

Enhancing Undergraduate Student Success through Re-Imagining Student Services as a Community Network of Care

FSLI 2025 Project Summary (Cohort 19)

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Project overview and background:

Meeting the ever-changing needs of our undergraduates, as well as engaging in continuous quality improvement in Academic Programs, requires regular assessment of how our students are doing. Common student success metrics include enrollment numbers, retention rates, academic performance (GPAs), and graduation rates (4- & 6-year). These are important quantitative measurements, but they are inadequate to evaluate the whole picture of student success or inform advances in undergraduate education. Qualitative data on students' sense of belonging, engagement with faculty and peers, and career readiness in their chosen majors are also relevant indices of student success.

At my institution, the Ohio State University (OSU), each year the provost or an associate provost meets with the deans and their curricular associate deans on a college-by-college basis to go over the common quantitative metrics listed above. Each year the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences (CFAES) has met or exceeded all or most of the student success metric benchmarks set by our institution. The question we are routinely asked is "What's your secret sauce?", followed by inquiries about how we can share our best practices with other OSU colleges and with peer colleges beyond OSU. This is the challenge addressed by this project.

The quick answer to "What's our secret sauce?" is our college's Student-First Philosophy. The Student-First Philosophy is the first of five college-wide goals described in our CFAES Strategic Alignment document (Kress, 2021). This goal includes the following:

- Align decisions to ensure the learning, success, health, and well-being of students is a high priority
- Structure our college environment and academic processes so that anyone who wants to study with us finds us accessible, affordable, welcoming, and inclusive
- Provide more experiential learning opportunities for students, such as including students in the work of our college (co-creators) in the teaching, research and Extension missions
- Enhance and reward excellent teaching and advising with training, resources, and recognition

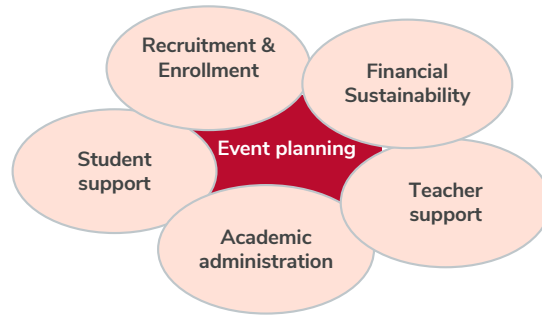
Project Objectives:

To more comprehensively answer the question "What's our secret sauce?", this can be broken out into three objectives:

1. Identify what we are doing that supports student success (and keep doing it)
2. Identify what we are doing that does not support student success (and stop doing it)
3. Identify what we are not doing that would support student success now and in the future (and start doing that).

Project Framework:

Several frameworks were explored to help guide this project. One lens is to consider the three functional staffing teams of the college's Office of Academic Programs: recruiting, student experience, and academic progress. A second lens is to examine the critical tasks of the Office of Academic Programs (Figure 1):



A better lens might be to look at what students experience as they progress through their undergraduate journeys. An advisory team brainstormed the following steps based on education theory and their own professional / personal experience (Kitchel, Washburn, Haas, and Christy, 2024):

1. Career Exploration
2. Higher Education Exploration
3. Applications & Initial Decision Making
4. Choice Confirmation (of institution and major)
5. Entry & Onboarding
6. Cultural and Social Engagement
7. Academic Enrichment & Professional Engagement
8. Career Planning
9. Graduation and Transition
10. Alumni Engagement

However, is it a step-by-step map-like journey or rather a jigsaw puzzle (Osborne, 2024) that each student must complete to graduate (Figure 2)?



Using the puzzle model, one notes that students enter from many places and there are multiple pathways to traverse their journeys. Students stop out, drop out, and re-enter; the undergraduate journey is nonlinear and often iterative. Students begin with some or none of the puzzle pieces they need to graduate, and they require support to help them discover and find the missing puzzle pieces. Over time, successful students acquire and assemble all of the necessary puzzle pieces. However, this can be a nonintuitive process, especially for first generation students. Earning a diploma means the puzzle is completed.

Student Services as a Community Network of Care:

So, how can we leverage the things that we can control and/or influence to help our students put their puzzle pieces together? I believe it means re-envisioning student services as not just functional tasks to be completed on behalf of our students but as a broader community network of care that includes the Office of Academic Programs but also all the other parts of our college: faculty, staff, alumni, and the students themselves. Staff and faculty play many important roles including as advisors, mentors, role models, navigators, and puzzle solvers. Acting as care network partners involves connecting students to the many resources at university, college, and department levels that can help them be successful. Overall, the community creates and maintains a welcoming atmosphere where students can gain a sense of belonging, allowing them to thrive and flourish.

Methods:

Several qualitative methods were proposed including student surveys, alumni surveys, focus groups, town halls, and exit interviews. Some tools used to help guide conversations during the envisioning process were the Concentric Circle exercise and the Victory Circle exercise (both were shared as part of FSLI programming).

Results so far:

It's a work in process. First year student surveys are now in their second year of implementation. Surveys also went out to the thousands of students who attend Celebration of Students events. Some survey results and example student quotes included the following:

- "The CFAES Carnival was really fun! I actually loved this event way more than I thought I would. It was nice to talk to my professors outside of the classroom which isn't something I get to do often."
- "Yes, I thought all the activities, City Barbeque, free giveaways, and premium raffles were all fantastic and I felt like I bonded with the CFAES community."
- "Great event! Really great experience! It was nice having a day different from the others not thinking about classes."
- "The events are the best part of being a CFAES student!"

On Feb. 5, 2025, I co-facilitated a focus group at an open CFAES Student Council meeting. Students shared what they liked and did not like about their CFAES experience, working in small groups and filling Post-it notes and easel boards with their suggestions. I was most struck by their knowledge of and enthusiasm for active learning in their courses (and conversely, their dislike or even disdain for those professors who did not incorporate such practices in their

classrooms). Several of our departments do exit surveys and/or department chair interviews with their graduating students, especially those programs with external accreditation requirements.

Next steps:

Building upon and institutionalizing the data gathering processes that have already been implemented is the first next step. These data can be included in the annual report generated within the Office of Academic Programs, along with the traditional quantitative data on enrollment numbers, graduation rates, etc. Using those data as evidence, I plan to share the results and, most importantly, the vision of a community network of care with all interested members of that community including faculty, staff, alumni, and students. By socializing this vision, along with regular reporting out of what we learn from our students, we can create the communication pathways that must undergird our community network of care.

What I gained from the FSLI program:

Some highlights of what FSLI tools and techniques I have already been able to use in my professional life include:

- Giving and receiving corrective feedback
- Conflict management
- Dealing with rules-oriented team members
- Crisis communication
- Change management

In addition, I learned about big-picture thinking and forecasting including a better understanding of higher education's fiscal environment, so I can strategically consider where we can trim while still keeping our quantitative and qualitative student success metrics outstanding, as well as still holding true to our Student-First Philosophy. Beyond the knowledge, skills, and confidence that I gained through the FSLI program, I also found a support network of people at sister institutions across the country with whom I can communicate and continue to learn and grow together.