

Students: The Reason For Being!

My life usually revolves around meetings or travel or entertaining visitors, alumni, and friends or giving lectures at various venues or going on fundraising trips with Todd Bastian or Jack Holpuch, our development professionals.

Typically, the conversations I am involved in are varied. They might be about budgets, or research, or teaching, or food, or natural resources, or jobs and the economy, or fundraising, or Extension, or space, or--whatever. You get the picture! One day is never the same as another, which makes my job a whole lot of fun.

Recently, however, most of my interactions have all been about our students—the reason Oregon State University was established as a Land Grant University.

About our students. The students returned en masse when classes started on September 26. Yet again this year, enrollments are up at Oregon State University—to almost 25,000. The College's enrollments also are up—our total enrollment is more than 2,300 students, a bit more than a 13 percent increase from last year, which is a record.

Many more of the incoming class are transfer students from community colleges, rather than true freshmen. Demographics also have changed, with a significant number of Hispanic, African-American, Asian, Native American, and international students. Many of these students are the first in their families to attend college, which is a significant challenge for the students, as well as for the College.

Scholarships are vital. I had the pleasure a few days ago of welcoming and honoring our “Rising Scholars”—freshmen and transfer students selected for various scholarships. For this 2011-2012 academic year, the College awarded more than \$500,000 in scholarships to these Rising Scholars.

With ever-escalating increases in tuition, unfortunately, more and more students rely on need-based scholarships. Indeed, seven out of 10 students in the College need some form of financial assistance.

Our role in developing leaders. The College launched its new Leadership Academy this fall term, with an inaugural cohort of ten students. The Leadership Academy is meant to help students develop “soft skills”, i.e., leadership skills, communication skills, critical thinking skills, team skills, networking skills, etc. Students in the Leadership Academy, identified as Fellows, are mentored by faculty and administrators in the College; I have the privilege of mentoring an outstanding young man, Thomas Griffin, senior in environmental economics, policy, and management from Culver, Oregon.

Jonathan Velez, the inaugural Bradshaw Professor of Leadership, oversees the Leadership Academy, and an alumna of our College, Kellie Strawn, is its director.

Leadership Academy Fellows receive a stipend of \$1,500—funds for which have been provided by several generous donors. We continue to seek additional donations to be able to offer scholarships to more students. In addition to the Leadership Academy, we are creating a minor in leadership. This latter effort is to enable students across the College to develop leadership skills.

Curricular changes on the horizon. As I have noted previously, we are revamping our majors and curricula, streamlining syllabi, and incorporating a number of “value added” experiences, such as enhancing leadership skills. Additionally, we require that students undertake “experiential learning” in the form of internships, externships, and other hands-on experiences in laboratories, in the field, on campus, off campus, in the corporate and other private sectors, and in government and non-government sectors.

Along these lines, we are building efforts to offer study abroad opportunities to more and more of our students. Our hope is that in just a few more years, one of four students graduating from our College will have had a study abroad experience. These experiences could include service learning, research, Extension experiences, work in corporate facilities, or study at partner institutions.

We are committed to enabling the success of our students, and the above are a few examples of our efforts in that direction.

Meeting changing student demographics. As the demographics of entering students change, we must adjust our teaching, advising, and financial aid efforts to meet the challenge of catering to the needs of students who might come from underrepresented or economically disadvantaged groups, or are the first in their families to attend college.

I have commissioned a work group of faculty, staff, and students to recommend how best the College may meet the challenges of the changing student demographic, and to help frame a vision for how we can help ensure the success of our students from underrepresented groups. The work group is to submit its report to me this fall, and we hope to execute a plan starting in January 2012.

These are truly exciting times, because the life-blood of our College—our students—bring excitement to our campus and validate the reason for our being!