

Transitions Dimension Final Report

Section One: Process Summary

The Transitions Dimension committee met weekly throughout the Fall semester, mapping out what we understood to be the critical issues, challenges, relevant data, current resources, questions, concerns and hopes regarding the successful transition of undergraduate students into the University of Colorado Boulder. This resulted in the formation of 4 sub-committees (Administration, Basic Needs, Belonging/community and Academics) which presented their particular recommendations to the whole group in a series of meetings in December. The committee came to a consensus on our final recommendations and a draft of our Final Report was circulated for comment before being finalized in this report.

Section Two: Committee Members

Scot Douglass (Co-chair)	Associate Professor, Director EHP & Andrews RAP
Chris Pacheco (Co-chair)	Executive Director Pre-Collegiate Program and Outreach
Molly Brauer	Hall Director Andrews and Kittredge West Halls
Amber Cardamone	Director New Student and Family Program
Murray Cox	Instructor, Applied Math
Jess Doty	Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution
Christian Gonzalez	Student Finance
Miranda Hook	Biochemistry Student
Celeste Maldonado	Integrated Physiology Student
Colleen Newman	Director Undergraduate Admissions
Cory Pavicich	Digital Learning Initiatives
Lelei Finau-Starkey	Campus Advising Specialist
Julie Volckens	OIEC Associate Director of Assessment & Education

Section 3: Narrative of the Committee on Specific FoE questions

5.1: Communication Methods

The three pillars of the prospective student communication plan are value, community and academics. A variety of platforms and messengers are utilized to communicate these themes with prospective students (blogs, chats, social channels, emails, print, digital ads, website, third party vendors). The pillars, messengers and mediums are developed based on research conducted with our current students, prospect pool and national student survey data. Committee conversations continually returned to the volume of communication being sent to students and how this volume may contribute to the lack of clarity surrounding expectations.

5.2: Communications to Students

Upon matriculation to CU Boulder, the division of Student Affairs in conjunction with New Student and Family Programs works with various campus constituents to utilize a strategically streamlined [new student communication plan](#) through the start of the semester. Targeted [email campaigns](#) along with the [New Student Welcome tab](#) in MyCUInfo provide directed information to new students as they are oriented to campus.

5.3 Communications with Parents

Although it is common practice to see the student as the “customer” and focus all communication directly at them it is important to note that, for our most vulnerable populations and those who are most in danger of not persisting at the University, the family plays an integral role in their decision to attend and whether or not to stay should they run into difficulties. Quality communication with parents regarding on-campus services and resources can help the parent

to reinforce the University's message of engagement and belonging and make it less likely that they will encourage the student to leave when difficulties arise. Whenever possible parents should be invited and encouraged to come to campus to learn about the opportunities that are available to their children and information should be presented in the parents' primary language. Doing this will facilitate the parents' comfort and trust in the institution which will, again, facilitate them encouraging their children to work through times of difficulty.

Upon matriculation to CU Boulder, the division of Student Affairs in conjunction with New Student and Family Programs works with various campus constituents to utilize a strategically streamlined [parent & family communication plan](#) including [email campaigns](#) through the start of the semester that mirrors the new student communication plan. Additional communication and educational strategies for families also occurs through the [Family Online Experience](#), optional [Buff Family Newsletter](#), and the [University of Colorado Boulder Family Programs Facebook page](#). Future consideration around the use of a university-wide [Parent and Family Engagement Portal](#) is in progress.

5.4: Communications to Others

Communication with community members and organizations who support the student in their home community can play a pivotal role in how well a student transitions to the University and how they perceive their new environment prior to arrival. This is particularly true if students participate in pre-college outreach and/or support programs. The staffs of these programs work proactively to support their student participants and should be used to reinforce the University's messaging around deadlines and requirements as well as a means by which the University can promote support programs as well as academic and personal opportunities. Because these organizations usually have multiple participants attend the University each year it is also a great opportunity to take a pre-existing community and use it to integrate other students of similar backgrounds into a more cohesive cohort.

5.5: Facilitating Student Connections

The committee consistently returned to the critical importance of communities that cultivate a sense of student belonging (see recommendations). Although the current options for incoming students vary in terms of effectiveness, the data show they all add value to the student experience. Their contributions are diminished (1) by their mission not being reinforced by larger communities of belonging at the departmental, college and campus levels, and (2) issues of equitable access. We strongly support the unique contributions of smaller communities while recommending a baseline universal experience (see recommendations).

5.6: Academic Advising (Lelei)

Please see separate report from Lelei Finau-Starkey regarding analysis and recommendations regarding Academic Advising.

Section 4: Sources of Evidence

First-Year Belonging Study (Dr. Jessica Keating)

- After controlling for demographic characteristics, high school GPA, and individual traits like self-control, students' sense of social belonging was a stronger predictor of retention to sophomore year than was first-year GPA
- Prior to arriving on campus, 22% of students in the study did not anticipate that they would have a strong sense of belonging at CU
- In the fall 2014 and spring 2015 semesters, students in the study who had a below-average sense of belonging score were more likely to report that "the university doesn't really care if I succeed."

2014 Climate Survey: An incoming 2014 student's fall semester sense of belonging score strongly predicted their probability of still being enrolled in spring 2017, no matter what their level of academic preparation

HDS surveys: HDS data from spring 2017 collected on the 2016 class showed that for students with low, moderate, or high sense of belonging, the retention rates were 68%, 89%, and 96%, respectively

OIEC surveys

Student Conduct Data

Timeline of Student Emails

Section 5: Recommendations for Action

The Transition Committee strongly concluded that our recommendations must be grounded in an intentional culture of belonging. This culture requires strong leadership from the Chancellor and Provost and essential buy-in from everyone who impacts incoming students (faculty, professional staff and current students). Multiple CU-specific research projects produced compelling evidence that a sense of belonging is the most critical factor in a successful student transition during the first year and beyond. (Dr. Jessica Keating's research on belonging, the 2014 Climate Survey, work done by OIEC, HDS, etc.)

For the purposes of these recommendations, we define a culture of belonging as one in which our students feel supported and accepted by the community (e.g. other students, faculty, the university, etc.), develop and maintain good friendships with peers, identify as a CU student, and generally feel they "belong" and "fit in" at CU Boulder, in both social and academic aspects of their lives.

Foundational Recommendation: *Cultivate an intentional culture of belonging.*

Establish a clear guiding principle asserting a student-focused mission of belonging for the University of Colorado Boulder, issued from and embraced by the university leadership team and championed by a senior faculty leader responsible for the first year experience. University leadership should promote a renewed commitment to putting students first through a coordinated, multi-year communications plan, challenging leaders at every level to ask of every unit decision: "How does this promote student belonging?" And "How does this reflect putting students first?" The student-focused mission, combined with these two questions, will help integrate all campus efforts around easily communicated, common cultural values. Additionally, we believe that a student-focused mission must strongly support diverse and unique approaches that take particular students, colleges and larger contexts into consideration.

A commitment to the cultivation of such a culture suggests the following specific prioritized policy recommendations regarding student transition:

Recommendation 1: *In order to create and facilitate a greater sense of student belonging, we should begin building a shared culture of academic excellence from a student's first week on campus. Student move-in should take place on a weekend, welcome events take place on Monday through Wednesday and classes begin on Thursday. These courses should require meaningful work to be accomplished over the first weekend.*

We believe that the first days of a student's experience on campus are highly formative. By not integrating academic experiences into this first week we squander the opportunity to center belonging around the academic mission of the university, and instead actively encourage students to forge communities through a party culture and risk alienating those

who reject the party culture. OIEC and student conduct data shows that a disproportionate amount of behavioral problems occur at the beginning of the semester and, in particular, the initial weekend. Conduct issues significantly drop during the semester as academic requirements and accountability increase. Currently, we spend the last three days of Welcome Week telling students about the significant challenge of their impending academic experience and then give them an unsupervised weekend before the work begins. This creates unnecessary opportunities for students to make poor decisions. If, as proposed, students have classes that meet during the first week on Thursday and Friday, they would have met once with each of their main classes and could be assigned 10-15 hours of real homework to do over the weekend. For this to be effective, it must be integrated with Recommendation 2.

Recommendation 2: *In order to create and facilitate a greater sense of student belonging, the university should require a one-credit hour "University 101 Seminar" in the Fall semester to provide spaced and interleaved learning of core university values and skills.*

To succeed, our students must be able to navigate the labyrinth of administrative processes, leverage university resources and adjust to the cultural expectations of the university. Attempting to accomplish all of this during orientation runs counter to what we understand about learning, does not support students practicing and consolidating these skills, and leaves our students without the necessary skills and information required when circumstances demand. This one-credit seminar will revisit the content of Welcome Week within the actual contexts where these practices and values make sense. These seminars need to integrate evidence-based practices for building community/belonging, teaching respectful dialogue/compassion, explore campus history and traditions, create awareness of student support services and foster learning how to learn. In order to recognize the academic, administrative and social demands on students, this seminar would be co-led by faculty, professional staff and students.

Recommendation 3: *In order to create and facilitate a greater sense of student belonging, we must cultivate meaningful, academically-centered communities of belonging that are reinforced at every structural level of the student experience.*

Evidence shows that students who participate in smaller, academically-centered communities express a stronger sense of belonging and subsequently perform better (academically and behaviorally). But the existence of these smaller communities in themselves is not enough; these communities must fit into a larger framework of belonging. Schools and Colleges must be held responsible for ensuring every student belongs to multiple such communities: university-wide communities, specific college communities, specific department communities, and specific, smaller communities (special interest groups, first-year seminars, RAPs, LLCs, Honors Programs, Professional Societies, Norlin Scholars, service groups, identity-based groups, targeted support groups). Each level of belonging would cultivate its own traditions, provide resources and engage students in ways appropriate to the size of the community. Smaller communities will provide more personal engagement, mentoring, focused co-curricular activities and individualized senses of identity. To guarantee that every student has a foundational community of belonging in a smaller community, every student should be required to either be in a RAP (removing the access barrier of student fees) or a first-year seminar during the Fall. The RAPs should tighten their focus and purpose (see recommendation 4) and strongly promote co-curricular activities rooted in this focus. First-

year seminars, limited to 19 students and focused on student engagement, would provide a self-selected academically-centered experience designed to cultivate university scholars.

Recommendation 4: *In order to create and facilitate a greater sense of student belonging, housing assignments should be assigned through lotteries, except in the cases of intentional academic communities who should review and select good fit students for their programs.*

Our current assignment process privileges students with more resources to claim coveted main campus locations. This negatively impacts a number of student groups: lower income students (waiting for fee waivers or unable to afford “insurance” housing deposits at multiple institutions); first generation students (not receiving the same level of parental support in the process) and international students (applications delayed due to immigration documents). Many students assigned to Williams Village begin with the perception of a pernicious status difference based on location, which undermines a sense of belonging. Additionally, main campus academic communities are undermined by being filled with students who are primarily interested in location rather than program themes. We suggest that campus move all open housing assignments to a lottery system, giving equal opportunities to students who apply later in the process. Additionally, all intentional academic communities should become application-based (reviewed by program directors, staff and students and possibly included in the Housing Application, itself) so that students who share interests and passions can easily find each other from the start (see recommendation 3).

NOTE: The committee has much more detailed recommendations and implementation strategies corresponding to each of the above recommendations. Specific committee experts would be happy to consult with the Steering and Implementation Committees if desired.