

## **PHILOSOPHY DIMENSION REPORT**

**February 18, 2009**

**Foundations Institutions approach the first year in ways that are intentional and based on a philosophy/rationale of the first year that informs relevant institutional policies and practices.**

*The philosophy/rationale is explicit, clear and easily understood, consistent with the institutional mission, widely disseminated, and, as appropriate, reflects a consensus of campus constituencies. The philosophy/rationale is also the basis for first-year organizational policies, practices, structures, leadership, department/unit philosophies, and resource allocation.*

### **Committee Co-Chairs:**

Jon Buse, Dean of Students

April Chatham-Carpenter, Associate Professor, Communication Studies

### **Committee Members:**

Alan Asher, Assistant Professor, Library

Linda Corbin, Director, Undergraduate Programs, CBA

Barbara Cutter, Associate Professor, History

Robert Frederick, Director, Career Services

David Grant, Assistant Professor, English

Adam Haselhuhn, Undergraduate Student

Susan Hill, Associate Professor, Philosophy & World Religions

Tim Klatt, Associate Director, Recreation, Wellness & Recreation Services

Beverly Kopper, Associate Provost for Academic Affairs

Kim MacLin, Associate Professor, Psychology

Amanda Mesirov, Residence Life Coordinator, Dancer Hall

Jim O'Connor, Assistant Vice-President of Marketing & Public Relations

Melissa Payne, Graduate Student, Educational Leadership, Counseling & Postsecondary Education

Kathy Peters, Academic Learning Support & Retention Coordinator

Lyn Redington, Director of Residence Life

Alexander (Lex) Smith, Instructor, Educational Leadership, Counseling & Postsecondary Education

Rick Vanderwall, Instructor, Price Lab School

### **Current Situation**

The Philosophy Dimension Committee examined four key performance indicators related to the existence and dissemination of a philosophy for the first-year experience at the University of Northern Iowa.

The first performance indicator asked whether a written, campus-wide statement of philosophy for the first year exists. There was unanimous agreement among the committee members that UNI does not have such an explicit statement. We found statements that reflect parts of UNI's overall educational philosophy (e.g., LAC goals; Qualities of an Educated Person report), but they are not specifically focused on the first year of college.

The Committee's sense that UNI lacks an explicit campus-wide philosophy statement for the first year was supported by data from the faculty-staff survey done for the Foundations of Excellence project in October, 2008. The FoE faculty survey population consisted of 2,155 faculty and staff members, including adjunct faculty and graduate teaching assistants who taught first year classes in fall 2007. Of the 2,155 invited to participate, 1,070 responded to the survey, for a response rate of 49.7%. 41.3% of those respondents were faculty, 10.3% self-identified as administrators, 25.5% self-identified as professional staff (analogous to "professional and scientific" staff at UNI), 22.1% self-identified as technical, clerical and service personnel (analogous to "merit" staff at UNI), and 0.7% were graduate teaching assistants.

When faculty and staff were asked "Does this institution operate from a commonly held philosophy for the first/freshman year?" a majority (54%) indicated *not at all* or *slight* (response options were 1 *not at all*, 2 *slight*, 3 *moderate*, 4 *high*, 5 *very high*). When we evaluated these data based on the respondent's role within the university, we saw that clerical staff (M=3.1) were the most likely to respond *moderate* to this question, compared to administrators (M=2.4) and faculty (M=2.2) who responded *slight*. Professional staff (M=2.6) answered between *slight* and

*moderate*. There are statistically significant differences between faculty and both types of staff, and between administrators and clerical staff, as well as between professional and clerical staff.

However, there was recognition that one or more implicit (unwritten) philosophy/rationale statements for the first year guide practice in specific units/department, especially in student affairs areas. For example, Department of Residence first year “Springboard” housing program is designed to “enhance entering students’ transition to UNI,” “create peer reference groups” and “enhance students’ academic and social success.”

(<http://www.uni.edu/dor/housing/residencehalls/basichallinfo.htm>). Summer Orientation Staff’s role is “to welcome all new students and their families to the University of Northern Iowa. ... They will help new students connect with each other, introduce students and families to campus culture, ... [and] assist with registration[.]” And the Jump Start program “provides students with an opportunity to make a smooth transition to the university.” These programs share the philosophy that all first year students and their families benefit by having individualized support from faculty, staff and peers, and that such support helps students make a successful transition to college.

When faculty and staff were asked “Does your department/unit operate from a commonly held philosophy for the first/freshman year?” 36% responded *high* or *very high*. When we evaluated that data based on a respondent’s role within the university, we saw again a disparity between groups, with faculty responding significantly lower than those in other roles. All other groups responded *moderate* (administrators M=3.2, professional staff M=3.1, and clerical staff M=3.2) or *high* (graduate teaching assistants M=4.0; throughout this report, graduate teaching assistant data should be interpreted with caution as there were only 4 who responded), except for faculty who responded between *slight* and *moderate* (M=2.5). These differences between faculty and those in other roles are statistically significant.

Faculty and staff were also asked “Has a department/unit philosophy for the first/freshman year of college been communicated to you?” Half (50%) said *not at all* or *slight*. Graduate teaching assistants (M=3.8) responded close to *high*, administrators (M=2.8), clerical staff (M=2.8) and professional staff (M=2.6) responded close to *moderate*, and faculty (M=2.3) again responded the lowest, close to *slight*.

These statistically significant differences between faculty and those in other roles may be related in part to the fact that there are few programs or initiatives for first year students currently associated with academic departments: two in the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry and one in the College of Business Administration. This suggests why faculty, who spend most of their time within their academic departments, would be less likely to be exposed to first year programs or initiatives than administrators and staff. In addition, the difference may be linked to conflicting implicit philosophies toward the first year within the university due to large class sizes in lower level courses (as described below). Most faculty members’ exposure to first-year

students takes place in the classroom, so if first year students are treated the same or seem to be regarded as less worthy of individualized attention than more advanced undergraduates (in the sense that they tend to be in large classes more often than juniors and seniors), faculty members would be unlikely to perceive a special commitment to a philosophy regarding the first year experience.

Programs, for the most part, operate on their own, without being guided by a campus-wide philosophy. We have many programs that indicate we are serving first-year students (see CPI, Table B), but the presence of these programs does not necessarily indicate an explicit philosophy. There is first-year programming and assessment related to the encouragement of self-exploration and personal challenge (trying new things, questioning personal barriers), in addition to providing support for academic and social adjustment.

Additionally, we found evidence of conflicting implicit philosophies toward the first year. Student services programs generally have a philosophy that stresses first year students' need for individualized and personalized support to ease their transition to college. However, the practice of having very large class sizes in a number of courses targeted toward first or second year students suggests essentially the opposite philosophy: that more advanced students (by virtue of having smaller class sizes) should have more individualized attention. In addition, evidence suggests that these large classes may present a unique problem for first year students: For example, the vast majority of students who took Humanities I in Fall 2008 were in sections of approximately 120 students. Almost all those who took Introduction to Psychology in Fall 2008 were in sections of approximately 200, and about half of those taking World Geography were in sections of about 200. According to our CPI, Introduction to Psychology has the highest DFWI rate of any high-enrolled first year course: 26%, while Humanities I is close behind with 25%. World Geography is ranked fourth on the same list, with a DFWI rate of 15%.

Without a campus-wide written philosophy statement, the answer to the next two performance indicators was not applicable. Regarding the second performance indicator, UNI does not have a written, campus-wide first-year philosophy statement that (a) intentionally aligns with and supports the campus mission statement, (b) clearly articulates campus beliefs about the purposes of the first college year, (c) focuses on what the institution controls (i.e., institutional actions and decisions, vs. student behaviors), and (d) articulates why the institution values the purposes made explicit in the philosophy statement. Since UNI does not have such a statement, our answers to the third performance indicator indicated such a statement has not been disseminated to any constituency groups (i.e., first-year students, faculty, student services staff, or other stakeholders). Faculty and staff were asked "Has an institutional philosophy for the first/freshman year of college been communicated to you?" and 61% reported *not at all* or *slight*. Clerical staff (M=2.6) responded the most favorably indicating close to *moderate*. Administrators (M=2.4), professional staff (M=2.4), and graduate teaching assistants (M=2.3) all responded between *slight* and *moderate*. Faculty responded *slight* (M=2.0).

Following the suggestions given in the fourth key performance indicator, the Philosophy Dimension Committee reviewed institutional documents to determine whether or not there was an existing first-year philosophy statement, and when determining there was not such a statement, used these documents to determine key elements that can be used in the development of an explicit first-year philosophy statement. The committee reviewed (a) both academic and non-academic unit/department mission/goal statements, (b) the university's vision and mission statements, as well as its strategic plan, (c) communications from admissions and marketing at UNI, (d) past accreditation reports, (e) liberal arts core (LAC) mission/goals statements, and (f) syllabi from the highest enrolled classes (i.e., Oral Communication, College Writing & Research, Humanities I, Introduction to Psychology, and World Geography).

Based on our review of these documents, we have identified some key elements we think may be considered in a campus-wide philosophy statement for the first year.

- Learning founded on a liberal education, that is personalized and individualized, recognizing students' needs and experiences
- Learning critical analysis skills
- Learning professional skills
- Learning to be productive citizens and life-long learners
- Learning values, including respect, caring, valuing diversity, intellectual vitality
- Being involved in a community of learning within a safe and supportive environment
- Meeting individual students' needs
- Informing students
- Engaging students
- Encouraging involvement
- Integrating the Liberal Arts Core curriculum into the rest of students' coursework – why they are here, what the purpose of liberal arts education is, interrelationships between the disciplines

## Opportunities and Challenges

UNI offers a variety of levels of support for first year students, but there is little coordination of these efforts among departments/units. The university is decentralized, and units are free to develop programs on their own and to operate according to what they think works best.

However, if a common philosophy was present, services and programs could be delivered in a more coordinated fashion, while reducing the likelihood of duplicating efforts across campus.

There is the opportunity for the university to coordinate a newly-drafted philosophy statement with the rewriting of the university's strategic plan, to really help drive what is done at UNI during the first and subsequent years of college for students.

UNI could include elements of the current strategic plans of the university and departments across campus in its philosophy statement for the first year, such as the following:

- Student learning is at the center of our culture. Students will be challenged academically. They should be taught by highly qualified tenured or tenure track faculty (“in accord with established performance targets”). Our overall goal is to enable them to become lifelong learners, to continue to grow in their chosen professions, and to function as productive citizens by teaching them critical and analytical skills necessary for lifelong learning. We should be providing a curriculum and related learning activities that promote liberal learning and intellectual development while preparing students for entry level professional positions.
- Student learning includes teaching students to be members of an open, inclusive, ethical and caring community.
- Students should learn respect for all members of the UNI community and the world.
- Students should understand and value diversity, respect, honesty, integrity, fairness, trust, civility, intellectual vitality, intellectual and academic freedom.
- Student learning includes character building, experiential learning activities and service activities, and developing an understanding of global society – learning to understand multiple perspectives.
- A strong liberal arts curriculum is the foundation of the undergraduate student's academic work, and students will understand why this is the case, why it is important.

- Students will be treated as individuals at UNI; they will be provided with a personalized learning environment that responds to their individual needs, encourages growth and recognizes their individual achievements.
- Students need to be provided a safe and supportive environment at the university.
- Students are part of the university community – thus they should have many opportunities to interact with all other groups at the university. They should be actively involved in university governance and their learning should take place within a community of scholars and students working together in a diverse and integrated learning community.
- Students should have a variety of learning opportunities that promote curiosity, creativity, and critical thinking.

The goal should be to help facilitate the self-actualization of students. This includes: promoting and facilitating engagement, effective career decision-making, adaptability, social and emotional connectedness, academic success, and active citizenship. As a university, we have a responsibility to the students who are admitted – to create an inclusive, inviting environment and to facilitate their academic and personal success. UNI should work to remove obstacles to student success and provide points of contact for students who are struggling to be successful. Living on campus helps to facilitate connections. Underlying this is the notion that first year students need varying levels of support to make meaningful connections during the first year. The types of support differ according to the experiences of each student. However, it appears that many support programs are geared toward specific populations (such as athletes, honors students, at-risk students, veterans, etc.), not necessarily all students.

UNI needs to make clear how much support the university intends to provide for first-year students. The elements above seem to indicate what our institution hopes to achieve throughout a student's tenure here. UNI needs to identify what specifically the university hopes will happen during a student's first year. Perhaps this will eventually lead to plans for second year students, third year students, etc., such as have been developed at other institutions (e.g., University of South Carolina's National Resource Center for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition).

### **Recommended Actions**

In spite of the absence of a campus-wide written statement of philosophy for the first year, both faculty/staff and students indicated they believed UNI is committed to the success of first-year students. Faculty and staff were asked "Do you believe that this institution is committed to the

success of first-year students?” and the overwhelming majority indicated yes in some form (90%; *moderate, high, very high*). However, we do still see that faculty are more skeptical of this than those in other roles (faculty M=3.6, professional staff M=3.7, administrators M=3.9, clerical staff M=4.1, and graduate teaching assistants 4.8).

The student data mirror this perspective with 92% of students responding *moderate, high, or very high* to this question. In addition, students were asked “Do you understand this institution’s intended learning goals for the first year of college?” A large majority also indicated yes in some form (80%; *moderate, high, very high*). The FoE student survey population consisted of 3,005 new freshmen and transfer students new to UNI. Of the 3,005 eligible to take the survey, 1,130 responded, for a response rate of 37.6%. The 3,005 students selected to take part in the student survey comprised 23.3% of the total enrollment on the UNI campus in fall 2008.

There was also faculty/staff support for having such a statement. Faculty and staff were asked “Is a formalized institutional philosophy for the first/freshman year of college valuable?” and again strong support was shown (88%; *moderate, high, very high*).

Therefore, a subcommittee of the Philosophy dimension committee worked on drafting a philosophy statement for the first year.

#### *Goals of the Philosophy Statement*

The philosophy statement is intentionally aligned with, and supportive of, the campus mission statement.

The philosophy statement clearly articulates campus beliefs about the purpose of the first year of college. These purposes might be expressed as hopes, goals, values, or a grand design for student learning and growth during the first year. This is the core message in the philosophy statement and should be written in language that can be easily understood by students and their families, external constituents, and all members of the institution. The philosophy statement covers all aspects of the first year and is not limited to a single program or initiative.

The philosophy statement focuses on what the institution controls - its design for the first year of college. The purpose of the statement is to articulate the institution's commitment to the desired outcomes of all aspects of the first year - both in and out of the classroom. As such the philosophy statement "speaks for" the institution rather than for students or others.

The philosophy statement clearly states why the institution values the purposes made explicit in the philosophy statement-- why the stated purposes are a priority for the institution and its role in society.

The philosophy statement, in the body or footnote, acknowledges the process of endorsement by the institution and the date of last revision.  
(<http://www.fyfoundations.org/doc.aspx?id=167>)

### *Philosophy Statement Draft*

A positive first year experience is the cornerstone of students' success in college, and by extension, their careers and lives. The University of Northern Iowa recognizes the importance and value of this positive first year experience for students, and the need for the university to facilitate students' effective transition to the University by providing a variety of experiences, opportunities, and foundational skills to help them become successful students.

UNI is committed to fostering a personalized and supportive environment that challenges and inspires students to actively engage in learning, develop a broad world view, practice responsible decision-making, open their minds to new possibilities, be engaged citizens, and be members of pluralistic communities.

UNI shows its commitment to achieving these goals by providing a welcoming and safe environment that introduces students to the university's values of respect, caring, ethical responsibility, inclusiveness and intellectual and social engagement; is sensitive to individual needs, backgrounds and experiences; facilitates connections with faculty, staff, support services and other students; and encourages active involvement in campus and community life.

### **Recommended Action Items**

- Draft a Philosophy statement for the First Year at UNI. (*High priority*)

A subcommittee of the Philosophy Dimension was charged to draft such a statement. The draft was taken to the FoE steering committee, the Policy Center for the First Year of College staff, and the HLC task force for feedback, and will eventually be vetted at the university-level.

- Consult with relevant constituencies for vetting of the Philosophy statement. (*High priority*)

We recommend the Philosophy statement to be one of the first coordinated action items communicated to the campus community from the FOE committees. A reminder of what FOE is, who is serving, the volunteer nature of those serving, and the work done so far should accompany the Philosophy statement. We recommend the following by way of dissemination:

- A website created where people can register comments
- An announcement via UNI Online, made with a link to the website.

- An email sent to all faculty and staff directing them to the website
  - Specific groups targeted for feedback: Humanities coordinating committee, LAC committee, Academic advisors, Faculty Senate, NISG, P & S council, Merit council, United Faculty.
- Draft tentative goals for the First Year of College (*High priority*)

Action goals/objectives, which are measureable, and time specific need to be developed. These will be informed by the findings of the other dimension committees. This will lead to the assessment of how well we, as an institution, are doing to meet these goals.

- Include approved Philosophy statement in new university strategic plan. (*High priority*)

Since the strategic plan officially runs out in 2009 (with the possibility of having a two-year renewal of it, due to the Board of Regents strategic planning process finishing in 2010), we have the opportunity to include the approved philosophy statement in the strategic plan.

- Come up with a plan for communicating the new Philosophy statement across campus -- how will it be publicized to faculty, staff, new students, prospective new students & their parents, etc. -- so its influence will be felt. (*High priority*)