Strategic Academic Planning
Subcommittee 3
Faculty Forum #5, March 14, 2008
Summary Report

Topic: Undergraduate programs and core disciplines

Charge: Provide a vision of what UC Merced's undergraduate programs and core disciplines should aspire to become in the next two decades.

Membership: Gregg Camfield (chair), Udaydeep Bali, Jane Lawrence, Robert Ochsner, Dunya Ramicova, Christopher Viney. Academic Senate consultant: Peggy O'Day.

Purpose
The subcommittee's objective for this forum was to review findings from its recent faculty survey and to stimulate discussion and feedback on four general objectives that have begun to emerge as key strategic components of its undergraduate vision.

Survey findings
In its recent (early March) survey, the subcommittee asked faculty members to consider two lists of possible "ends that [UC Merced] ought to pursue" through its undergraduate programs. The lists were taken directly from "Guiding Principles for General Education at UC Merced" and *Our Underachieving Colleges and Universities*, a book by former Harvard University President Derek Bok. Two additional possible purposes were added to the Bok list by the subcommittee.

In addition, the survey asked for faculty feedback on the importance of interdisciplinary education, the evaluation of teaching, the sharing of successful pedagogies and the best ways to use the strengths of a research university in undergraduate education. Response rate for the survey was 66.3%.

The subcommittee reported a "strong consensus" among respondents on the primary goals of undergraduate education at UC Merced. Top choices (those considered "high" importance by more than 60 percent of respondents) were as follows:

- critical thinking: 90.8%
- decision-making: 80.6%
- communication: 80.6%
- scientific literacy: 74.6%
- ability to seek and evaluate information: 72.7%
- ethics and responsibility: 71.6%
- cultivating intellectual openness and flexibility: 63.6%

The survey also found that nearly two-thirds of respondents affirmed interdisciplinarity as a means to educational ends, while 58.2 percent said they believe UC Merced should establish criteria for evaluating teaching vs. 31.3 who said it should not.

Four general objectives

Based on these statistical results and open-ended feedback from dozens of respondents, the subcommittee has identified four general objectives the university should pursue to foster a rich and rewarding undergraduate experience at UC Merced. They are:

1. Develop and reward the use of appropriate pedagogies.
2. Ensure that students understand the role of research, preferably through experience.
3. Develop ways to help students integrate the pieces of their education.
4. Support and enhance diversity.

The balance of the forum was devoted to open discussion and feedback on how best to pursue these objectives.

Objective 1— Develop and reward the use of inquiry-based and learning-based pedagogies.

For discussion purposes, the subcommittee offered a wide range of possible strategies toward the fulfillment of this objective:

- offer new-faculty orientation tailored to the needs of the UC Merced community
- offer faculty seminars – something more robust than what's available from the Center for Research in Teaching Excellence
- provide CRTE consultation:
    - about syllabi
    - about pedagogies
    - through classroom observation
- assign faculty mentors
- de-emphasize student teaching ratings
- create faculty teaching portfolios:
    - aligned with general goals
    - aligned with WASC needs
    - aligned with needs for program reviews
    - ensuring that innovation is rewarded, not penalized
- have peer reviews of teaching portfolios

During discussion, attendees generally endorsed this approach but noted that the strategies seemed very "classroom-based" while the richest learning environment is often outside the classroom. Service learning, field work, internships, freshman seminars and other nontraditional learning experiences may contribute at least as much as in-classroom instruction and should be promoted as much as possible. To implement these strategies successfully (whether inside or outside the classroom), the university must understand the

effect on faculty workload, invest in a supportive environment and create an appropriate reward structure.

A concern was raised about the merits of de-emphasizing student teacher ratings locally (at UC Merced) but not globally (within the UC system). In response, it was noted that the system only requires "evidence of teaching excellence" but doesn't prescribe how it should be determined. Therefore, UC Merced should have plenty of latitude to set its own criteria.

To overcome resource challenges, faculty members were urged to seek grants from philanthropic organizations known to fund higher-education programs, such as the Pew, Lilly and Hewlett foundations. Faculty should "create a wish list" and work with University Development to identify potential donors to underwrite internships and field work, or to donate or fund such things as "smart boards," workstations, lab equipment and facilities. But one word of caution: donated equipment must be well-suited to the intended use.

The subcommittee next introduced WASC expectations as a major factor to consider in the university's approach to pedagogy. They include:

- learner-centered curriculum for student success
- scaffolding of content
- alignment of learning outcomes
- curriculum design directed by learning outcomes
- project- or problem-based learning
- community connections
- collaborative or cooperative learning

It was noted that the movement toward learning outcomes, as encouraged by WASC, puts less emphasis on teacher "ratings" and more on evidence of learning. For example, in writing courses, student progress in writing quality would be of greater significance than how students rate the instructor.

Finally, attendees were asked how UC Merced faculty can become innovators in the practice of teaching, rather than just implementers or refiners of ideas already known. They were also asked to consider if the university should hire faculty who are researchers in higher education and use classrooms as labs for pedagogical research.

Feedback on these ideas was mixed. While some noted that innovation can be good, others pointed out that it isn't always the best thing for students. Refinement of the "tried and true" can also be innovative and more effective than something completely different. Another attendee observed that it would be better to have people helping the faculty than studying them. In a resource-constrained environment, investing in pedagogy may not be as high a priority as other needs.

Objective 2 – Ensure that students understand the role of research, preferably through "experiential learning."

As a research university, UC Merced can offer students a richer learning environment by exposing them to the fundamentals of discovery and knowledge creation. Making research part of the undergraduate experience not only improves learning outcomes but also represents a key differentiator for UC Merced relative to non-research schools in attracting and retaining top-quality students.

To get cutting-edge knowledge into the classroom, the subcommittee believes UC Merced must ensure that "scaffolding" in lower-division courses enables engagement at higher levels. This requires the use of best practices in undergraduate lower-division education. Attendees were asked how this might be achieved most effectively. For example, should the university hire pedagogical faculty in disciplines and make them responsible for progress toward this goal?

Comments again focused largely on resource constraints. Some noted that hiring specialized faculty to address this need is not a realistic option today and may not be for many years to come. Others pointed out that such faculty are hard to find. It was noted that some universities (UC Berkeley, universities in Scotland) address this issue by putting their most distinguished and experienced faculty in lower-division courses.

The subcommittee presented several suggestions to increase undergraduate participation in research, either by supporting current efforts or launching new programs. Examples of the former included such efforts as NSF-funded REUs and the McNair program, as well as widespread collaboration with undergraduates in research. New efforts offered for consideration included endowed undergraduate research scholarships and a digital communication program that allows students to publish their own journals of undergraduate scholarship.

During discussion, a question arose about the percentage of undergraduates currently engaged in research of one type or another. Attendees were told the university is currently trying to gather this information through faculty inquiries, but responses have been slow in coming. Several people suggested other ways of gathering this data, including payroll records (for positions with stipends) and the registrar's office (for positions with research credits). It was widely agreed that having this information in hand would be useful with WASC and would help with student recruiting.

It was noted that donors are generally more inclined to fund programs that provide financial support directly to students, rather than to administration or faculty. Thus, donors may be a key resource in increasing student participation in research. Matching-gift programs also can be a very effective solution. Many donors are more willing to contribute if their gifts can be leveraged through other sources. This type of program can be established within the university as well, where grants secured by faculty members are matched by the university.

Attendees strongly endorsed a suggestion to appoint a director of experiential learning, noting that this individual could help with service learning, internships, science and math initiatives as well as student research projects.

Objective 3 – Develop ways to help students integrate the pieces of their education.

In the recent faculty survey, two-thirds of respondents reaffirmed the desirability of interdisciplinary education at UC Merced. Yet students generally do not understand the merits or mechanics of choosing complementary courses. The subcommittee asked attendees to comment on several possible strategies that might help to achieve this goal:

- revitalize the CORE concept
- create undergraduate portfolios
- establish "learning communities"
- adopt a different school structure
- create interdisciplinary programs
- create interdisciplinary projects

Attendees focused primarily on the pros and cons of the CORE concept – a great idea but difficult to implement for a range of logistical and practical reasons, including class size, faculty time constraints and uncertainty about how the CORE program ties into majors. It was noted the class sizes could be reduced by creating multiple CORE offerings rather than requiring everyone to take the same class. The goal of CORE is to create "communities of inquiry," which can be done without requiring every student to study the same material.

Other strategies were also well-received, but the subcommittee was asked to think in terms of priorities, since it is unlikely all could be implemented. It was also noted that current efforts to define UC Merced's future school structure (subcommittee 1) could have a significant impact on this objective. For example, if the university were to change the school structure, as suggested in Faculty Forum #4, to having a large college of letters and sciences, a graduate school, and professional schools, interdisciplinary learning would be much easier to deliver and the CORE program would become more manageable.

Objective 4 – Support and enhance diversity.

UC Merced's extremely diverse student body makes this an important issue from both the faculty and student perspective. At its first faculty forum, the subcommittee was urged to make hiring of underrepresented faculty a major priority for the university, despite the proven difficulty of finding and attracting candidates. The subcommittee proposed two strategies to address this concern:

- hiring a consultant to help with best practices (specifically, author Caroline Turner)
- hiring a vice chancellor for equity and inclusion (as UC Berkeley has just done)

On the student side of the equation, the subcommittee believes UC Merced's diverse student population needs to be cultivated and supported, as follows:

- with pedagogical solutions
- with student-life enhancements
- through student engagement (e.g., tutors, peer groups, teacher involvement)

Comments focused primarily on the need for a breakthrough in hiring underrepresented faculty, especially African-Americans. Though the first successful hire is likely to experience enormous time demands and may feel somewhat isolated, he or she will find an outstanding mix of students and a welcoming environment in which to operate. Hiring two or more at once, if possible, would be one way to avoid overwhelming the first hire.

The subcommittee expressed the view that progress on its other objectives will also support its diversity goals.

Next steps

The subcommittee believes forum feedback has affirmed the validity of its four general objectives. It will process suggestions and comments on specific strategies and make appropriate refinements. It may also consider other issues implicit in its charge. No additional faculty surveys or forums are planned at this time.