

Philosophy Dimension Feedback California State University-San Marcos

Dear David, Joanne, Evelyn, Mark, Bridget, Richard, Darren, Jeffrey, Emily, Brian, Geoffrey, Linda, Janet, Patricia, Dilcie, Janet, Kimber, Patricia, Kaine, Jacqueline, Patricia, and Peter,

I have read your thorough report on the Philosophy Dimension and would like to share my reaction to your work. I didn't see reference in your report to question #15 on the faculty/staff survey, and I was curious about the responses to that particular question. You will recall that it asks, "Is a formalized institutional philosophy for the first/freshman year of college valuable?" Over 77% expressed the belief that such a formalized statement is important. That is good news and gives you the support you need to engage in this work across campus.

Of course, there is no way of knowing what first-year philosophy some of your faculty and staff believed had been communicated to them. I'm guessing that if you had actually pinned people down, they would have described an implicit philosophy or rationale based on programs and policies in place at CSUM that support student success. A piece of your implicit philosophy no doubt deals with student retention, but, as you have indicated, the implicit (or assumed) philosophy is not limited only to retention.

You certainly undertook a serious review of existing philosophy statements and probably noticed that there is a huge variance in them. Some are more clearly written than others – some make more sense than others. Some are a string of platitudes; others are far more meaningful.

I share your hope that the philosophy statement you develop will guide the structure and content of the policies and practices that affect first-year students and can also be communicated in a meaningful way to the students themselves. In the future, you may want to let students help you assess whether you are adhering to the spirit and the letter of your first-year philosophy statement.

Before commenting on your statement, let me share a story from the past. When John (Gardner) and I were at the University of South Carolina, we co-taught a course for graduate students on the "first-year experience." We told our students during the first class that a question on the final examination would be to write about their "philosophy of education." Even with all that advance warning, many of our students had a great deal of trouble even figuring out how to begin responding to this question. They were quite good at talking about what they were doing or wanted to do, but talking about their core values or beliefs as related to education was a real stretch for most of them. It's hard for many of us to take a step back and really think about these core assumptions, values, beliefs, philosophy—whatever language we want to use.

Now let me react to the statement itself. First, as you certainly know, there is not one “right” or even “best” way to construct such a statement. To me, a philosophy is generally aspirational – that is, not “what we do currently,” but what “we will do,” “will strive to do,” or are “committed to doing.” When I read your statement, it implies that you currently “connect first-year students to the campus community.” Do you do this currently in every case or is this something that you are committed to doing because you believe it to be a purpose of the first year? You might want to consider wording such as “we strive to connect” . . . or “we are committed to connecting,” or even more directly, “we will connect.” Now, I realize that this is a subtle difference and you may prefer the present tense. And of course, this is YOUR statement, not mine, and you can word it in any way that makes sense to you.

As you delineate first-year learning goals, be sure that you continue to keep the emphasis on what the institution does, not what students do. (By the way, you have done an excellent job of focusing on the institution in the lead paragraph of the current statement.) That means that in terms of your learning goals, you might state that you believe the purpose of the first year is to provide an environment (or structures) through which students achieve these goals (or begin the process of achievement). I agree that student development issues are perhaps what differentiate first-year goals from others, although any goal can be “staged” at a first-year level.

You have done an excellent job in laying out the steps for producing, implementing, and evaluating such a statement. All that’s left is to determine exactly how to word it so that it is meaningful and useful for you. And let me reiterate: The most important objective for this task is to develop a statement that will be useful to you.

Best wishes. Please let me know if you have any questions about my observations or suggestions.

Best wishes to each of you. You are a terrific team!

Betsy

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