faculty could work with OIT to produce a data feed and with advising leadership to provide context on the grades. That would give advisors valuable personalized information on many students to coach them to make adjustments. This model is currently working well in Leeds with MATH 1112 data.

Expanding on this idea, we would love to see a standardized way for all faculty to “ping” campus support mechanisms (like the advisors) with concerns (extended absences) or accolades (an especially great performance on an assignment).

3. **Unify, or at least better communicate, policies that currently differ across campus.**
   Some of the policies that affect a lot of students include:
   - Transferring programs or changing majors
   - Class repeat
   - Class drops, semester withdrawals
   - Academic standing

   As we described in the responses to PI2.7 and PI2.8, many important policies are not campus-wide, but are determined by a student’s current academic unit. This decentralization creates challenges for the many students interested in changing units. Here are some suggestions that would improve the problems created by the inconsistencies:

   1) ***Figure out which policies can be at the institution level***. For example, consider institution-wide minimum academic standing requirements and streamlining units’ course repeat rules. See, for example, the “Course, Catalog, and Calendar” committee of University of Texas.
   2) ***Adopt consistent terminology across units***. For example, call class-level exit a “drop” and institution-level exit a “withdrawal,” and standardize the terms we use for academic standing (good standing, warning, probation, suspension, etc.).
   3) ***Have an authoritative source for information about policies.*** Financial Aid, Bursar, and Registrar websites should be the primary source for their policies. This would benefit students and advisors in like in ensuring the policy information can be easily located and relayed in the most accurate and current fashion possible.

   As one of our committee members wrote, “If we had a unified vision, goal, way to get there, and a common way we were being evaluated on our progress, I think it would start to decrease some of the barriers we put up when working together.”