Belonging and Community to deliver a world-class out-of-classroom student experience

Setting the stage

The Division of Student Affairs at University of California, Berkeley has been engaged in a long-term strategic planning process since 2012. This effort to “Dream Big” is aimed at enhancing the division’s services and solutions to world class levels – making the total student environment one with strong support, inclusiveness, and belonging. Extensive outreach to the student community revealed the importance of community and affiliation with the University and the impact this has on the total experience – both at the individual level of daily interactions and more broadly with the campus as a whole. When current students were asked about the best part of their student experience, 68% of responses were centered on their interactions with others across campus and their ability to find community. Nearly ninety percent of Berkeley students agree at least somewhat that they feel a sense of belonging to this campus (UCUES 2012). However, the research also shows the current situation is not ideal from a student perspective. When asked what they would change to enhance their experience, many students expressed frustration with the impersonal nature of campus interactions, and the difficulties they encounter to connect with meaningful programs and services. Coupled with what people commonly describe as the competitive nature of the UC Berkeley experience, both inside and outside the classroom, students often feel isolated and on their own.

The division took these findings to heart and is now organizing to promote and deepen student’s sense of belonging and community. To make this happen, during the Fall 2014 semester, Student Affairs will reach beyond its own boundaries to collaborate with other campus partners and initiatives with similar objectives. An integrated and inclusive approach will support the shift in mindset, practices, and services that will bolster students’ ability to build meaningful relationships and connect to campus life.

Challenges and opportunities

To create an environment where all students feel they are welcomed and supported starts with the opportunity for new and different relationships. That’s at the core of our efforts to strengthen campus community, affiliation, and belonging. To bring forward such an outcome on a campus with the scale of 35,000 students means re-imagining the process of engaging students from their first interactions to completion and beyond. A campus ecosystem that encourages and supports smaller scale engagements and ways to connect with others is a key
challenge. Creating more intimate experiences for students requires more than just adding or redesigning services – it represents a fundamental shift in how staff and students think about their interactions. A different set of outcomes for the student experience will need to be agreed upon and promoted through clear design and practice.

**Future State**

An ideal future state would see students engaged in a highly personalized experience which provides directive support across their educational career. Students come from a myriad of backgrounds and have goals and objectives as diverse as their histories. These differences are valuable and a key factor that make UC Berkeley the dynamic place it is. The systems, structures and spaces provided by the campus will embrace those differences and help facilitate students’ ability to find holistic support that meets them where they are to provide clear guidance on how to define their personal objectives and navigate their educational journey. Systems will help students navigate the many resources that exist across campus and highlight those that may be most relevant to each student based on not only their academic goals but co-curricular interests. Programs and services will account for the uniqueness of each student to ensure a sense of belonging, in service of ensuring they have the relationships, skills, and resources to meet their objectives. Physical spaces on campus will be designed to facilitate connection and encourage students to spend time on campus collaborating and socializing with their peers. Campus-wide events will provide opportunities to meet new friends, engage with others, explore differences, and celebrate Cal pride. Taken together, every student will be known and know their options. They’ll discover their path or be empowered to pave their own. Most importantly, students will embrace UC Berkeley as a place of genuine belonging for them.