

REPORT
First Year Experience Task Force
February, 1999

Background:

On March 10, 1998, a group of faculty, staff and students (Appendix A) was assembled to serve as a Task Force on the First Year Experience (FYE) of undergraduates at UC Berkeley. In the charge to the committee, the Task Force was asked to look at ways to purposefully engage students in the intellectual life of the university with attention to the following:

1. A review and summary of prior campus studies and efforts in this area.
2. A review of current efforts and an analysis of areas requiring increased coordination.
3. A review of data on new students including information on trends and appropriate interventions.
4. An assessment of needs and a determination of which are common across groups and which require separate or different interventions.
5. A review of summer orientation activities, with recommendations for changes, expansion, or new efforts that could easily be undertaken through existing programs and services.
6. A determination, if possible, of a program(s) which best meet first-year needs, and recommendations of appropriate articulation within existing programs, departments, activities and an identification of ongoing oversight mechanisms to ensure necessary evaluation, articulation, planning.
7. A review of activities that might ease the transition into the second year.

The FYE Task Force met biweekly throughout fall semester, 1998. As a departure point, we were fortunate to have access to research already conducted by an intern, Roberta Friedman. Ms. Friedman's work quickly provided us with the requisite historical overview of the campus' prior efforts and studies; with pertinent journal articles on the experience of students in transition; and, information about common practices at campuses across the nation. This analytical work provided an important framework for our ensuing conversations, and is attached to this report as Appendix B.

Although asked to identify "a program" that would best meet the needs of the transitioning student, the Task Force determined that our contribution would be most useful if we were to put our efforts into developing a thorough understanding of the transitional issues facing students at Berkeley, and then identify ways in which those transitions might be more positively influenced. Throughout our many discussions, we continued to believe that the "multiple entry point" model of service delivery (referred to as decentralized by many), with appropriate improvements and modifications, is still the most effective way to serve the diverse needs of the entering Cal student.

In concert with the above, we also concluded that an analysis of the details of individual units, and their specific programs and activities, would result in a lengthened process of review, with concomitant delays in response to compelling needs. Thus, we focused on the larger issues related to transition to the university, and will leave to the managers responsible for key programs and activities the obligation to act upon our recommendations and observations.

We have made a number of general observations that are important to identify at the onset.

First, it was clear to the committee that the transition of students living in the residence halls is a very different one from the transition of those not living in the residence halls. Therefore, we focused much of our attention on the non-resident student transition. Our analysis clearly indicated that the program offered in the halls is providing the necessary assistance to students, and that mechanisms to modify and/or add program elements to address emerging needs were in place and working very well.

Second, we concluded that there is much that can be accomplished with modest but strategically focused funding, as long as ample planning and coordination occurs and priorities are clear. In addition, we concluded that there are activities or processes that can be easily modified or expanded rather quickly, again with appropriate direction and clarity of priorities.

Third, we concluded that even the “best” practice, with creative and well-conceived interventions, was only as good as the student’s engagement in the opportunities available. We concluded, therefore, that the campus should continue to strive to ensure that multiple and divergent *high quality* options exist for the transitioning student rather than putting all efforts into one program, per se.

The Importance of Understanding the Transitioning Process:

The Task Force approached its charge in three stages.

- First, five (5) outcome statements were developed that describe the critical transitional elements that every Berkeley student should have the opportunity to achieve. These outcome elements were based, in part, on the Upcraft and Gardner (The Freshman Year Experience) concept of the needs of first year students. Upcraft and Gardner’s “needs” include developing academic and intellectual competence; establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships; developing identity; deciding on career and lifestyle; maintaining personal health and wellness; and developing an integrated philosophy of life.

The five final versions of the outcome statements are:

#1. INTELLECTUAL CONFIDENCE: Students will have increased confidence in and a better understanding of their abilities and responsibilities as members of the academic

community, and will have begun to demonstrate invigorated intellectual curiosity and a passion for ideas.

In particular, students will have engaged in some form of self-assessment, begun to clarify their own level of academic competency, and taken steps to strengthen their talents in areas critical to academic success at Berkeley. They will have begun to take responsibility for their own learning and decided to engage in coursework or other academic discourse that requires independence of thought and a move outside the area of their primary academic interest.

#2. LEARNING THE CAMPUS: Students will have the knowledge and ability to use the multiple forms of campus resources and processes.

Since Berkeley offers students myriad resources aimed at helping them navigate the university as a system, students must learn about and begin to independently use the many resources readily available to them. These resources are available in many forms and require initiative and networking to deploy. Resources include libraries, technology, publications, as well as individuals.

#3. SELF-KNOWLEDGE: Building on their life experiences, students will have explored facets of their own identities, including values and ethics, social responsibility, understanding others, and learning about and appreciating differences.

Aside from developing as scholars during their first year, students learn about themselves in new and exciting ways by interacting with peers, faculty and staff, by living in or near this environment, by experiencing the campus culture, by making decisions, and by experiencing success and failure. The transitional year must afford opportunities for self-exploration, for understanding the responsibilities of citizenship and for learning about others that are different than them.

4. SOCIAL CONTEXT: Students will have developed a sense of membership in social communities of the campus.

Engagement in university life is enhanced by a strong sense of belonging. Meaningful interactions with peers, staff and faculty are key to helping transitioning students succeed. In addition, developing strong personal relationships with peers and creating meaningful networks helps students invest more strongly in their own education.

5. FUTURE ORIENTATION: Students will have taken steps to plan for their educational, professional and personal futures, including building a professional portfolio.

Transitioning students will be well served by beginning to think about their education in terms of their futures, and by beginning to forge the necessary relationships and experiences that will position them to realize their goals. This includes developing relationships with faculty and staff who can serve as references, identifying group and individual experiences that demonstrate competencies necessary for professional or graduate-level success, and completing projects and assignments in such a way that their inclusion in a formal portfolio demonstrates competency in critical skills.

- Second, the outcome statements became the anchor for our deliberations and formed the context for all of our recommendations. Indeed, the student members on the Task Force were wonderfully deliberative and provided us with much valuable insight into the process of transition, as were the students who participated in the forum on issues for transfers and commuters.
- Third, once the Task Force agreed that the outcome statements represented the group's expectations for the transitioning student, we then identified several critical campus resources pertinent to our outcomes and invited the relevant staff to visit the Task Force to discuss their perspectives on the issues. The recommendations and observations presented by the Task Force were developed as we proceeded through our conversations, and we easily reached consensus on those identified in this report.

As you will note, the final outcome statements are broad, by design, but sufficiently focused so as to provide necessary parameters for all involved with first-year students to share a common framework. The recommendations and observations offered in this report are intended to help better align campus efforts with the outcomes statements, even though we find that the campus, in general, has done very well providing programs and opportunities that address our desired outcomes. The Task Force strongly urges that the outcome statements become the basis upon which programs are identified, evaluated and described and form a means by which we can gauge how successful our efforts are with students. We suggest that they become a part of the Division's "vocabulary" about its goals and intentions with respect to the transitions of students; the focus for marketing efforts and publications; the backdrop for the development of assessment; the focus for planning and development of new or revised interventions; and, most importantly, the structure that helps staff and students talk together about what is critical in terms of transition.

Recommendations and Observations:

In summary, the recommendations that follow are based on either an assessment of insufficient opportunity for students to achieve the outcomes or a need to provide more or different means for them to be achieved. We have noted, in parenthesis after each recommendation, which outcome the recommendation addresses.

A note regarding transfer students: The Task Force concluded that the outcome statements pertain as directly to transfer students as they do to new students entering from high school. The transition of transfer students is complicated, however, by the fact that

they already have collegiate experience, have usually declared a major and have a “home department,” and have half the time to complete their academic careers. Thus, the successful completion of the outcomes by transfer students, in some cases, will require a specialized approach that attends to unique needs brought about by their particular circumstances.

Recommendation #1: We recommend that small, academically-focused courses which allow students to become engaged with a small community of learners while attending to their own academic development be expanded. The size, complexity and competitive nature of the Berkeley culture were often the focus of discussion with the group. The existing courses focusing on issues related to the transition to the academic culture were identified as central to student success, yet are limited in number. The Task Force would like to see an expansion of such offerings, so that every student who wished to enroll in one would have the opportunity to do so. For freshmen, these offerings could extend throughout their entire first year; for transfer students, it is recommended that the bulk of them be offered during the fall semester, to attend to the need for a faster and more focused transition. The goal of this recommendation is to provide greater opportunity for students to engage in the exploration of their academic experiences within the context of a small, well designed, interactive course. These kinds of courses can take many forms, such as freshmen seminars, adjunct and non-academic study strategies courses, as well as courses introducing the university. The point is to provide more of these very successful options so that more students can have access to them. Implementation of this recommendation has obvious budgetary implications, and could be realized as early as fall 1999 were adequate funding provided. (Outcome #1, 2, 3, 5.)

Recommendation #2: We recommend that a thorough reassessment of the campus’ system of advising and coaching students be undertaken immediately. In many different ways, we heard about a compelling need for students to have a “point person” with whom they could establish a more sustained and personal relationship during their transitional period. This was particularly apparent for students not living in the residence halls. It was obvious to the Task Force that the decentralization of services and contacts on campus had its advantages, overall, but served to limit new students in their mastery of resources available to them. We liken our recommendation to the establishment of a personal bridge for students for purposes of “brokering” the campus’ complexity until the transition has been completed. This would require systematic evaluation of current outreach, intake and, in some cases, might involve the actual assignment of students to specific service units.

The Task Force is fully aware that the issue of advising and individual points of contact is complicated, and potentially costly for both the Division as well as academic departments. We believe that this topic should be explored during the discussions of the Committee on Undergraduate Education and that short and long-range systematic planning and budgeting be done soon. The Task Force sees this recommendation as potentially the most difficult to implement, but perhaps the most powerful, if successful. (Outcome #1, 2, 3)

Recommendation #3: We recommend that a comprehensive method of information dissemination be developed and implemented. It was clear to the Task Force that students are bombarded by information, and that it exists in multiple formats, is received at varying times, at times appears conflicting with earlier information, and serves more to confuse than help; it is summarily dismissed by students, we were told. The Task Force considered this situation to represent a problem of “access” to information needed to learn about Berkeley in an efficient manner and served to create an obvious disadvantage to students who need to make a fast transition. The manner in which information is provided to students is too convoluted and dispersed to be reliable, and the Task Force believes that centralization leading to simplification is the only way to gain control of this “out of control” situation. Students consistently indicated to us that because they receive so much information, they only pay attention to that which indicates that action must be taken; otherwise, it is discarded.

Many useful ideas emerged that are worthy of consideration. For example, the Task Force felt that a complete “make-over” of the Berkeley home page via a vis access to information in a user-friendly and intuitive way is needed. Further, we discussed the benefits of having a “pre-timed” e-mail messaging system that would automatically alert students to important information. But these examples simply demonstrate the kinds of work that needs to be done, and beg the issue of information proliferation, ineffective publications and flyers, and difficult maneuvering on the web.

Again, this is a recommendation with longer-term implications, but certainly needs to begin to be addressed right away. We suggest that a panel of key staff and faculty involved in disseminating information be assembled to begin to think through the suggestion of “centralization” and begin to establish campus guidelines that will provide better, and more timely, and multiply-formatted information to students. (Outcome # 2)

Recommendation #4: We recommend that a location be identified and furnished that would serve as the “gathering place” for non-resident (commuter) students. In every discussion held in regards to transfer student transitions, the difficulty in connecting with others and having a place “to hang out” while on campus was prominent. Of course, the experience of residents was different, but since over 75% of entering transfer students live off-campus, this message was strikingly strong. Students, in particular, argue that their ability to meet others and make friends is made unnecessarily difficult because such a location is not available to them.

The Task Force strongly urges the immediate identification of a space as described above, and the allocation of modest monies to provide the required equipment and furnishings. In doing so, this recommendation could be successfully implemented by fall, 1999. The repeal of rent control measures in the Berkeley community, the very low vacancy rate, and possible changes in residential patterns of commuting students in general have prompted the committee to view this recommendation as central to the successful transition of the non-resident, entering transfer student. Further, we speculate that such a space will become even more important to campus retention efforts as the residential patterns of students change over time. A budget covering very modest supplies

and equipment (lockers, microwave, computers and printers) would be necessary to make this space viable for students.

In addition, we recommend that serious consideration be given to providing some form of resource referral and assistance through the use of peer mentors. In addition, students believe, and the committee agrees, that peers could easily manage to provide sufficient community building and resource referral as part of this space's operation. Since the majority of transfer students do not live in the residence halls, this space becomes integral to their smooth transition to campus. Peer mentors could serve in a role somewhat analogous to Resident Assistants by planning social and educational programs, answering individual questions, and providing referrals to services. In addition, providing peer mentors offers the transitioning student key interpersonal contact with others who, by virtue of their roles and responsibilities, indicate that the campus cares about their effective transition. (Outcome #2, 4)

Recommendation #5: We recommend that more deliberate and focused first-semester services on behalf of transfer students be coordinated, to include transitional work on writing and reading, study strategies, portfolio building, etc. The Task Force was struck by the relative lack of services directed at entering transfer students. However, through our discussions, we came to understand that the issues of transition are common across all new students, with transfer students needing an expedited model of delivery. Thus we recommend that focused programming and services be developed and offered to transfer students, with an emphasis on first semester transition. This service should be strongly focused on academic development, particularly in writing and reading, have a strong peer component, have personal advising, and incorporate small academic development coursework.

The budgetary implications of this recommendation are dependent upon the unit that ultimately provides the general services on behalf of transfer students. Establishing an entirely new service unit has fairly substantial budgetary implications; expanding upon existing programs and services provides greater economy but may be wanting in terms of comprehensiveness. A decision regarding the type and scope of services on behalf of transfer students to be supported by the Division would hasten the planning efforts and provide much-needed clarity. (Outcome #1, 2, 3, 4)

Recommendation #6: We recommend that connections with faculty regarding issues facing the transitioning student be formalized. Specifically, we recommend that staff in Undergraduate Affairs involved with transitioning students be routinely and formally included in annual new faculty orientation and GSI training. The committee believes that new instructors have a significant effect on new students, and could enhance the student experience in their courses by becoming more aware of and sensitive to the issues faced by them. We recommend that a *periodic* symposium on Excellence in Advising be coordinated and offered through UGA so that faculty and academic staff who provide advising to students are more routinely brought into the conversation about these student needs. We recommend that additional funding be secured, and other benefits be identified and instituted, that would produce additional faculty interest in teaching freshmen

seminars. Finally, we urge that funding be provided to institute additional small seminar-style courses like freshmen seminars for entering transfer students. (See Recommendation #1 for more detail.)

Again, the speed with which this recommendation can be accomplished is dependent on funding planning, and leadership with key members of the faculty community. This will require the establishment of a team of individuals who can gain access to these kinds of venues and persist in establishing the institutionalized means by which we can be inserted into the conversation about teaching and students. (Outcome #1)

Recommendation #7: We recommend that the Career Center and/or other units and segments of the campus community be charged with developing programs and systems that assist new students in building a professional and academic portfolio.

These portfolios would contain information that could be drawn upon when applying to positions or graduate school and might contain such information as resumes, samples of writing, reference letters, summaries of extra-curricular activities and awards as well as any other pertinent information. To we will need to teach staff and faculty mentors how to assist students in developing portfolios. Strategies and timelines will need to be developed to deal with differences between freshmen and transfer students. The committee believes that, if accepted, this recommendation could begin to be realized by fall 1999, with enhancements and additions occurring over time. Budget implications are unclear, but not prohibitive. (Outcome #5)

Recommendation #8: We recommend that additional offerings be developed so that student have greater options to prepare themselves for their academic work during the summer. Currently, summer options for new students are CalSO, Summer Bridge and Summer Sessions. We believe that many new students could benefit from exposure to the expectations of Berkeley if given more options. We were particularly struck by the transitional needs around writing and reading that arose in discussions regarding transfer students who could be aided by intensive work during the summer, and by the suggestion that study strategies courses be offered by Cal staff and faculty at community colleges. The Task Force also believed that the exploration of “distance learning” options might also yield positive results in this area.

There are serious cost implications involved with this recommendation, both for departments as well as students. These would need to be carefully considered. However, the need appeared compelling, and certainly worthy of planning, experimentation, and exploration. Depending of what kind of efforts were to be identified, summer 2000 could see some enhanced summer opportunities for students. One possible option to explore initially might be the development of a course through College Writing that specifically addresses the writing needs of transitioning transfer students. (Outcomes #1, 2, 3, 4)

Recommendation #9: We recommend that several campus policies and practices be reviewed for possible modification in support of the first semester student.

Specifically, we recommend that the 13 unit “rule” be reconsidered for first semester students only, such that there is no “catch 22” for students who receive financial aid and

have difficult academic or personal transitions. Students indicated to the committee that the pressure of maintaining the unit load in order to continue receiving financial aid is an added pressure for new students.

In addition, we strongly recommend that a creative solution to the degree audit process for transfer students be identified and implemented. Given their relatively short time on campus, it is imperative that transfer students understand “where they are” in terms of requirements quickly. The current situation precludes timely audits for transfers students and creates, we were told, confusion about course selection and major requirements to be met as well as potentially lengthened time-to-degree.

The committee also recommends that the cap on units for graduation be reviewed for transfer students. This policy is perceived an impediment to their full participation in the richness and vitality of the campus’ intellectual offerings. Their relatively shortened timeframe in general, in conjunction with the unit limit and lengthy wait for audit information, is seen by transfer students and staff who work with them to be a limitation to their full participation in the intellectual life of the campus.

Further, we suggest that the times that courses start be reviewed for possible revision. Namely, we suggest that the feasibility of having morning courses begin on the hour, and afternoon courses begin at ten minutes after the hour be explored, such that a twenty minute time period be created to allow for students to meet friends for lunch, take care of business, etc. This is a practice already in existence at a number of universities and colleges and might allow students more opportunities for non-structured interactions with their peers and faculty members. The institution of a small team of individuals to research such issues, make formal recommendations and develop strategies for implementation could be undertaken immediately. (Outcomes #1, 2, 3, 4)

Closing Thoughts and Next Steps:

The members of the Task Force developed a great sense of respect for the challenges facing the transitioning student in an environment like Berkeley’s and want to see the Division have a stronger role in this important process. There are a number of areas vital to the successful transition of new students that require more thoughtful planning and study. There are also a number of initiatives that can be started now, with results showing as early as SUMMER AND/OR fall, 1999. We strongly urge the adoption of the outcome statements as the guideposts for all our efforts in these areas. We also suggest that units whose objectives already include services on behalf of transitioning students be asked to review and adjust their activities, where appropriate, to further the likelihood that we can, with confidence, say that students at Berkeley have excellent opportunities to achieve in the five important outcomes during their early days on campus.

Finally, while not addressed in the context of the Task Force’s work, per se, we acknowledge that successful transition to this environment is a process that extends past

the first two semesters. It will be incumbent on the individuals and units responsible for implementing these recommendations to think through ways in which students moving through the campus past the first two semesters can be assisted effectively. Deliberate and intensive interventions aimed at the first two semesters made the most sense to the Task Force. By the same token, however, we are aware that changes in the level of attention offered to students by campus departments may create a “perceived” lack of attention to needs. Careful attention will need to be paid to helping students take more deliberate and self-directed responsibility for their own educational experience after their first year.

The committee suggests that the following steps be undertaken.

- Vice Chancellor Padilla review and comment on the recommendations in this draft.
- After consultation with VC Padilla, a final report be submitted for discussion with the Executive team and others within Undergraduate Affairs.
- Vice Chancellor Padilla consider assembling a small implementation planning team whose charge would be to quickly develop an action plan.

The committee believes that the composition of the planning team needs to be representative of individuals and/or units responsible for the activities addressed in this report, and would require, in addition, an individual who can assist the planning from the perspective for short and long-term funding. This team would need to identify and delegate to appropriate individuals and units those action items for implementation by summer and fall 1999, and those that will require further coordination, planning, or budgetary strategies. We hope to be able to integrate the summer and fall programmatic efforts identified by the implementation planning team into the budget planning process this year, as appropriate.

The task force found the work that formed this report engaging, interesting, and ultimately compelling. While we do many things, and many of them are done well, we think that we can and should do better, and have confidence that the talent and commitment of all can be brought to bear on an improved transition process for all new undergraduates.