

ENVISION ★ SFA Concept Paper

SFA Identity

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Introduction and Background

Identity is the qualities or beliefs that make a particular person or group different from others (Merriam-Webster.com). For SFA, these qualities include location, demographics and academics.

SFA is described as an independent, regional comprehensive university serving mostly undergraduate students on a residential campus. It is strongly grounded in tradition. Among current and former students, SFA is known as a student-centered university with caring faculty members in a beautiful and friendly environment.

The diverse student population of approximately 13,000 students boasts 40 percent minority and 48 percent first-generation graduates, on average. SFA's six colleges – Perkins College of Education, Rusche College of Business, Arthur Temple College of Forestry and Agriculture, Fine Arts, Liberal and Applied Arts, and Sciences and Mathematics – collectively offer 83 baccalaureate degrees in 120 areas of study, 44 master's degrees (two of which are terminal degrees: fine arts and social work), and three doctoral degrees (educational leadership, forestry, and school psychology). SFA has a faculty-to-student ratio of 1:20 with terminally degreed faculty providing instruction to students at all levels.

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education categorizes universities based on student profile and program offerings. These benchmarks are used for comparison and to document milestones in program offerings and growth. SFA currently is listed in the following categories:

“Undergraduate Instructional Program: Balanced arts & sciences/professions, some graduate coexistence”

“Graduate Instructional Program: Doctoral, professional dominant”

“Enrollment Profile: Very high undergraduate”

“Undergraduate Profile: Full-time four-year, selective, high transfer-in”

“Size and Setting: Large four-year, primarily residential”

“Basic: Master's Colleges and Universities (larger program)”

Lessons Learned

SFA is both advantaged and disadvantaged by its location. According to recent research, many prospective students in our target markets may be unaware of SFA, but those who are aware of the university associate it with strong academic offerings. However, the lack of “name recognition” discourages some prospective students from enrolling. The advantages of small-

town living and the abundance of natural resources in the region are not fully integrated into SFA's identity; for recruiting purposes, some constituent groups do not place a high value on these characteristics.

Although new residence halls, parking garages, and recreation center, as well as an expanded and renovated student center, have greatly improved the campus for student life, audiences list antiquated instructional facilities and equipment as an unappealing attribute of the university.

Faculty members are required to bear heavy teaching loads relative to comparable institutions in addition to student advising, committee service, assessment duties, research and scholarship, and various other administrative tasks. Many feel their productivity is limited by a lack of administrative support for faculty research, faculty-led undergraduate research, conference travel, sabbatical leave and equipment upgrades, as well as adequate funding to support competitive teaching and research assistantships for graduate students in their programs.

Financial constraints on the university result from a number of interrelated factors, including a limited endowment, changes in funding from the state, increased competition for students, rising costs of infrastructure needs, and decreasing dollars from externally funded projects including research.

State and National Trends

Today the traditional university's challenge is to change in ways that decrease its price premium and increase its contributions to students and society. Its expensive campus and professoriate must be deployed innovatively against the jobs of discovery, memory and mentoring. It won't be enough to change superficially, such as by cutting budgets or faculty working harder. Tough choices about students, subjects, and scholarship must be made. These choices must be reflected in the university's DNA and in its success measures. (Chistensen & Eyring, 2011)

While the Texas Legislature presses for lowered tuition costs, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board has asked universities to "Close the Gaps," providing more accessibility to higher education for all Texans and increasing rates of success. This provides the potential to increase enrollment, but may place a strain on resources and infrastructure. Future long-range plans for higher education in Texas may include an increased focus on completion with marketable skills and lower student debt (Paredes, Nov. 21, 2014).

Resources are limited in an increasingly competitive state and national arena:

- state support for instruction has dropped to 29 percent, and funding formulas may shift toward completions rather than enrollments;

- state pressure to recruit and retain under-represented populations has increased, with students from all populations being more likely to be academically under-prepared for college-level coursework;
- increased enrollment of students who need services universities have not traditionally been prepared to serve;
- tuition and fees are limited by the state and by market demand;
- federal funds for research and sponsored programs have decreased, making the awards more competitive;
- the availability of funding from SFA endowment is limited, with the need for a capital campaign looming in the future;
- some public schools provide computers for all students and fully utilize electronic textbooks; instructional technology at SFA should exceed that found in the majority of public high schools; and
- in response to the national STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) initiative and other goals, many universities have made a choice to pursue a higher research status in order to access additional research funds.

There is an increasing call for educational experiences that provide skills leading to meaningful employment and enhanced civic engagement. This will require that all students receive the skills needed to prepare them for careers and life, through field experiences, internships, research activities, peer-to-peer mentoring, and volunteer and service learning. To be competitive, out-of-the-classroom learning opportunities must expand beyond East Texas; ideally, global experiences would be included.

Strategic Themes

Several strategic themes emerged that are central to SFA's identity, including areas addressed by the other concept papers: campus culture, transformative experiences for students, and connections, for example. In addition, there are several areas that should be considered as SFA forms its future identity within a framework of core values. These include:

- Which aspects of campus culture are critical to SFA's identity, mission, and vision, and which can and must change?
- How can SFA capitalize on its location?
- How can SFA build strong(er) external connections that bridge geography and other physical limitations?
- What demographics (student, faculty, and staff) must SFA change to remain competitive?
- What programs should SFA offer, and what form should they take (face-to-face, online)?
- What resources will be needed to meet the challenges of the future?

The core of SFA's ethical identity has been articulated through Students Affairs' campaign "The SFA Way," which comprises five "root principles" that foster a commitment to respect, caring, responsibility, unity and integrity. This commitment, if tied to the core curriculum objectives, could develop within students a mindset to see a need and meet it, whether the need be social, ecological or organizational. If every course of study fostered a burgeoning awareness of personal and social responsibility, and if opportunities to contribute to the greater good through citizenship and stewardship initiatives were provided, SFA would produce highly skilled, thoughtful and informed graduates dedicated to making a difference in the world.

If SFA is to continue to be known for its "caring faculty," it must strike a healthy balance between being student-centric and faculty-centric, which intrinsically links to SFA's identity. Research continues to show that a large number of faculty members are paid well below the state average for comparable institutions. An equitable and transparent internal compensation structure for faculty and staff must be established and funded. A merit-based, university-level, pay-increase policy tied to productivity in key areas of job performance and associated with the overall mission of the university should be developed to provide well-defined criteria for annual salary increases. SFA also should explore other cost-effective ways to exhibit a caring attitude toward faculty members that may also improve the educational experience of students. For example, faculty members could be offered options for ways to excel in teaching, scholarship and research, and should be provided with the state-of-the-art equipment and the classroom or laboratory space needed to teach effectively.

If SFA is to continue to be known as "student centered," it must continue to meet the needs of the changing student demographic. Especially for the first-generation college students who populate our campus, advising needs to be accessible and accurate. Rather than involve all faculty members, perhaps an approach that encourages those with a desire to advise students would be the most effective and result in a better student outcome.

If SFA's academic reputation is to remain strong (and grow stronger), it must produce graduates who are well prepared to enter the workforce. Undergraduate and graduate-level research opportunities play a large role in providing a transformative experience. The university might consider a move from the doctoral, professional dominant Carnegie classification to the comprehensive doctoral, which would require expanding doctoral degrees into the humanities, social sciences and STEM fields. The Carnegie doctoral/research university designation does not conflict with SFA's identity and rich history as a teaching institution, and would increase competitiveness for external funding as well as increase state dollars to support those programs.

The Carnegie Foundation is also developing one or more voluntary classification schemes; one focuses on outreach and community engagement, and the second focuses on how institutions seek to analyze, understand and improve education. SFA should consider pursuing one of these

classifications in order to increase the depth and breadth of visibility and sphere of influence. This should have a direct impact on recruitment of the most competitive students, as well as outstanding prospective faculty and staff members.

Course sequences that expedite degree completion could increase SFA's competitiveness, as would carefully selected programs of study that play to SFA's strengths. An overlap program model that strategically connects undergraduate, master's and doctoral programs may shorten enrollment time and gain the attention of prospective students. An emphasis on graduate and continuing education would enhance intergenerational learning. Currently, less than 10 percent of SFA students are enrolled in graduate programs. If graduate school enrollment increased, career development pathways and graduate earnings would increase. This emphasis would require more doctoral programs and greater graduate tuition and assistantship support, but it would enlarge faculty spheres of influence, while reinforcing that teaching and research can be a dual identity. Supporting a diverse student body through recruitment, retention and graduate/undergraduate degree completion makes our students more competitive for better jobs.

While online programs are increasingly popular, some SFA online offerings have not garnered the expected number of participants. SFA should strategically select programs to move online, especially those that completely preclude face-to-face instruction; selection should be mindful of the need to serve more students in our resource-constrained environment while serving equally well the students who have chosen to attend SFA classes on campus. SFA's reputation for educational excellence must continue in both traditional and online environments.

Options (choice points)

SFA must define a future identity that embodies our core values and makes bold choices for the future. These may include such controversial (and identity-changing) topics as increasing class sizes, increasing tuition, increasing graduate student pay, decreasing the number of full-time faculty, increasing research competitiveness, and/or changing the degrees and programs that are offered. Factors to be considered include:

- Student demographics and academic preparation.
- Limitations of residence halls to accommodate increased student enrollment.
- Limitations of aging infrastructure and equipment on recruitment and instruction.
- Emerging uses of instructional technology, including the appropriate mix of online courses.
- The inter-relationship of class size, faculty-to-student ratios; the percentage of faculty with terminal degrees in undergraduate classrooms, and faculty salaries.
- Sources of increased revenue, such as grants, gifts and endowments.