Recommendation of the Distinctive Identity Implementation Committee

Date: April 27, 2005

Attached is the final recommendation for the basic framework and implementation of the Masteries approach outlined in SFA '08. The committee is unanimous in our support for the proposal and we recommend it to you enthusiastically.

The goal of first the Distinctive Identity Task Force and now the Distinctive Identity Implementation Committee has always been to help SFASU promote itself through the development of a distinctive identity. This masteries approach proposal is aimed first and foremost at helping SFASU project a unique identity that honors the academic mission of a quality university while still appealing to potential students and other stakeholders. The masteries approach embodies and clarifies our shared mission so that it can be put before the public.

In The Future of Higher Education, the authors of the Futures Project conclude that "there must be clear learning goals, not just with regard to content but as to the intellectual skills and capacities to be achieved (135)." Our masteries approach proposes to create an identity that highlights our commitment to students' abilities in the areas of *communication*, *civic engagement*, *career preparation*, and *creative problem solving*.

Some detractors have suggested that the masteries approach is little more than "window dressing." Even if this is the case, enhancing the marketability of an SFA education improves our ability to recruit the students we need. If SFA becomes more attractive to students, then the committee will have succeeded whether or not the nature of the education offered changes fundamentally. If this new identity helps us recruit and retain students, the masteries approach will pay dividends well into the future.

We believe that the masteries approach outlined here will enhance our reputation by making the strengths of an SFA education *transparent* and *pervasive.*

Making our goals transparent

We hope to make the goals of an SFA education transparent by bringing the abilities found in a quality education to a more visible position. While the purpose of the complicated menu of course requirements may make sense to those who permanently inhabit the university, the method and meaning of course requirements is often far from clear to potential students taking their first look at the course catalog or to employers reviewing the transcript of a graduate.

The committee does not believe that an SFA education is inferior or needs fundamental change. However, we need to do a better job presenting it to potential students. As the Futures Project concludes, higher education is facing increasing competition. More institutions and more types of institutions are competing with traditional universities like SFA, and that competition is sure to continue to grow. We need some tangible, academic response to challenges from the

convenience of on-line universities, the proximity of community colleges, and the brand-name recognition of branch campuses of the major university systems.

Currently, an SFA education lacks a clear or unique identity. To persons unfamiliar with a college education, program requirements can come across as an incompressible collage of unrelated courses rather than an invitation to high school student to continue their education. We need to make sure that students see the education that we offer as being valuable to their personal and professional growth. While our academic courses and programs may have all been carefully crafted in line with noble goals of higher education, these goals are often not clear to students.

Students will choose and stick with programs with clear goals. By clarifying our goals we will be better able to bring in students, especially the kind of first-generation college students most likely to be intimidated by the current presentation of program requirements. Once enrolled, students will be more likely to stick with programs where they can identify goals and track progress toward them.

We would never say that students should come to college to "take classes." However, in practice, that is often what we present to them and that is all that many students will do. If, on the other hand, we help them understand why courses are required, they will be more likely to share our goals. Again from the Future's Project,

"The more institutions accept their responsibility, the more students will. Where institutions are clear as to the expected learning outcomes, where there are meaningful assessments of student learning, and where these assessments guide continuous efforts to improve the quality of learning, the student's sense of responsibility for truly mastering learning soars. Instead, in most settings there is an unspoken, comfortable conspiracy between faculty and students not to bother each other too much; mediocrity reigns (136)."

The need to better project our goals and success goes beyond recruitment. According to the Futures Project, elected officials see higher education in "strikingly different terms" than academic leaders (78). The different perspectives on the meaning of higher education are reflected in the growing movement toward increases in assessment and accountability. Thus, transparency will help SFA by anticipating future demands from SACS and the State of Texas.

In The Abandoned Generation, Willimon and Naylor suggest that underlying many of the challenges in higher education are three fundamental problems: meaninglessness, fragmentation, and the absence of community (15). We believe that students will assign little value to an education unless the meaning is clear. One study found that 9 out of 10 college graduates felt that while their degree helped them get a job it did not give them the skills they needed for the workplace.[1] Conversely, the masteries approach will help students see the connection between their course work and those abilities valued in the workplace and the community.

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[1] Olblinger and Verville, 1998. Cited in The Future of Higher Education, page 55.

Making our goals pervasive

While the masteries approach is primarily a tool for promoting what we already do well, it can also serve as a guide to making an SFA education even better. The masteries approach makes the goals of an SFA education *pervasive*.

Students can get an excellent education at SFA. However, many do not. This is not unique to SFA. According to the Futures Project there is "extensive evidence that students can, and regularly do, pass courses without mastering the skills and knowledge that will be required (136)." As we focus on these masteries, we more easily ensure that students develop the skills the university has always considered the hallmarks of an educated person.

Many programs at SFA already provide excellent templates in one or more of the masteries. At the same time, many departments don't clearly articulate the skills that are currently built into their programs, thus they will need to more clearly state the goals they have for graduates of their programs. The masteries approach can take the best of what is currently being achieved and make it campus-wide.

The benefits of a distinctive identity

In order to build a distinctive identity for SFA based upon our academic mission we need an academic mission with an identifiable hook. The masteries approach gives specific enough form to the education we offer to allow us to package it. If we don't build our "distinctive identity" on a discernable academic mission then SFA will continue to be seen in terms of pine trees, athletic events, and the other incidental things that viewbooks fall back on. Leaving SFA to be marketed on these superficial matters undermines academic excellence from a student's first exposure to SFA and keeps us in a competitive disadvantage as we compete against branch campuses of large systems that have ready-made name identification.

STAMAT recommends schools develop a "strong verbal and visual vocabulary" to convey what we have to offer. The masteries approach allows us to construct a picture that is more understandable than the unstructured set of course requirements often presented to students. By framing our education in a way that is comprehensive yet unique, SFA can pull itself "out of the blur" of information coming to students and generate discussion (or "buzz") among potential students and parents.

The masteries approach helps close the gap between student perceptions and those of faculty. This is most evident on the topic of preparation for careers, a major concern of students. According to our survey, about 83% of SFA students rated career preparation as a "high priority" compared only 38% of faculty. Meanwhile, 91% of faculty believed that SFA was preparing students for careers, but only 79% of current students agreed. Further, only 53% of high school students and 57% of potential transfer students saw this as a goal for SFA. In addition, 20% of current SFA students rated SFA as doing a "poor" job on career preparation while only 5% of faculty rated SFA's effort as poor. This "poor" rating from students is especially interesting because students generally give SFA's efforts a *higher* rating than faculty. The evidence thus suggests that we need to rethink how we present our goals to students.

Why the masteries approach works

        The masteries approach is an attempt to create a common language that describes student success in a way that is clear to students, parents, and post-graduate educators and employers. Unfortunately, much of what SFA presents is of little interest to high school students. The beauty of the campus and the small-town setting hold little charm for high schools students we recruit. Other institutions in the region offer classes just as small and are in small towns just as nice as Nacogdoches. Further, many of these schools have an advantage because of their proximity to larger population centers or the visibility that come from being in the UT or A&M system.

        We believe that bringing the campus together around a common rhetoric will help the university project a consistent and strong image. The common language proposed here is flexible enough to allow for the breadth of the university as well as future growth. *Communication*, *civic engagement*, *creative problem solving*, and *career planning* are all abilities that will be familiar to external constituencies while still allowing for the complex demands of higher education. The inclusion of a *broad-based education* highlights the unique nature of a university education and helps distinguish us from community or junior colleges.

        The masteries committees will define each individual mastery in ways that allow each program to meet the needs of its students. These masteries definitions will dovetail with the framework (see attachment) that has been developed by our committee and reviewed by the colleges. While the DI committee is not in the position to create standards for programs, these masteries are specific enough to allow future administrators to constructively guide programs. While programs can be modified without a masteries approach, such an approach can provide useful guideposts for future growth.

        Some elements of the mastery approach require shifting priorities and re-allocating resources. However, most of what is outlined in the proposal is a change in presentation. To the degree that some resources will be needed to fully implement the proposal, the costs are relatively modest. However, we need to be willing to invest in the academic infrastructure of the university just as we have in the physical infrastructure. A university that can spend millions on new dorms, a student center, a recreation center, and a new baseball stadium should be able to find the more modest funds needed to refine and promote the academic mission that is at the heart of our identity. There is no need to invest large amounts of money in advertising SFA until we have a plan to make the value of our education clear to the audience.

        Some of the costs outlined by the committee would likely emerge as we approach reaccredidation and other components of the strategic plan. While some of these costs have been outlined by the Distincitve Identity Implementation Committee, the costs are often not a product of the masteries approach.

        By making our academic goals pervasive and transparent the masteries approach should increase recruitment and retention. It does not raise standards for admission or graduation. By building upon the total university experience SFA already offers, it will not make excessive demands upon individual instructors or programs.

        Through our discussions with the colleges and faculty across campus, the most common reaction would have to be described as cautiously receptive.   There are also a smaller number of

individuals both more strongly supportive and against the approach. One point to keep in mind is that the masteries approach will not be a quick fix to enrollment and retention problems. However, it can be a long-term solution and give us the unique identity for which we have struggled for many years. It will required effort and leadership at all levels; however, the payoffs of such a concerted effort will be much greater than a series of small, quick fixes. In conclusion, this masteries approach addresses the needs of potential students and employers, and the concerns voiced by the public and the legislature. It will create a shared language for bragging about the skills of our graduates without diminishing the academic goals of the institution or compromising the integrity of individual programs.

Action statements:

- Appointment of Masteries Committees in areas of Creative Problem Solving and Civic Engagement to begin work on university framework definitions in Fall 2005

- Work with Masteries Committees in areas of Communications and Career Preparation to gain approval of university framework definitions in Fall 2005

- Work toward the funding of a Director of Assessment for Teaching Excellence Center with partial responsibility for support of Masteries

- Consider the appointment of an Administrative Fellowship to explore grant writing and assist piloting departments with masteries implementation.

- Implement Masteries in Communications and Career Preparation through pilot department programs in Spring 2006

- Implement digital portfolio pilot program (Full campus implementation will require a part-time portfolio manager)

- Bring in speakers to address issues related to masteries implementation

- Schedule workshops to aid departments who might pilot programs beginning in Spring 2006

Conclusion

The Committee appreciates your attention to our recommendation and welcomes any questions you might have. Enhanced promotional and recruitment activities, new buildings, new baseball and equine sports, and the beginning of some specific new academic initiatives, are all pluses for SFA. The Committee believes, however, that enhancing the overall branding presentation of the university to the broad spectrum of stakeholders, in terms of best-value vis-à-vis competing institutions, requires an overall, pervasive, identity. That is the Masteries Approach.