

*Use of the NSSE Data and Student Engagement
College of Agriculture
Report 2005-06*

The College of Agriculture has developed a series of programs and events, both in and out of the classroom, to effectively engage our students in their education, in the University and in the community.

The COA conducted an internal NSSE, discussed the results as a College, and utilized that data to make improvements in our program.

In terms of the 7 Principles, our College has data to indicate particular strength in the following areas:

- Encouraged faculty student contact
- Encouraged cooperation among students
- Encouraged active learning

Data from the NSSE and our Academic Rigor survey indicate a very open-door engaged faculty who are involved with students both in and out of the classroom. Active learning at the Agriculture Teaching and Research Center, a tremendous variety of extra and co-curricular activities, result in an engaged learning community.

Potential areas of improvement include:

- Communicated high expectations

Our academic rigor survey indicated a significant range in the expectations from course to course---from “exceptionally challenging” to “not challenging”, highly dependent on instructor and course. The instructors have been provided that data for self evaluation and improvement. We are tentatively scheduled to conduct the survey in Fall, 2007, and utilize the Fall, 2005 data as benchmark information in order to assess progress.

COA activities relative NSSE, Rigor and Student Engagement

Outreach and retention

Central to our educational mission, is the identification and recruitment of outstanding students to the College. Unlike many majors at CSU, Chico, there are only four CSU campuses that offer programs in agriculture. Our efforts to attract students to the program extend well beyond the north state, encompassing all of California with a focus on the valley communities where agriculture is a major industry. The COA has an outreach and retention officer who is charged with helping to identify, attract and retain the “best and the brightest” to our program. Her efforts involve a coordinated effort with High School agriculture programs, the FFA, and selected major Community Colleges that are primary feeders to our programs.

Beginning in April, all students who have applied to the COA receive a personalized letter from their assigned academic advisor---a faculty member in their area of interest. The advisor is given information relative to the current status of the applicants, and is encouraged to personally call each applicant. In addition, the outreach office hosts several “call nights”, where current students (“Ag Ambassadors”), personally call each applicant. The outreach office also hosts an “open house”, including a tour of the Agricultural Teaching and Research Center in early April. There is a concerted effort to get admitted students to attend summer orientation---and to continue that process of connecting students to the University.

Theme housing

In the Fall 2006 we enrolled the first cohort of freshmen into our Agriculture “theme house” at University Village. In a cooperation with University Housing, this program has been a success in building a University community for students with common interests. The first year experience can be traumatic for many students and their parent’s. The idea of an integrated theme house has led to greater academic success, as well as development of long term friendships, with the long term expectation of increasing retention. The theme house provides a focal point for many freshmen students. Upper classmen, club representatives, and faculty have taken the opportunity to mentor those students who participated in the theme house. Early indications suggest a significant increase in applicants for the coming year.

Engagement in the College / extra and co-curricular activities

As students arrive at Chico in late August, the COA is prepared with a welcome back barbecue of all new and returning students at the Agriculture Teaching and Research Center (University Farm). This informal gathering which the vast majority of our students attend is prepared and served by faculty and staff. This provides an opportunity to welcome back our friends and “clients”, while creating an atmosphere of inclusion for all. The numerous student organizations are given a brief opportunity to introduce themselves and their mission, while recruiting members for the first meeting. With the opportunity for our new students to meet faculty and staff, the continued success of this event leads naturally to the informal, “open door policy” that we so strongly encourage our faculty to adopt.

Thirteen student organizations provide diverse co-curricular and extra-curricular opportunities representing all majors and interests, within agriculture. Club presidents serve as representatives to the ICC (Inter Club Council), which is involved in the coordination of many College events. We strongly encourage leadership development, which is clearly enhanced by the countless opportunities presented to all of our students.

Student success course (AGRI 180)

Eight years ago, the COA, in conjunction with academic advising, created a one unit “student success course”, required for all freshmen and transfer students. The intent of this course was quite similar to the current UNIV 101, Introduction to University Life, efforts that are occurring University wide. Our eight week course has been designed to connect students to both the

College and University. Wide ranging discussions, including academic rigor and honesty, financial aid, career planning and placement, are supplemented with library assignments, course planning and efforts to engage students in the culture of the University.

NSSE Survey

When the University conducted a planning workshop to discuss the National Survey of Student Engagement, the College of Agriculture was highly interested in the comparison of our College to the University as a whole. Because of the relatively limited numbers in the University sample for Agriculture, we decided to complete a NSSE survey for all juniors and seniors in the College. With assistance from institutional research, all students were surveyed, the data were compiled and a summary looking at differences between Agriculture and the rest of the campus was distributed for discussion. Although differences were not significant in most areas, there were some areas of distinction where Agriculture was particularly strong (advising). Data were discussed at a general faculty meeting, with recommendations for improvement.

Academic Rigor Survey

Recently, the University has focused discussion on the level of rigor at the institution. The COA decided to collect quantitative data on courses to assess our level of rigor (engagement). With expert assistance from Institutional Research, we designed a survey that was administered to all courses within the College during the fall semester. Data were compiled and each faculty received a summary of their courses compared to College means, as well as student written comments. A faculty meeting was devoted to how to utilize this benchmark data for program improvement. We are in the process of refining the survey, and determining how it will be used in the future.

Mandatory advising

Although we have very close contact with many of our students, the faculty determined that mandatory advising was important to the success of our students. In an effort to improve course sequencing, reduce units to graduation, and create a more engaged student body, the faculty developed and adopted a mandatory advising program. We implemented the program for spring semester, 2006. Registration holds were placed on all students in the College until they had met with their assigned advisor. We found this to be an incredible opportunity to improve our interaction with all students within the College. This program did not make a significant difference to our outstanding students who were already engaged with faculty and engaged in educational planning. Mandatory advising was critical to those students who occasionally “drop through the cracks” because they either do not seek advice or are sometimes embarrassed because of their academic performance. Anecdotal evidence from students and faculty indicate this program has resulted in changed behavior for many students. We are in the process of completing mandatory advising for the second semester (for fall, 2006). The faculty, staff and students recognize the importance of this process, and continue to refine our program. We observed that many students came for advice more prepared, aware and directed. This allowed

the faculty member more time to focus on internships, career planning or general discussion about that student's educational objectives.

Career and Internship Fair

The COA just completed the third year of our annual Career and Internship Fair, held at the Agricultural Teaching and Research Center. We have worked with Career Planning and Placement, as well as the Internship Office, to develop one of the largest career fairs on campus for the smallest College. We limited the event to thirty prospective employers, that included regional, national and some international employers. We appreciate the developmental presentations from the Career Center on resume building and interview skills. Historically, we have been very pleased with placement rates of our graduates. Yet with a growing, changing discipline, it was essential that we increased the diversity and quality of the employment opportunities for our students.

Summary

Although the programs listed above may appear to be distinct, we believe they are interrelated activities that help us to strengthen the academic experience of our students. Attracting, retaining and ultimately, placing high quality graduates is critical to the success of this institution. We believe that engaging students in and out of the classroom, providing a challenging curriculum, and creating a true learning community results from connecting the dots between these different, but related programs. As we move further in assessment of learning outcomes, we intend to further refine our efforts to offer a unique high quality learning environment.