

Student Ownership, and The College Experience

A White Paper by the
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Preface

The Student Forum on Learning (SFL) is a group of undergraduates dedicated to positively impacting the culture of teaching and learning on UT's campus. We aim to offer feedback on experiences, motivations, expectations, cultural implications, and challenges related to student learning and the college experience. The SFL is sponsored by the Tennessee Teaching and Learning Center (Tenn TLC), and we work closely with their faculty and staff, as well as with the members of the University of Tennessee Learning Consortium (UTLC). Together we aim to identify challenges related to student learning and development, provide a student perspective, and propose creative solutions to be integrated into targeted university initiatives. The group was initiated Spring of 2011, and is currently in its third semester of operation.

While originally intended to simply offer perspectives on learning relevant to the activities of the Tenn TLC, very early into the group's operation it became apparent that members wanted to take on a more active role in advancing student learning. At the first meeting, members expressed a desire to affect university policy and operation in order to more effectively meet student needs. One student recommended we approach group meetings as inquiry discussions about student needs and experiences and, as appropriate, make a formal recommendation to the University regarding the results of these inquiries. Thus, it is with this goal in mind that we present the results of our past two semesters of discussion.

This paper is designed to assist faculty, staff, and administrators in decision-making processes related to the VOL VISION initiative and others having to do with undergraduate student learning. We have been intentional in identifying and describing student experiences in seven key areas related to our learning and development, so that these experiences can help guide strategies for enhancement. We recognize that many at the University of Tennessee have a vision for what they want students to become. However, we feel this vision is not really made explicit so that students can act upon it. Therefore in the concluding section of the paper, we have tried to provide a template with examples that could help facilitate objective setting and identify associated student actions. This tool is intended to help further the process of employing creative solutions to improve student learning and development.

Finally, we want to thank the Tenn TLC and the UTLC for supporting the authorship of this paper. We recognize the hard work they and all other leaders are putting into making the University an even more meaningful and enriching place for us, and we appreciate the opportunity to be a part of this process. We hope that this document makes you proud, and that it prompts ongoing dialogue between students, staff, faculty, and administrators.

Introduction

Through our exposure to the Tenn TLC and the UTLC, it has come to our realization that many faculty and administrators are concerned about students not taking ownership over their learning and college experiences¹. We have heard faculty express disappointment with the widespread lack of engagement many students exhibit, and have witnessed it ourselves both inside and outside of the classroom. Many students appear to expect to be spoon-fed their course material, and appear resistant to hard work or self-sufficiency. However unlike many faculty and administrators, we, as students, understand many of the experiences that contribute to these behaviors. We are similarly concerned about student apathy and feel there are a number of ways the University could help encourage and facilitate students taking responsibility for, and ownership over, their learning and development. This paper informs seven of these areas, describing the student perspective (as represented by the SFL) on each, and offering ideas for enhancements. The areas of focus are as follows: campus advising, service-learning and community engagement, general education, the classroom experience, empowering ownership over learning, diversity and interculturalism, and facilities and physical spaces.

1. Campus Advising

Throughout the past two semesters, the SFL discussed academic advising extensively. In these discussions, we recognized that the University had put substantial effort into enhancing the advising process. We are grateful for the improvements that have come out of this effort. We hope that advising remains an institutional priority, and that student appointments continue to become more tailored to each individual's experiences and needs. This includes employing intentional and strategic efforts to help us take advantage of valuable opportunities and stay on track to graduate.

Despite that advising appears to have increased as a University priority, the experiences expressed by our members signaled that the quality of sessions is inconsistent. Some students explained that while they were very happy with advising in their departments, the quality of advising at the campus level was irregular. For example, one student stated, "I had a good experience because my advisor had been in the same major as me and she was able to inform me of experiences she had concerning her classes. My schedule was always well thought out and well guided by my advisor." However, another student relayed an experience in which she, as a political science major and an Asian studies minor, was paired with an engineering graduate. She explained that her advisor had a lot of trouble assisting her and wasn't even aware that her minor existed. A third student expressed having a positive experience with a

¹ By "college experience", we refer to the collective set of experiences, both curricular and co-curricular, that a student engages in throughout his or her time at the university.

peer advisor through the University Honors program, because this student was able to offer guidance relevant to her program of study. These experiences led us to believe that students had more meaningful experiences when their advisors, whether they were faculty advisors, professional advisors, or peer advisors, were knowledgeable about their programs of study.

Our experiences also reflected inconstancy in the quality of processes related to advising sessions. For instance, students who were able to access major-related information (major requirements, departmental policies, etc.) and schedule appointments online expressed greater satisfaction than those who were not. (When trying to schedule an appointment via phone, one student described waiting on hold for 90 minutes, feeling this was “not a very good way to make an appointment.”) Some suggested that they might benefit from being able to schedule an optional extended session as well. One student who had planned her schedule prior to her meeting was able to spend time going through her DARS report with her advisor. She felt that this was extremely helpful, and suggested that these experiences might be available to others if they knew how to prepare, and had the option of an extended appointment.

Given the enhancements to advising that have already been made, we propose that this impact could be maximized if the best practices discussed above could be employed by the entire advising community. We feel that by establishing consistency of good process, making necessary information available, and creating clear expectations for students, the University could both accommodate those changing majors, and help all students understand and fulfill their roles in the student-advisor partnership. Therefore we propose:

- All advisors be expected to have a strong knowledge base about their students’ programs of study, or that all student-advisor partnerships be coordinated based on major, if applicable.
- All major requirements, departmental policies, and other important information become available to students online.
- All appointment scheduling be moved to a centralized, online system such as Banner or the system used by the business school.
- An optional extended appointment length be offered to students.
- Quality assessment surveys be integrated into the advising processes.
- The University employs an optional peer advising program, available to all students.

2. Service-Learning and Community Engagement

Service-learning and community engagement has been an area of significant focus from the SFL’s initiation, and remains a concern to us. In the first meeting, an SFL member expressed, “A person can come and go from UT and never know what it means to be a good citizen.” We see this as a problem. While some of us have engaged in service experiences through the University, many students have not.

We suspect that is because the opportunities and experiences are not integrated into most student's academic curricula, and there is little encouragement for students to become engaged. If there were more emphasis from the University on the value of service, these experiences would be more heavily integrated into the curriculum, and students would be encouraged to seek them out. Without this emphasis, not only are students missing out on the benefits of serving the community, but the University is missing out on a great opportunity to engage us as learners.

These missed opportunities are deeply concerning to us, as we observe among many students a severe lack of engagement in the learning process and the college experience in general. As one student reflected, "My service learning class had the largest impact of any single class on my education. Being a political science major, I have sat through numerous lectures on just how much public policy influences lives. None of that hit home until I spent a semester studying education policy and working in an inner-city school program. The correlation between what I learned in the classroom and how it applied to the outside world that I experienced in that class has changed the way I approach any classroom subject. The class finally allowed me to learn and not just be educated." Just as this student was enlightened and empowered through her service experience, we want all students to be. Through having a greater awareness of community issues, we want all students to have the ability and desire to apply reason and problem solving skills to community issues. In short, we want, for ourselves and our fellow students, more real-world engagement with our subject matter. Service-learning provides opportunities for all of these things.

While we are aware that there has been a proposal put forth to enhance the University's community engagement and service-learning capacities through the creation of a campus-wide center, we hope that our own advocacy can help advance these efforts. Therefore we suggest the following measures:

- Create a center for service-learning and community engagement on campus, through which students can easily seek opportunities to serve.
- Promote a culture of service and volunteerism across campus by strategically integrating service experiences across the academic curricula.
- Increase institutional priority on civic and community engagement by offering multiple and varied service-learning courses in each academic college.
- Initiate a curriculum requirement (with an opt-out opportunity for select students) of one 1-3 hour service learning course.

Institute a graduation pledge similar to that used by Appalachian State: "I pledge to explore and take into account the social and environmental consequences, and the civic and community responsibilities, of any job or career I consider and will try to improve these aspects of any organizations for which I work."

(<http://act.appstate.edu/graduationpledge>).

3. General Education

While recognizing that certain courses in the current curriculum can be critical to our development, the SFL's perceptions about general education held that the rigid structure limits their abilities to explore new areas of learning. As one student expressed, "The current structure seems to help those who are not as self-motivated or proactive about building an enriching and personally relevant course of study, but it seems to greatly impede those who are." We realize that petitioning is occasionally an option for expanding our learning opportunities, but this process can be difficult and problematic, and sometimes requires students to complete the course first. One student described being informed that she would need to complete a course before petitioning. She reflected that "With little flexibility in my 4-year plan, this option was simply not possible for me and I ended up taking a course with which I had little engagement." Another student expressed being limited by a "rigid, major-intensive schedule," in which "being able to substitute courses more easily or having a more clear and streamlined process to do so" would have greatly benefitted her.

The students also expressed that the rigidity of the general education curriculum can inhibit student ownership over the college experience by requiring very little thought or consideration to one's course planning. Some described their course curriculum as being almost entirely prescribed by the majors. For these students and others like them, it is possible, and even likely, to graduate having taken few or no courses out of sheer interest, and having exercised little independence over their academic careers. We feel that this situation can contribute to students feeling complacent about their courses, and not perceiving a need to take responsibility. Since we understand the need to take ownership and responsibility, we want to see both students and the University reap the benefits of this ownership. Therefore, we propose the following measures regarding general education:

- The number of course options available through the general education curriculum be increased.
- Students have the ability to petition for a course replacement before completing the course they wish to petition.
- The course petition process be converted to the web so that students can easily—under the guidance of their advisors—initiate and follow through with course replacements.

4. The Classroom Experience

Since our primary focus as an organization is student learning, we devoted a significant amount of our meeting discussions to the student learning experience. Regarding this experience, we perceive—as mentioned above—a general lack of engagement, ownership, and motivation among many students. While this is not characteristic of all students, we have some ideas as to why many act this way. First, much of our class time is spent listening to instructors lecture. While many students do not see this as a

problem, we feel it can inhibit motivation and willingness to work hard. One student expressed that “lectures can provide a good foundation for experiential learning... [but] a hands-on portion makes students more receptive to the lecture.” Another student shared that while her physical presence is often a requirement of the course, she does not often feel as though she must be mentally present for the class. Some SLF members felt that the standard lecture format can also keep students from getting to know others in the class, something they expressed as being important to them. In fact, one student explained that he “would like to see minimum lecturing and more individual and group study.” In line with these statements, we propose that by implementing creative means and ways for students to engage each other and the material, many of them will participate more actively and enthusiastically in class.

Through our conversations, we also noticed that lack of access to instructors could impede our ownership over and progress toward learning. A number of students spoke of experiences in which they went days or weeks without being their instructors returning their emails, and some spoke of their instructors also not being available during office hours. Because we feel that regular access to our instructors helps us develop valuable relationships with them, as well as self-assess our learning and performance, we propose that by maintaining accessibility, instructors can facilitate greater ownership and motivation among their students.

In order to increase overall engagement, ownership, and motivation among students, we advocate that instructors:

- Incorporate more interactive activities into the curriculum (such as experiential learning, clickers, and other methods) that allow students to actively participate in their learning.
- Increase opportunities for peer or small group discussion about course material.
- Attempt to accommodate different modes of learning (such as active or visual learning) by using different methods of instruction over the course of the semester.
- Strive for consistent accessibility, and invite students to ask questions after class, during office hours, or through email.
- Include multiple in-class responses and opportunities for students to gauge their understanding of course material. Ideally, some or all of these would be ungraded.
- Utilize the Blackboard grade posting system for all courses, and that grades be posted in a timeframe that allows students to gauge their performance over the semester.

5. Empowering Ownership Over Learning

As expressed in previous sections, we feel there is a lack of engagement, ownership, and motivation among many students. In addition to the perceived reasons described above, we suspect that many students often do not understand their instructors’ intended outcomes, or the relevance of their course

material. Some students might figure this out over the course of the semester, but our instructors could help us get there faster by making these expectations and outcomes explicit early on. One student described a “lack of communication about expectations,” and another expressed a desire to see a greater “connection between presented material and its purpose or use.” We feel that when instructors clearly delineate their objectives and expectations, students are better able to guide their own learning because they know what outcomes they are striving for. It is also likely that when students receive more non-graded assignments aimed at assessing and promoting their learning, they will in turn demonstrate greater learning throughout the course. In summary, we propose that through more intentional communication of learning outcomes and non-graded assessment of learning, students will take greater ownership and achieve greater learning.

Secondly, a lack of knowledge about the courses they are selecting during the registration process may also indirectly contribute to the lack of ownership many students exhibit over their learning. Often students choose courses they would not have chosen if they had access to better information. One student expressed that he finds it “frustrating to blindly guess about courses,” and stated that he would “like to have the opportunity to make more educated decisions about scheduling.” The opposite scenario can occur as well, with certain courses not appealing to many students because they do not recognize the value of the course from the information available. Therefore, we feel that if students had more complete information about courses during registration, they would be able to make more informed decisions over what courses to take.

Therefore, in order to increase student ownership through intentional course selection and increase engagement, ownership, and motivation throughout courses, we propose the following:

- All course syllabi include intended learning outcomes.
- Instructors discuss these outcomes in depth on the first day of class, and continually tie course material and activities back to these outcomes.
- Courses include regular formative assessment of students’ learning and overall progress.
- That the University compile a database of syllabi for all UT courses, with each syllabi containing at minimum the course learning outcomes, assignments, grading scale, instructor expectations, and teaching methods. (Such a database could include the syllabi from the last time the course was offered, and instructors could replace the syllabi every time the course is updated.)
- The syllabi database be integrated into the Banner system, so that students can view it as they are registering.
- The TN 101 system also be integrated into Banner so students can view evaluative data alongside the course syllabus.

6. Diversity and Interculturalism

During our first meeting of Fall 2011, we had the privilege of having Rita Geier speak with us about diversity issues on campus and in society. Through this meeting, many members came to a better understanding of why appreciation for diversity is a critical component of an academic community. At the heart of our conversation was a desire for diverse student voices to not only be heard, but to be sought out and valued. One student mentioned that, “In order to appreciate your fellow classmate, you need to first learn how to appreciate their unique background.” As a group, we agreed that all students graduating from UT should have an appreciation for differences, and that the University should be a place where we embrace these differences and learn from each other. Another student said, “I don’t feel as though any of my courses, save one specifically on race, addressed diversity or facilitated diversity in the classroom.” We would like to see a campus culture that accepts and values individual differences, one that promotes an inquisitiveness and desire to engage with multiple and varied perspectives and experiences. We feel that a more visible and institutionalized emphasis on appreciation for diversity and interculturalism would create a warmer learning environment for many students, and would contribute to greater student involvement and success. The SFL plans to address this issue ourselves, through a video aimed at helping students understand and appreciate the diverse experiences of their peers. We hope that the University will also work to foster these outcomes by considering the following measures:

- Including a diversity module, similar to the Life of the Mind module, in the orientation process, and making it mandatory for all entering freshmen.
- Including in every academic major multiple “access points” for diversity and interculturalism messages. Examples include integrating training into course curriculum, making it a recurring part of departmental discussions, and including it in the faculty rewards structure.

7. Facilities and Physical Spaces

Last Fall, the SFL served as a focus group for the Classroom Renovation Committee, informing ideas for the Humanities classroom renovations. As we thought about our experiences in various classroom spaces across campus, we realized that the state of the University’s physical spaces affects our perceptions about how we are valued by the University, and in many cases affects our ability to learn. For instance, those of us who have attended classes in the Haslam Business Building or the new Ayers Hall conveyed feelings that these were “more serious learning spaces” than the Humanities and Social Sciences building, or Estabrook Hall.

Some members described incidents in which the physical classroom space actually inhibited their learning. Issues including extreme temperatures, loud construction, and noisy air conditioning units contributed to these classroom disruptions. For example, several students complained of extreme

temperatures in buildings such as Estabrook Hall, in which one student took multiple tests in eighty-degree temperatures. To combat this problem, window air conditioning units were added to cool the classrooms, but the units were unsuccessful and just created more noise and distraction. Additionally, students repeatedly pointed out the “decrepit” state of some buildings on campus. For instance, as one person described, “During last year’s hailstorms, I was one of the fortunate students who got stuck in Estabrook Hall, working on a design project, when the roof began to break as balls of hail struck it and entered the building.” Students also mentioned many of the classrooms limiting their instructors’ use of teaching methods other than traditional lecture. This, too, was felt to be problematic, because as mentioned above we are able to take greater ownership over our learning when we are involved in the process. In summary, we feel that the declining state of many facilities impedes student engagement and contributes to many students feeling like they are a low priority to the University.

As part of the Classroom Renovation Committee proposal, we also photographed students studying across campus, to inform where students spend time studying. This project prompted us to examine the availability of informal learning spaces. Many students voiced a desire for more of these spaces, where they could engage in individual or group study. These spaces could range from a group of tables and a white board to a sophisticated space such as the Library Commons. Some buildings across campus have such spaces, and we feel they contribute to a more tight-knit and engaged academic community. The Library Commons is a great example of an effective informal learning space, and we hope that more buildings could integrate smaller versions of this type of space. In order to address this and the concern of inadequate learning facilities, we suggest the following measures:

- Classrooms in older buildings be equipped with ceiling fans.
- The University assesses the soundness of older buildings, and makes changes and updates necessary to creating comfortable classrooms.
- Newly built structures and classroom renovations allow for greater flexibility in teaching methods.
- The University integrates informal learning spaces into the renovation plans of all new academic buildings.

Conclusion

As stated in this paper’s preface, we recognize that our leaders have a vision for what they want us to become. As exemplified above, we too have aspirations for our learning and development. We hope the experiences we have shared can help shape and guide the development of this vision. To facilitate this process, we have, with feedback from the Tenn TLC and UTLC, created the following template. This template includes what we believe to be some of the intended outcomes the University wants all students

to achieve, and allows an opportunity for further thinking about how targeted activities across the four-year span can address these. As stated above, we hope that this tool helps facilitate communication of the University’s vision for its students by clarifying and connecting overarching outcomes with specific actions. This template is just meant to provide a framework from which to build an operational definition of the vision. The categories provided are just examples.

| Example Outcomes: | Core Base of Knowledge | Responsible Citizenship | Appreciation for Diversity | Professional & Personal Development |
|--------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| Freshman | <i>Example:</i> Join a learning community or formal study group | <i>Example:</i> Join a campus organization <i>Example:</i> Fulfill plagiarism module requirement | <i>Example:</i> Complete diversity orientation module | |
| Sophomore | | | | <i>Example:</i> Make contact with Career Services Center <i>Example:</i> Consider undergraduate research participation |
| Junior | | <i>Example:</i> Undertake a major-related service-learning experience | | <i>Example:</i> Consider travel abroad |
| Senior | | | | |

By equipping students with the tools we need and by integrating purposeful opportunities to achieve targeted outcomes, the University can empower us to take greater ownership and responsibility over our learning and development. While we recognize that the University has made substantial enhancements dedicated to this end, there are still a number of inhibiting factors. The goal of this white paper was to identify some of these factors and contribute potential solutions through which they might be addressed. Our hope is that through creating conditions that allow and encourage greater ownership over our learning and development, that the university might be a richer, more fulfilling place for all.