



TOWARD AN INTEGRATED, CULTURALLY-RELEVANT AND ACADEMICALLY GROUNDING NEW ONBOARDING EXPERIENCE AT CSUCI

ABSTRACT

The academic literature shows that creating an integrated first year experience program that fosters a successful undergraduate student experience through strategic programming that focuses on positive academic transitions and the development of learning communities can move the needle significantly. The authors present an argument in favor of developing a more integrated and intentional new student onboarding experience, from recruitment and admission through enrollment, for first-time, full time and transfer students that is both culturally relevant and academically grounding.

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The following discussion provides the background, rationale, and proposed procedure for revising the use of the term “New Student Onboarding” to expand beyond new and transfer student orientation to include all student-facing activities included from recruitment through admission, orientation, enrollment, and completion of the first year of coursework. We propose the adoption of a campus culture that sets an expectation that all faculty, staff, and administrators are responsible for student success, including recruitment, enrollment, and retention. Finally this proposal calls for significant integration of student onboarding communications, activities, and events to improve student retention.

I. Introductory Summary

CONTEXT

In 2015, the California State University (CSU) launched Graduation Initiative 2025, its ambitious plan to increase graduation rates, eliminate equity gaps in degree completion and meet California’s workforce needs. The CSU identified six operational priorities to effectively implement Graduation Initiative efforts across the system. These areas were identified both through research and practice, as having significant impact on degree completion and student success: academic preparation, enrollment management, student engagement and well-being, financial support, data-informed decision making, and removing administrative barriers. All six of these operational priorities converge as we consider new and transfer student onboarding.

As California State University Channel Islands makes progress towards our GI 2025 benchmarks and goals, retention of incoming students is a top priority. The academic literature shows that creating an integrated first year experience program that fosters a successful undergraduate student experience through strategic programming that focuses on positive academic transitions and the development of learning communities can move the needle significantly (Marshall Holcombe and Kezar 2021). CSUCI has pre/orientation programs, learning communities, embedded high impact practices, and academic advising activities during the first year of student onboarding, and would like to better integrate them to improve our FYE approach, particularly given that our student population tends to be comprised of a large number of first generation, pell-eligible, and historically underrepresented students.

WHY DO THIS WORK? CSUCI is at a critical moment in its development, as we currently find ourselves celebrating our twenty year anniversary and standing at the intersection of multiple pandemics (COVID19, economics, and social injustice) that have negatively impacted our communities, and our students’ success specifically. In order to better serve the changing needs of our students, to drive their social mobility, we must move CSUCI to its next critical step of maturation around new student onboarding.



DISCOVERY

Several years ago, now-interim Dean of Extended University and AVP for Digital Learning and colleagues developed an inventory of communications received by students in their first year at CSUCI. This project yielded results that demonstrate that new students received thousands of email messages from a wide array of offices across the university. We learned that each office sends its own communications in an uncoordinated fashion.

During the Spring 2022 semester, Vice Provost Jessica Lavariega Monforti re-engaged this previous work and learned that communications are being sent to new students from a wide array of offices across CSUCI, including but not limited to the following: student recruitment, freshman/transfer admissions, university outreach, financial aid and scholarships, student housing, student business services, education opportunity program (EOP), academic advising, student orientation and family services, the Title IX office, individual schools/programs, and the like. Many of these communications occur in silos, without cross-division coordination or integration. It is understandable that students are overwhelmed by the many and frequent communications they receive from CSUCI offices, sometimes from different offices about the same tasks/activities; we find that students simply no longer check their campus email messages from the institution as a result.

Anecdotal data collected over the last several years demonstrate that, while there are a high number of opportunities for students to engage with CSUCI as they transition to matriculated student status, there is a lack of connection between activities, communications and events that may contribute to student stop out and drop out, as well as a less than optimal experience for continuing students. Furthermore, there are office/committee level reports regarding a lack of cooperation and participation in student recruitment, enrollment, and retention activities such as combating new student summer enrollment melt, new and transfer student orientation, and Admitted Dolphin Day. Specific examples of this concern include: difficulty in reserving rooms for on campus recruitment, admissions, and orientation events, locked doors and lack of air conditioning during weekend recruitment, admissions, and orientation activities, limited faculty engagement in orientation, faculty counter-messaging students regarding block scheduling and guided registration.

ASSUMPTIONS

Student experiences and faculty/staff feedback about CSUCI's existing onboarding processes led CSUCI's 2022-23 Middle Leadership Team to make the following assumptions about the campus and student onboarding:

- The impact of new student onboarding on student success is underestimated by many, although not all, on campus.
- While the accountability for student recruitment, enrollment, and retention fall on designated offices, there is not a strong enough understanding that student recruitment, enrollment, and retention is part of everyone's role at CSUCI.
- Many campus stakeholders view new student onboarding, from recruitment through



admissions, orientation and enrollment, as a series of events and transactions, rather than an intentional process to build capacity for student success – this leads us to miss the opportunity to have the biggest positive impact on students early-on in their CSUCI experience.

- The Middle Leadership Team thinks we, as a campus community, can make a substantial, significant change for this next round of student onboarding.
- As change is implemented, we can help the campus transition from reactionary to intentional interactions with students and decrease equity gaps, as required by GI 2025.

II. Rationale and Background

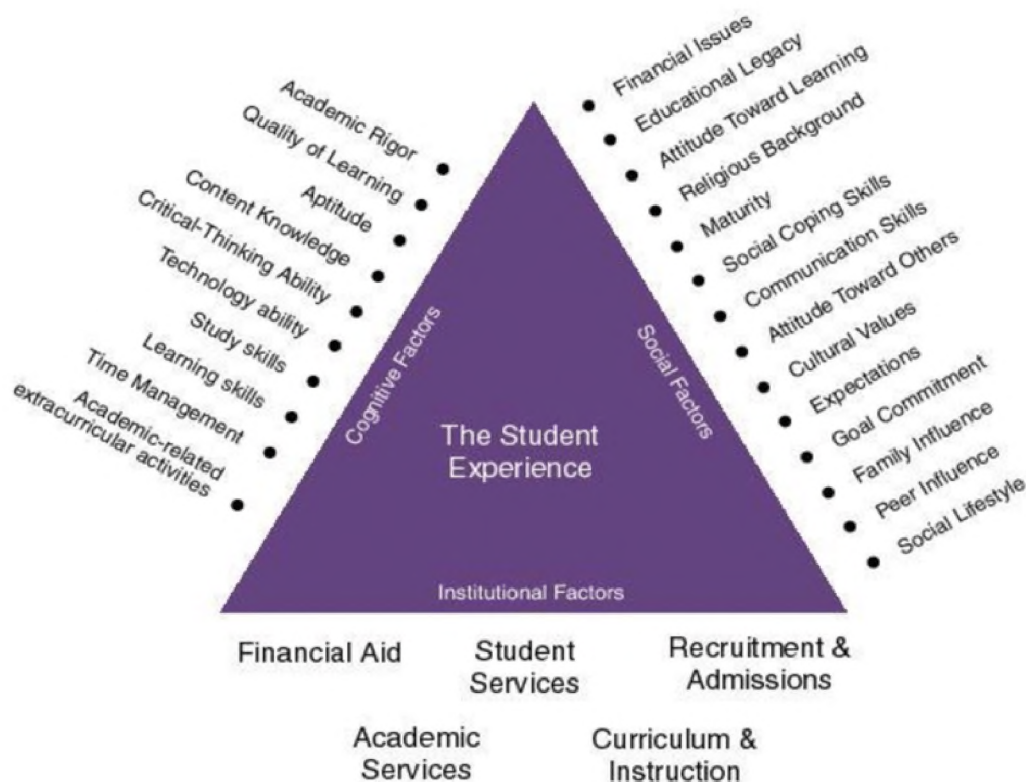
A. Background: New Student Onboarding

A college degree correlates with lifelong social mobility, financial success, health, and family stability (Griffin, Johnson & Jogan, 2022; Haktanir, Watson, Ermis-Demirtas, Karaman, Freeman, Kumaran & Streeter, 2021). As such, higher education professionals strive to address institutional barriers students may experience and develop better support systems to help students persist and successfully graduate. Successful graduation is measured by four-year and six-year graduation rates, and research shows that academic preparedness, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and the first year experience are some of the most salient factors for college persistence and success (Bolkan, Pederson, Stormes & Manke, 2021; Cole, Newman & Hypolite, 2020; Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Griffin et al., 2022; Haktanir et al., 2021; Jackson & Kurlaender, 2014; Pickenpaugh, Yoast, Baker & Vaughan, 2022). A national representative survey of college students measured belonging through descriptive analysis and found that at four-year schools, feelings of belonging predict persistence, engagement, and mental health and that underrepresented minority and first-generation students report a lower sense of belonging than their peers (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). Numerous studies have measured the extent to which self-efficacy (Bolkan et al., 2021), dropout predictors (Berzenski, 2021), resilience, academic self-concept, college adjustment (Haktanir et al., 2021), student-faculty interaction (Griffin et al., 2022; Schademan & Thompson, 2016), peer mentoring (Yomtov, Plunkett, Efrat & Garcia Marin, 2017), social capital (Almeida, Byrne, Smith & Ruiz, 2021), first-year seminars (Pickenpaugh et al., 2022), and learning communities (Azzam et al., 2022) affect student persistence and retention.

The research shows that students' positive adjustment to college in the first year, particularly in the first semester, is the most impactful period in determining persistence or attrition. While some research suggests that students' background characteristics of lower high school GPAs, placement into developmental first-year courses, URM students, first generation, and Pell-grant recipients are "at risk" of not persisting (Berzenski, 2021; Daniel, 2022; Mitra & Zhang, 2022), it is imperative to challenge deficit-based approaches. An asset-based lens will better allow us to foster a supportive campus community, meeting students where they are by offering holistic guidance and support services. Using Swail's (2003) Geometric Model of Student Persistence and Achievement, we can focus on the three areas that inform college



student persistence and overall student success: cognitive, social, and institutional factors. Students come in with varying degrees of preparedness, abilities, goals and aspirations. With adequate institutional support, clear guidelines and a roadmap for success, students can persist and thrive.



To this framework, we add Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model which represents a framework to understand how students of color access and experience college from a strengths-based perspective. In essence Yosso posits that institutions need to capture the talents, strengths and experiences that students of color bring with them to their college environment to bolster their capacity for student success and retention.

According to the National Student Clearinghouse, just 74% of all first-time, full-time students are retained into their second year, and this number drops precipitously for part-time and non-degree-seeking student populations.¹ To combat this outcome, many colleges and universities are embracing the concept of "onboarding" as they transition students from admissions to enrollment. Onboarding, originating in the corporate world, is meant to bring people into your organization in a coherent,

¹ <https://encoura.org/orientation-vs-student-onboarding-four-questions-for-student-success/>

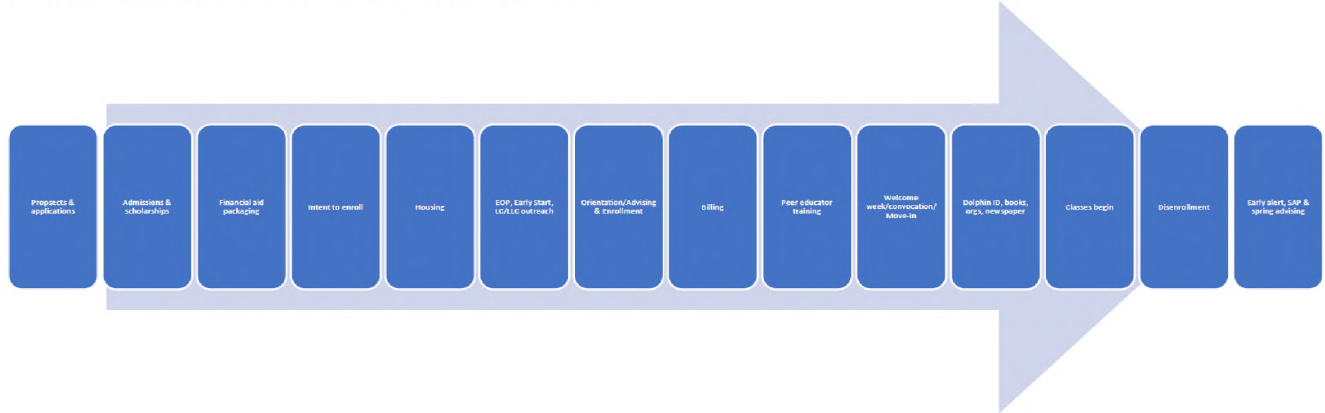


thoughtful, and organized fashion in order to boost retention and performance. There's *orientation* and then there's *onboarding*. Consider these two paradigms as two ends of this spectrum. Orientation is "old school;" onboarding is "new school." Orientation is a one-time, cohort-level program where students are treated the same. When the time is up, the orientation is done whether the goal is accomplished or not. Onboarding is a continuous, individualized journey that begins upon deposit and ends when the student meets a goal of being successfully integrated into the community.

The onboarding process has been a pain point for students, and a central student success priority for universities for years. The pandemic has only made the task more challenging, exacerbating roadblocks for students—and threatening student success and enrollment goals. Onboarding can influence a number of high-priority areas (like academic integration, community building, or working with students at risk) that impact student success. While it's possible to craft an onboarding strategy that touches many areas at once, it is better yet to create a strategy that focuses on the area that promises the greatest impact. Best practice and existing literature point us in the direction of initiating an overhaul on new student onboarding, to make new student onboarding a distinctive part of the CSUCI experience. Specifically, an intentional new student onboarding program will ensure students are familiar with important information that provides a foundation for academic success, such as familiarity with campus resources including campus safety, Title IX response, and mental health services. Further, a well-coordinated onboarding program will also ensure students have a stronger sense of community, sense of belonging, and connection to people and resources, which we know leads to increased academic success and retention.

B. The Existing CSUCI New Student Onboarding Experience

1. Currently the new student onboarding experience is a series of discrete events beginning with recruitment and admissions and ending with enrollment in second year courses and the completion of learning communities. As students progress through the experience, we note that transitions from one step to the next lack integration and intentionality. This results in students leaving from the onboarding process at several stages of the experiences, lowering CSUCI's capacity to retain students. See the current new student onboarding process map provided below.

**CURRENT CSUCI NEW STUDENT ONBOARDING PROCESS MAP**

2. In order to better understand CSUCI's current practices, we have developed a timeline of [current new student onboarding events](#).
3. Fragmented and somewhat un-institutionalized student experience
 - a) As part of the onboarding experience, it is imperative that CSUCI identifies signature events that can be shared with students and families as early as the recruitment phase. Signature events are events that are institutionalized and supported by all members of the CSUCI campus community. As part of the identification phase, it would be beneficial if signature events were defined institutionally to answer the why and importance of each event. These events play a pivotal role in establishing a strong institutional identity right from the start, as they become campus traditions. Signature events help transform the new student experience and play a key role in the onboarding experience and university wide retention efforts. The hope is that the working list of signature events below can be adopted institutionally.
 - (1) Admitted Dolphin Day
 - (2) First Year Orientation
 - (3) Transfer Orientation
 - (4) New Student Convocation
 - (5) Welcome Celebration
 - (6) Weeks of Welcome
 - (7) National Transfer Student Week
 - (8) Family Weekend
 - (9) Noche de Familia

C. CSUCI Data on New Student Onboarding

1. Prospects and recruitment



With a fully staffed recruitment team Admissions and Recruitment have expanded its high school and community college outreach to include the following counties: Ventura, Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo, Los Angeles, Kern, Riverside, San Bernardino, Orange, and San Diego. Increased on-campus tours from 1 to 2-3 daily, Monday through Friday. Each tour can accommodate up to 70 visitors. We also offer a Saturday Dolphin Tour once a month, September through February. This year (2022) we have implemented two new recruitment events; *Get Ready for College at CSYouCI* and *The Black Student Forum*.

Get Ready for College at CSYouCI -This event helped prospective students and their supporters learn about CSUCI's academic programs and services as well as how to apply for Fall 2023.

Black Student Forum- Invited prospective Black students to visit and experience CSUCI, learn about our academic programs, resources for success, student life programs, and how CI might be a good fit for them.

The overarching goal was to help increase the number of Black students interested in attending CI.

Utilized data from the CSU Student Origin report to identify high schools and cities with large populations of Black students.

2. Admission to Intent to Enroll

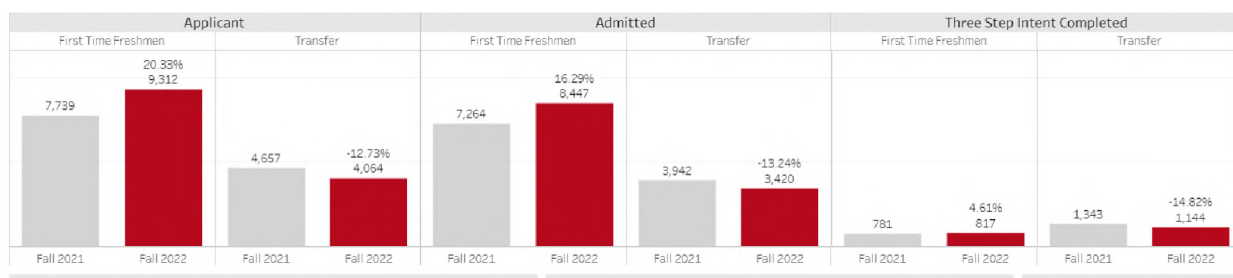
Student applications have fluctuated post pandemic and have negatively affected applications with the transfer population. In fall 2022, transfer applications were down by 12% compared to fall 2021. Nationwide all educational systems, enrollment numbers have been declining. Our local community colleges indicated they had a 35-40% enrollment decrease this past year. Intent-to-enroll we were down by 14%. As for Spring 2022, applications were up by 9% but down 11% on intent-to-enroll.

First-time freshman application numbers have increased for fall 2022 by 20% but stabilized headcount during intent-to-enroll stages compared to last year. For fall 2022, we had a 5% increase on intent-to enroll compared to 2021. Data shows that application numbers for first-time freshmen will decrease for the next few years and will see an increase in the 2025 application cycle.

FALL

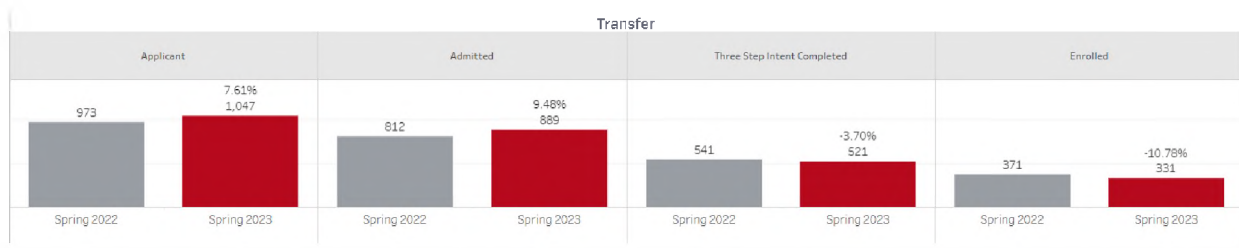


Admit Type	Applicant		Admitted		Three Step Intent Compl..		Enrolled	
	Fall 2021	Fall 2022	Fall 2021	Fall 2022	Fall 2021	Fall 2022	Fall 2021	Fall 2022
First Time Freshmen	7,739	9,312	7,264	8,447	781	817	552	625
Transfer	4,657	4,064	3,942	3,420	1,343	1,144	1,017	866
Redirected Freshmen	1,499	1,123	1,430	1,087	24	20	14	10
Redirected Transfer	905	523	748	433	111	40	65	22
Grand Total	14,800	15,022	13,384	13,387	2,259	2,021	1,648	1,523



SPRING

Admit Type	Applicant		Admitted		Three Step Intent Completed		Enrolled	
	Spring 2022	Spring 2023	Spring 2022	Spring 2023	Spring 2022	Spring 2023	Spring 2022	Spring 2023
Transfer	973	1,047	812	889	541	521	371	331
Redirected Transfer	15	390	13				2	
Grand Total	988	1,437	825	889	541	521	373	331



3. Financial aid packaging and billing (pending responses, Catherine following up)

4. Orientation and enrollment



Traditionally, orientation has been hosted in the months of June and July for our incoming students. June for our first time freshmen(FTF) and July for our transfer students. It is important to note, when talking about the students who attend orientation, these are students who complete the three step intent to enroll process and are completely deposited. The three step intent to enroll process consists of the following:

- Step 1 - Accept provisional admissions
- Step 2 - Choose mandatory orientation session
- Step 3 - Pay non-refundable orientation fee

When looking at the fall 2022 orientation cohort (table below), we can see the university loses students after they have completed the three step intent to enroll process and continues to lose students after attending orientation. About 78% of FTF and 80% of transfers who complete their intent to enroll attend orientation, but as the numbers show, we are not retaining them through the start of the fall semester. Through post orientation outreach, we know some of these students are choosing other campuses over CSUCI for a variety of reasons including financial circumstances, class offerings and modalities, location, and limited interactions with faculty in their respective program.

Fall 2022 Orientation Cohort:

	First Time Freshmen (FTF)	Transfer
Intent	817	1144
Oriented	641	936
Enrolled	625	866

Historically, the orientation program always involves faculty as they play a critical role in orienting our new students. As the program currently stands, we have one faculty representative per major and hope to expand participation through the efforts of this project. Moving forward, we would like to see Deans, Program Chairs and program designees all present not only at orientation, but throughout the entire onboarding process.

5. FYS and LC/LLCs

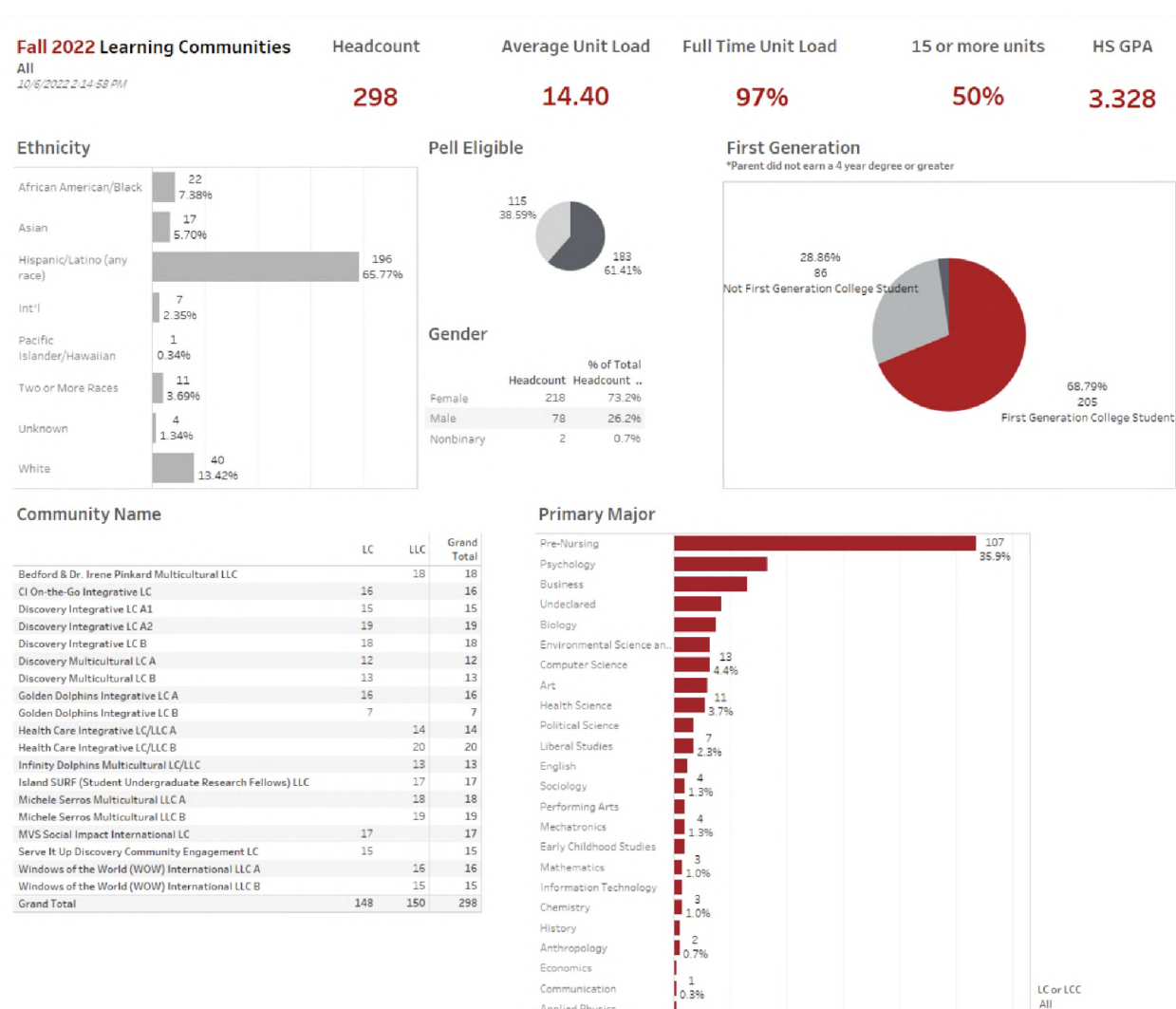
- a) In the current 22/23 academic year, the number of students participating in learning communities was 298 students in the Fall



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of 2022. This was approximately double the number of the previous academic year of 157 students in learning communities at census. The AY 22/23 learning communities consist of 12 communities and 19 cohorts (some communities have multiple sections). The cohort size ranges from 6-20 students.

Below is a snapshot of the 22/23 living/learning communities students:



- b) The goal in the scaling learning communities for the AY 22/23 was to hire 25 embedded peer mentors (EPM) into the program. Due to a low applicant pool, only 19 EPMs were hired.



III. What We Are Proposing

CSUCI's 2022-23 Middle Leadership Team's (MLT) vision is to create and sustain a widespread culture of recruitment, enrollment, and retention across campus so that we can reach our GI2025 goals of 94% student retention from fall to spring and 76% retention from Spring to Fall. The MLT proposes three overarching goals:

1. Reduce fragmented approach to new student onboarding for full-time, first-time & transfers;
2. Develop culturally relevant onboarding experience; and
3. Leverage new student onboarding to create students' academic identity.

We proposed this work happens through [three home team groups](#) on integrated communication, cultural relevance in onboarding, and academic efficacy and identity (led by the individuals highlighted in [green](#)), with coordination and reporting by members of the MLT.

Communication Home Team Charge

The charge for the Communication home team is to develop and implement a comprehensive plan for communication with students including the modalities we will use and the platforms needed to accomplish this. The goal of the plan is twofold. First we plan to identify all the various touch points students have with the university from the point of recruitment through registration for fall classes in their second year. Second, we plan to identify established best communication practices and platforms so that all relevant campus stakeholders are communicating with new and prospective students in a coordinated manner.

The scope of this communication encompasses recruitment, application/admission, registration for classes, housing applications, registration for orientation, the start of their first fall, and the remainder of the first year at CSUCI. This would eventually consist of a timeline or checklist for various offices that would be managed by Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software that would unify and manage all contacts with prospective students and admitted students. Depending on the features of the CRM the campus chooses, we are also recommending establishing a communications portal that will consolidate all communication with students into one online portal where the campus can centrally control who gets what messages when and from what offices. We request that the charge is sent from OTP, with Dr. Guerrero as lead until the new AVP for Enrollment Management and Marketing is hired; at that time the new AVP will



lead this group. The timeline is such that changes should be implemented for Spring 2023 admission and onboarding.

To coordinate these efforts we recommend the establishment of an onboarding communications committee. This entity would determine the type, method, frequency and timing of all communications to students from their time as prospective students, to the time they register for classes for fall of their second year. They will also determine who has access to new student contact information. Finally, they would work with IR to determine the best way to assess and evaluate our communication practices.

- Develop and implement a comprehensive plan regarding communication platforms and modalities.
- Identify touch points with students in the first year across offices and streamline them.
- Identify best practices across CSU for communications with FTFT and transfer students.
- Develop and publish a timeline and/or checklist.
- Recommend a CRM for campuswide use and develop an onboarding portal (including connections to apps, analytics/compliance data transfer to individual offices, etc.)
- Make recommendations for portal maintenance and updating.
- Developing guidelines regarding who has access to new student contact information, what messages go to all incoming students and when/how, and how often these decisions will be reviewed. Should these decisions be made by a committee? Who would populate it?
- Policy review and development
- Recommend how CSUCI assesses and evaluated these practices

Cultural Relevance Home Team

Research has shown that the integration of cultural relevance across both curricular and co-curricular activities supports a student's sense of belonging and ultimately the academic success and personal development during their undergraduate experience. The charge for the Cultural Relevance Home Team will focus on the following:

- Review participant surveys and evaluations from past campus events and activities in the FYE life cycle (recruitment through end of year 1), and make recommendations for adjustments to enhance the student experience in response to the feedback.
- Create a checklist to guide the development of future FYS programming (events, activities, communications) and ensure the infusion of culturally relevant strategies in the planning, implementation and review (marketing, logistics, schedules, target audience, programming).
- Develop a portfolio of faculty of color with research interests for students.
- Provide a list of spanish-speaking faculty, staff, and administrators,



- Provide a list of affinity groups and student organizations about DEI
- Provide a list of ethnic studies courses, especially in LC/LLCs
- Signature annual events with DEI focus (Latino Male Retreat, etc.) in a calendar
- Define ways in which the HSI Task Force gets incorporated into new student onboarding
- Developing a point of contact list for DACA/AB540 and undocumented students
- Family outreach (parents, children, partners, etc.), in English and Spanish
- Make a recommendation about needs for ongoing professional development re: DEI across campus; training BEFORE participating in key onboarding events like with bias training for search committees. What existing programs can we leverage? Gaps?
- Policy review and development
- Recommend how CSUCI assesses and evaluated these practices

We request that the charge is sent from the Provost's office, with Dr. Guerrero as lead or the charge be sent from OTP with Dr. Ford Turnbow as lead. The timeline is such that changes should be implemented for Spring 2023 admission and onboarding.

Academic Efficacy & Identity Home Team

Within an academic context, SE is frequently described in terms of Academic Self-Efficacy (ASE), which defines learner judgments about one's ability to successfully attain educational goals (Elias & MacDonald, 2007). A wealth of literature exists that highlights the importance of ASE for learning and subsequent academic performance. There is a growing, sizable body of research suggesting that efficacy expectations influence motivation, persistence, and accomplishment. Studies have shown that academic self-efficacy is moderately correlated with academic performance. Regardless of the educational setting in which it is measured, ASE has consistently been shown to positively correlate with academic performance, with meta-analytic studies reporting moderate effect sizes (Richardson et al., 2012, Robbins et al., 2004). Findings from the meta-analysis conducted by Richardson et al. (2012) suggest that ASE beliefs account for up to 9% of the variance in the overall Grade Point Average (GPA) of university students, however, significant heterogeneity in effect size was also reported across studies ($I^2 = 90.94\%$). When coupled with culturally relevant strategies, the positive impact of academic efficacy and identity is bolstered, particularly for male students of color (Oyserman, et al. 2001).

Given previous research, the academic efficacy and identity home team will be charged to:

- Define academic efficacy and identity
- Make recommendations re: best practices for developing new student academic efficacy and identity
- Recommend meaningful academic traditions to help define the beginning/end of the CI experience



- How, when, why should deans/faculty be incorporated into the new student onboarding process
- Incorporate faculty into the transfer student onboarding process
- Outline high impact and experiential learning opportunities for students during onboarding
- Incorporate LC/LLCs more fully into student onboarding processes
- Revisit new students after 1 month of starting at CI. explain wrap around student and academic supports. Recommend HOW this can be presented in effective ways to students (student videos for programs?)
- Policy review and development
- Recommend how CSUCI assesses and evaluated these practices

We request that the charge is sent from the Provost's office, with Dr. Lavariega Monforti as lead. The timeline is such that changes should be implemented for Spring 2023 admission and onboarding.

IV. Conclusion

In summary, the existing new student onboarding process is disjointed and contributes to retention concerns for incoming students. While CSUCI has all the pieces necessary to implement a powerful, student success-centered onboarding process, there is a lack of integration and interaction between divisions and offices.

These observations suggest that a departure from current practices to one that is interconnected and intentional may help to eliminate the perception that new student onboarding is solely a transactional practice at CSUCI. Perhaps adoption of a new approach will help to seal holes in CSUCI's onboarding pipeline and close equity gaps with regard to student persistence, academic resilience and more equitable graduation rates. Research has asserted, first-year programming, done well, forms the foundation for academic success and retention. This MLT now has the opportunity to create a different kind of student onboarding experience characterized by integrated communication, cultural relevance and academy efficacy. The MLT would like to form home teams and take the following next steps:

- 1) Inventory and assess existing FYE practices to determine student characteristics and needs, set priorities among these areas of need, identify available resources, evaluate a variety of successful programs, and implement a formal comprehensive retention program that best meets institutional needs;
- 2) Using the lens of HSI servingness, develop a redesign of FYE that takes an integrated approach in retention efforts that incorporates both academic and nonacademic factors into the



design and development of programs to create a socially inclusive and supportive academic environment that addresses the social, emotional, and academic needs of students; and
3) Make recommendations to the President's Cabinet for FYE changes.

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