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# FoE Philosophy Dimension: Qualitative Study – Student Perspective



A Report by South Texas College's office of  
Research & Analytical Services  
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## **Background**

As part of its Comprehensive Mission, South Texas College (STC) had displayed a continuing effort to serve the educational needs of the Rio Grande Valley. Student success is outlined as one of the College's core values, and STC also lists the need to be "a premier learning-centered higher education institution where student and community success are paramount" as one of its guiding principles (South Texas College, 2007).

STC recognizes that retention and success of First Time In College (FTIC) students is paramount to meeting the college's comprehensive mission. It is apparent that efforts made by STC on this front have been successful with the proportion of all FTIC students at STC retained from fall to fall having increased from 50% to 57% in the last five fall terms (South Texas College, 2009, p. 1). The increase for full-time, college-ready FTICs is even more dramatic having increased from 60% to 69% in that same time period (South Texas College, 2009, p. 3). While these statistics are encouraging, STC realizes that there are still a large number of FTICs not re-enrolling and is dedicated to doing what it can as an institution to maintain this upward trend in retention rates.

In his study on retention, Tinto (1999) suggests that most institutions do not take student retention seriously. This is not the case with STC. In an effort to improve the way in which South Texas College (STC) works with first-year students, and therefore continue to improve student retention rates, the college joined the Policy Center on the First Year of College's Foundations of Excellence in the First College Year (FoE) on September 1, 2008. The goal of this collaboration is to "study all aspects of the new student experience and to produce a plan for institutional improvement leading to higher levels of student learning and persistence in college"

(Policy Center, 2008, p.1). As part of the model provided by this organization, STC has been asked to develop a “Philosophy towards first-year students.”

FoE contends that STC, along with other participating institutions, should have a philosophy in place that is

...explicit and easily understood. It is consistent with the institutional mission, reflects a consensus of internal and external constituencies, and is widely disseminated. The philosophy is also the basis for organizational policies, practices, structures, leadership, and resource allocation to support the new student experience. (Policy Center, 2008, p. A-2).

### **Purpose of Study**

While FoE survey data collected at STC as part of the Web Enabled Survey System (WESS) in Fall 2008 suggests faculty and staff believe that the college operates under an unofficial, unwritten institutional and departmental philosophy towards first-year students (South Texas College, 2008), survey data collected from students as part of the WESS does not include questions regarding an institutional philosophy towards FTIC students.

This particular study seeks to fill this particular gap in the data through qualitative inquiry involving focus group and interviews with students. This study was conducted to discover whether or not students believe any sort of philosophy towards first-year students exists and what that philosophy encompasses so that an official philosophy can be developed as part of STC’s participation in the FoE.

The information gathered in regards to this subject area will be used by the FoE Philosophy Dimension Committee to develop an official philosophy towards first-year students that can be used by STC to insure the retention and overall success of FTIC students.

### **Methodology**

A qualitative study involving a combination of interviews and focus groups was conducted to provide insight on the student perspective concerning an institutional philosophy towards FTIC students. A number of one-on-one interviews and five different focus groups were conducted (n=50). Students for the individual interviews (n=12) were recruited at the Pecan Campus. One focus group was conducted at the Starr County Campus and both the Pecan Campus and the Mid-Valley Campus were venues for two focus groups each.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed with the exception of one interview and focus group where equipment difficulties prevented a recording of proceedings. Transcripts along with written responses provided by students and focus group/interview observation notes were entered and coded using NVivo7, a qualitative software program utilized by Research and Analytical Services. Coding allowed for the discovery of common themes and ideas regarding students' views on STC's philosophy towards first-year students on both an institutional and departmental level.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to ask whether or not students believe that STC operates under an unofficial philosophy towards first-year students, whether students are aware of such a philosophy, and what they perceive this philosophy to be if they believe it does indeed exist.

Furthermore, this study also seeks to uncover whether students believe there are different philosophies at play at institutional and departmental levels.

(Please see Appendix A for a list of questions asked of students during the course of interviews and focus groups.)

### **Findings**

Qualitative analysis of data collected for this study suggests that students do not believe STC to be operating under any sort of philosophy towards first-year students at either the institutional or departmental levels. Many students indicated that STC throws first-year students into a “sink or swim” with little or no consideration given to the fact that they are new to the post-secondary educational system and that all students, regardless of first-year status, are treated similarly by faculty, staff, and administrators at both the institutional and departmental levels. Several students repeatedly mentioned how “everyone is the same” at STC and added that they do not believe that first-year students should be treated differently or be given any sort of preferential treatment.

Despite several students indicating that first-year students should not be singled out, a number of students felt that their first-year counterparts have difficulty navigating the system. While students all seemed to agree that STC is dedicated to the success of first-year students, students do not always find the help that they are looking for. They pointed out how this is not a problem that is specific to first-year students, but that they are affected more by this due to the fact that they cannot rely on previous experience to navigate their way around the college environment.

Numerous students felt that a solution to this issue might be to make orientation for new students mandatory rather than voluntary. Students also suggested that participation in developmental study courses gives first-year students an advantage over other students who are not in remediation. This is supported by data which shows that “the proportion of all First Time in College students receiving remediation who are retained from fall to spring (83%) has surpassed that of students with no remediation (82%)” (South Texas College, 2009, p. 1).

Fike & Fike (2008) point out how “community colleges tend to enroll more underprepared students than the university” (intro., para. 6) which is to be expected with open-door institutions. One particular student emphasized how a “College Success” course taken as part of his developmental studies course was instrumental to his continued enrollment and success as an STC student. Students who are unprepared are usually “encouraged to enroll in a community college, where they can take advantage of developmental, or remedial courses” (Fike & Fike, 2008, intro. para. 6). When this particular student mentioned his college success course taken as part of his developmental studies classes, other students expressed how they wish a similar opportunity had been afforded to them. Students are enrolled in developmental courses when test scores show them to be lacking in one or more academic areas, but the term “unprepared” should also encompass other students who are not prepared for the post-secondary educational experience.

Students who participated in this study pointed out how many of their classmates enter into college unaware of the differences that they will encounter at STC when compared to their high school educational experiences. In addition to not understanding the difference in the amount of work that is involved, they also indicated that much of the “red-tape” that is in place is confusing and, at times, unnecessary. Students felt that while the majority of STC faculty, staff,

and administrators are approachable and try to be helpful, many times they are misinformed about procedures and policies. They indicated that this was a large frustration among the whole student population, but that it was especially disconcerting as first-year students. Many students also emphasized how staff should be friendly and approachable. Although the majority of students indicated that they had only had good experiences in this area, other students explained how a “bad attitude” on the part of an STC employee could deter students from seeking out help when needed.

### **Recommendations**

Data suggests that the transition into post-secondary education would be easier if students were made aware of the stark differences between the high school and college academic worlds. This could be emphasized in a philosophical statement where STC faculty, staff, and administrators are instructed to not only be helpful and do their utmost to help first-year students navigate their way through the college environment by providing the most up-to-date information about college rules and regulations, but also assist them in making the transition by understanding the new position in which first-year students find themselves.

Additionally, STC employees should take into consideration the fact that students may be “unprepared” as first-year students for the transition into post-secondary education even if they are not enrolled in developmental studies classes. Students who fall under this category should be advised properly about what steps to take to make the transition easier.

The suggestions made by students that orientation become mandatory rather than voluntary and the possibility of integrating more students other than those in remediation into a college success course do not necessarily lend themselves to the development of a philosophical



statement, but should be taken into consideration as a means of increasing retention rates and academic success for first-year students.

## Bibliography

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## Appendix A

### **Interview/Focus group questions for FoE Committee Philosophy towards first-year students:**

(Questions marked with an asterisk (\*) were adapted from the questions provided in the *Foundation of Excellence in the First College Year: 2008-2009 Guidebook for Task Force Members Two-Year Institutions*, pg. A2-A3)

\*Has an institutional philosophy for working with new students at STC been communicated to you? If so, what is it in your own words? Is there more than one? What are the others? Among the different philosophies, what are their key attributes or reoccurring themes?

\*Has a departmental philosophy for working with new students at STC been communicated to you? If so, what is it in your own words? Is there more than one? What are the others? Among the different philosophies, what are their key attributes or reoccurring themes?

\*Do you believe STC operates from a commonly held philosophy when it comes to working with new students? What makes you think so?

\*Does your department operate from a commonly held philosophy about the new student experience? If so, how do you see it implemented?

\*Do you believe that a formalized institutional philosophy for working with new students is valuable? Why or why not?

\*Do you believe that STC is committed to the success of new students? What might a formal, written philosophical statement in regards to first-year student students look like at STC?