

Roles & Purposes Dimension Report
Stony Brook University

Foundations Institutions promote student understanding of the various roles and purposes of higher education, both for the individual and society. These roles and purposes include knowledge acquisition for personal growth, learning to prepare for future employment, learning to become engaged citizens, and learning to serve the public good. Institutions encourage first-year students to examine systematically their motivation and goals with regard to higher education in general and to their own college/university. Students are exposed to the value of general education as well as to the value of more focused, in-depth study of a field or fields of knowledge (i.e., the major).

First Year Matters

Committee on Roles and Purposes

Final Report

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Introduction:

There are four common purposes or goals of going to university cited in the literature about undergraduate education: acquiring knowledge for personal growth, learning to prepare for future employment, learning to become engaged citizens, and learning to serve the public good. Our committee assumed that first year would be an obvious time for undergraduate students to discover and reflect on these and other purposes of attending Stony Brook. Our task was to discover whether and how the four roles and purposes were communicated to first-year students. What opportunities were provided for students to explore why they were attending Stony Brook and to think about how the courses and skills required for graduation helped them achieve their goals.

We found the exercise immensely helpful for ourselves and discovered that it raised many questions we could not answer definitively and so often we have proposed our conjectures about where things stand. To put our findings very briefly, we believe that Stony Brook administrators, faculty and staff could do a better job of talking more explicitly about the goals of education here. We also believe that most Stony Brook students see future employment (and an upper-middle class salary) as their chief goal, while the other three purposes rank in second place in no particular order. In fact, most students (and even some committee members) do not see much difference between serving the public good and becoming engaged citizens. Most of us have enough social awareness to say to others that, while we want to do well, we also hope to do good.

Sources of evidence: committee discussions

Discussions among committee members raised many questions. We wondered whether faculty and student affairs staff have different or only partially overlapping priorities, areas of focus and perceptions of what the university does and should do in relation to students. We were also hazy about how well we as an institution communicate Roles & Purposes to our students through our publications, advertisements, services and teaching. Since the undergraduate colleges have been made central to first-year education, we were concerned about how much or little faculty are consulted on matters pertaining to them and what role they should play in them. Another important concern was just whether and how the University provides opportunities for students to explore their own motives and goals in attending Stony Brook, as well as to reflect on the rationale for the motivation for college attendance. Finally, we had only impressionistic ideas about what students believed or could articulate about the roles and purposes and the way the university helped them to further understanding of how their university education might contribute to their ideas in these areas.

We used the evidence library, two focus groups in fall semester, and the fall student and faculty surveys, as well as the follow-up spring student survey (a modification of the fall survey) to try to answer these questions. We attempted to work with the performance indicators (though we found it difficult to understand how the indicators fit the roles & purposes dimension). As far as we could tell, none of the advertising materials, view books or other information given to prospective students, none of the guides for transfer students, and not even the huge book for the SBU 101 seminar given to all first-year students explicitly mention the four roles and purposes. At best, the goals and purposes remain implicit, as if we know what we are about but do not need to say it "out loud." Providing explicit opportunities for reflection and personal examination at the first-year (or even undergraduate) level are not the bread and butter of large, ongoing universities with multiple purposes besides undergraduate education. Most introductory information sessions for first-year students about their academic work do talk about the general education ("DEC") requirements and/or major requirements that each student needs to complete to graduate. We see this as a kind of "hurdles to graduation" approach that does not ask students to be more reflective or to think in other than instrumental terms.

The good news is that staff and faculty more involved with first-year students tend to rank such communication about goals and purposes as more effective since they are involved in doing it. Students, staff, and faculty in undergraduate colleges with particular themes such as Global Studies, Human Development, Leadership and Service, Science and Society are likely to do and think more about the "personal growth" or the "engaged citizenship" or the "serving the public good" roles and purposes. What occurred to us was that first-year students in other colleges might believe they need not think about those purposes since their colleges had different themes or emphases. Would a student in the College of Arts and Humanities only be focused on what she liked? Would a College focused on "personal growth" actually include intellectual development? It is entirely possible that the various thematic emphases of the first-year undergraduate colleges and seminars elide the roles and

purposes focused on by other colleges. It may well happen that the thematically designated colleges keep all four purposes out of focus for everyone involved in them, especially when the theme of a college does not dovetail with one of the purposes. Nonetheless, each could serve the overarching purposes of undergraduate education from its particular viewpoint.

The Surveys

What we found from the surveys was that the glass is more full than empty. To some extent, the questions on which first-year students gave lower scores in the fall (questions 14 and 41 about life goals and personal reasons for attending college) received even lower scores in the spring survey, as students gained more experience of the reality of Stony Brook. We might surmise that "hitting the wall" of Stony Brook's demanding introductory courses led students to reconsider what they are doing here. Scores were higher for both surveys in areas involving employment, knowledge for personal growth, civic engagement and public good—these scores stayed the same or improved in the spring survey. We found some differences between males and females on the different roles and purposes, but do not know how this difference is significant.

As regards the faculty survey, there was a significant difference between tenured and tenure-track faculty as compared to staff/lecturers/faculty more involved with first-year students. Faculty and staff in this survey do not appear to see their job as one of promoting student engagement in the community or promoting student contribution to the betterment of society. If one thing comes out of the three surveys, it may be that the two questions perhaps closest to the hearts of college students (What am I going to do with my life? How is what I am doing now connected with what I am going to do?) are the focus of rather few, if any, institutionally supported exercises or programs—from student groups to residential and advising staff workshops to actual faculty-run courses.

One way to interpret the survey data is to imagine that there is little reward or positive notice for faculty and students who reflect on or worry about the goals of personal intellectual growth and social involvement, apart from courses, projects, clubs and majors where these are part of the curriculum. As a consequence, one might hope that learning calculus or Renaissance philosophy will improve one's chances at employment or help one's personal development, but often these tasks are seen as requirements for another course or for a major or for graduation. Faculty rewards in a research institution such as salary improvements, promotions, and recognition by one's academic peers do not come from a commitment to student development except insofar as excellent teaching figures into one's evaluation by a university where teaching is second to research. Often commitment to student growth is relegated to staff in student affairs, and their dedication is supposed to outstrip their numbers. One reason the goals and purposes remain implicit is that faculty, staff, and students have somewhat different immediate goals in and outside of class. As a consequence, our more general common goals are served in silence, if at all.

Focus Groups

In the focus groups, we asked six questions:

1. What do you think are the purposes of a college education?
2. List all the things you think a college education can help you achieve—both what people try to achieve and those you think they should achieve.
3. Where and from whom do you think students learn about the purposes of higher education?
4. Which goals do you believe you learned about during college?
5. Pick the 3-4 goals most important to you. Who has helped you think more carefully about them?
6. How has being at Stony Brook helped you clarify and understand the goals of a college education?

One group was made up of 17 first-year students in SBU 101; the second was made up of 9 juniors/seniors in a course run from the Career Center. Here are the findings from the two focus groups:

1. Top purposes for first-year students were money, reputation and social standing. For juniors and seniors the top purposes were career preparation and networking. Comment: perhaps the first-year students accept the goals from their families common in our society; the older students suddenly realize that college is almost over.
2. The freshmen saw college helping them achieve praise and pride, while the upper-division students listed skill acquisition as the main achievement. Comment: Many of our students are the first of their families to go to college—it's a big deal. No wonder the younger students are still basking in family pride, while the older ones realize that "praise and pride" are not job skills.
3. Sources for what they know about college's purposes (in order given) were high school, parents and peers for those in first year; parents, high school and peers for juniors and seniors. Comment: The importance of family for our students remains paramount.
4. Main goals first-year students learned from college were to graduate on time and make a living; older students said the goals were to graduate on time, pursue further education and find a job. Comment: The costs involved in university education (even with Stony Brook's famously low tuition) seem evident in these responses, as well as the general belief that higher education is primarily an instrumental goal or means, not also an end in itself.
5. In the first-year group, the main resources for thinking more about their goals were making mistakes and their advisors; juniors and seniors listed professors, family and career counselors as top resources. Comment: It is a hopeful sign that students reach out more globally as they move through Stony Brook.

Action Items

Here is the list of action items that came out of what we learned and discussed:

1. Find out what goal-setting and purposes mean to the students through focus-groups and workshops, then work on making the three or four roles and purposes explicit at orientation, in residential settings, in SBU 101. What sort of goal-setting is developmentally appropriate? How should it be imagined and communicated? HIGH
2. Make the roles and purposes explicit in all promotional literature, bulletins and handbooks given to students. "Why I am here" and "where I am going" should have the same emphasis as "how to do it" and the current emphasis on "time management." Post the goals of personal and intellectual growth, preparation for future employment and social engagement in large letters in every academic and freshman advisor's office. HIGH
3. Cover the three or four goals/purposes in all 101 classes. Have every 102 seminar begin with a review of the four purposes and how the seminar relates to them. HIGH
4. Have career center, academic advising and college advisors run workshops on goal setting, on prioritizing goals, on widening one's viewpoint and purposes. HIGH
5. Relate the four goals to the particular emphases of the residential colleges, have the specialized colleges teach their goals to other colleges and to commuters. MEDIUM
6. Have freshman mentoring programs within the residential colleges and for commuter students where successful junior and seniors match up with freshmen and talk about direction, academic and career goals. This should be co-ordinated between Academic Advising and the residential and commuter colleges. MEDIUM
7. Make sure all students learn presentation and oral communication skills, leadership skills, and problem-solving skills in all majors, just as now they learning reading and writing appropriate for the major. MEDIUM
8. Have more experiential learning such as internships available to students, with explicit time and assignments devoted to reflecting on the relation between college and career and on the purposes of college. MEDIUM
9. Gather anecdotal evidence from faculty and staff who believe we help students with goals and purposes about what exactly they have found effective in giving such help. This can be done through the TLT Center's workshops and in staff-faculty-student retreats. LOW
10. Gather anecdotal evidence from faculty and staff about how they see the SB and its commitments and how they relate to their work with undergraduates. More rewards need to be proposed by Stony Brook to involve faculty and staff in such exercises. LOW
11. Gather anecdotal evidence from faculty and staff about whether they believe SB does or should expect them to help motivate students for goals beyond their schoolwork. Surveys and seminars for faculty on student development would be of help. LOW

Final comments

Our discussions and reflections on the roles and purposes of university education made it clear to us that the questions we asked students in the focus groups are questions that should be asked of every incoming Stony Brook undergraduate. Just asking the questions will make students explicitly aware of their own goals and possibilities. Having an opportunity to discuss the questions in a group with a staff or faculty member can allow students to compare and contrast their own priorities with those of others and with those of the institution. Understanding the difference between university education as a means to social and economic betterment and the same education as something worthwhile in itself can be the first step toward widening one's goals and reshaping one's understanding of what he or she is doing. We urge that Stony Brook take seriously the business of exploring student goals and communicating to them larger purposes.

Recommended Grade: C+

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