

ENVISION ★ SFA
Concept Paper

Academic Innovation

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Background

Over the course of the SFA's history, and especially in the last decade, academic innovation has existed in small pockets at the institution.

SFA has always prided itself on being a teaching institution. As such, there has historically always been a number of progressive, forward-thinking faculty using innovative teaching methods on campus; while those few may have been recognized for their innovation within their department or by their discipline's professional organizations, there has been little institutional recognition for such work. The university has offered very few, sporadic professional development programs designed to keep the majority faculty up-to-date on best practices in teaching. We have expected faculty—many of whom have little professional training as educators—to learn the art of teaching on their own in the crucible of the classroom. To this end, five years ago, the Provost required all incoming faculty to attend an eight-part, professional development series focused on pedagogy and professional responsibilities.

SFA has tried to stay abreast of changes in classroom dynamics and technologies. However, as new research begins to validate the effectiveness of active classrooms (in terms of both furniture and technology), we have fallen behind and need to rededicate ourselves to efforts to improve and update all classrooms. For the handful of classrooms that have progressive design and technologies, we have not provided adequate support for faculty who need to redesign their courses for these spaces. Effective support is in place, however, for faculty building online courses.

Those individuals interested in academic innovation are often thwarted by a lack of resources—namely financial ones. When they do make ends meet, their efforts are not substantively celebrated or rewarded by the university. No singular space has existed that facilitates interdisciplinary collaboration for innovative projects.

In the past decade, pockets of programmatic innovation have been seen at SFA. However, there has not been a comprehensive, sustained initiative to develop new programs geared to meet the needs of the changing economy.

Lessons Learned

“Don't limit [students] to your own learning, for [they were] born in another time.” – Rabindranath Tagore

Innovation can only be achieved by providing the financial, academic, and human resources for faculty and students to learn, create, collaborate, and experiment. Currently, there is no system for encouraging or rewarding innovation at the university. Talent and ideas are in abundant supply, and those assets need to be fostered by a comprehensive, sustained effort to create an environment that inspires innovation.

Additionally, we have a silo issue at the university in that faculty members, departments, and colleges function independently and without interaction. Given that we live in an age that needs and demands interdisciplinary knowledge and skills, we must devise a way to break down the lack of communication, collaboration, and transparency that currently exists. More effective collaborative techniques and applications would encourage movement away from “siloed” resources to shared, more efficient models for innovation, thus accepting that funding is limited and focusing on producing more with less.

We must educate to innovate, and we must innovate to educate. We must provide faculty professional development opportunities to inform them of best practices for teaching in the twenty-first century, and we must teach students to be agile, forward-thinking members of society. If we want someone—faculty, student, or staff—to do something and do it well (i.e. advising), we must train them well and then not ask them to wear quite so many hats. Continuous teaching development and research development over the course of a career must become the status quo, as a one-time orientation or seminar is not sufficient.

National Trends/External Picture

Our world is changing. The global economy is rapidly shifting from a focus on natural resources and manufacturing to a focus on services and innovation. We must prepare students for jobs that do not yet exist and equip them with skills in communication, critical thinking, information literacy, and digital fluency, all of which will allow them to move into and between jobs easily and readily.

As the world changes, so do our students and responsibilities. State governments are asking universities to do more than ever before with less support than ever before. As state support has decreased, the cost of education has increased for students and parents. Innovations such as MOOCs (massively open online courses, which often have enrollments in the thousands from locations across the globe) and open educational resources (free or low-cost textbooks or other online educational materials) have arisen to respond to these increased costs. Universities are now responsible for the education and edification of a demographic of students who may never have attended college in decades past. This new generation of students is more diverse than ever before and includes traditional-age students, returning students, a large spectrum of socioeconomic backgrounds, and varying levels of digital engagement and technological skills. Innovation is necessary to successfully educate and serve the needs of all of these students, which includes access to information and emerging technologies.

Higher education institutions realize that their role in the future of the nation, while shifting, is valuable. As they move forward, they are committed to innovating on teaching, learning, and research fronts. To this end, many institutions are investing funds to create specific physical spaces (e.g. innovation labs) that foster the creation of informal networks and create an environment in which faculty, staff, and student-researchers can share their research and ideas. Institutions are also developing repositories for these ideas to allow individuals to benefit from the ideas of their colleagues years down the road. Many institutions are also focusing on innovating by using big data to provide preventative and just-in-time support for students in terms of advising, counseling, and other areas of student affairs. We must

provide the forum or clearinghouse to invite people on and off campus to speak up and share their ideas and questions on addressing the issues that exist within higher ed.

Strategic Themes

1. Ensure appropriate resource and space allocation to foster innovation among faculty and in the classroom.
2. Educate to innovate and innovate to educate by creating many and varied professional development opportunities to keep faculty aware of the best practices in teaching and learning.
3. Promote innovative instructional methods and learning environments to enhance students' academic experience and thereby their success.
4. Foster innovative program design by evaluating current programs, making recommendations for program additions, deletions, and modifications based on the growing and changing economy, need for marketable skills, and social demands.

Options

Innovation in teaching can occur via the following: comprehensive professional development program; program evaluation (if a program or degree is dated and no longer relevant in the current economy/market, then having the willingness to reconsider the existence and necessity of maintaining the program or area of study); encouraging innovative teaching and rewarding it via merit raises and tenure and promotion. As a teaching university, we must encourage, support, and reward innovative, engaging, and experiential teaching as much as, if not more than, we reward the very measurable number of articles, books, performances, or exhibitions under the category of scholarship and creative projects. While evaluating great teaching and mentoring of students is difficult, it must be central to the mission of a teaching university.

Innovation in learning can occur via the following: creation of innovative learning environments; establishment of a mobile device pilot and investigation in moving toward a potential initiative for the entire campus; and creation of an innovation lab in an effort to provide open communication, cross-campus collaboration, and transparency.

Innovation in research can occur by: providing incentives through tenure and promotion; again, establishing an innovation lab to provide a space for faculty, and students when appropriate to communicate research agendas and collaborate on research projects.

Once again, the innovative use of technology throughout these options is necessary in order to capitalize on such efforts and bring such energies to fruition. Technology allows us to teach and provide support for more students in a way that was impossible a decade ago. While technology is significant, human fundamentals matter too.

Projected Costs

Implementing the suggestions made in this document will require capital. Funds for such projects would either need to be raised or monies reallocated in annual budgets. Evaluation of best methods for acquiring funds will depend largely on the project at hand; that is, while funds for individual classroom renovations could be taken from departmental or college budgets over an extended time (e.g. five years), funds for an innovation lab will likely require substantial fundraising.

Short-Term and Long-Term Plans

Short-Term Plans (one year or less):

- successfully complete mobile device pilot/investigation
- begin plans for creation of an innovation lab
- begin transitioning classrooms into flexible learning environments
- identify best practices/practitioners on campus and devise ways to apply their successful strategies more broadly across the university
- institute a broader professional development initiative that hits on more topics beyond D2L and addresses basic pedagogy, effective teaching in large lectures, assessment design, and effective syllabus construction
- adopt open educational resources, and
- consider offering more classes via alternative delivery methods.

Long-Term Plans (1-5 years):

- investigate creation of university professional development standards requiring continuing education regarding teaching and learning
- formulate equivalency between teaching innovation and research innovation
- develop campus-wide system of recognition for innovation, including rewards ranging from affirmation to compensation
- create a college for first-year students, the purpose of which would be to serve as a clearinghouse that will streamline the process of entry to SFA, including everything from advising, academic assistance, financial aid, to Career and Counseling Services
- expand undergraduate and graduate programs in areas of economic need and demand while eliminating programs that are no longer productive or relevant in the twenty-first century
- continue commitment to the Quality Enhancement Plan, which promotes high-impact practices
- promote increased faculty engagement with the scholarship of teaching and learning, and
- encourage the use of open educational resources in core classes.