December 10 – A Night Like No Other

Friday night, December 10, the world changed for our families, colleagues, and students when a number of communities were hit by devastating tornadoes. When our students return in January, many will still be reeling from the aftereffects of these events. Patience, compassion, and support will go a long way towards helping our students recover. Please keep our neighbors who were affected by these storms in your thoughts.

Notes from the SACSCOC Annual Meeting + Early Results from the Foundations of Excellence Student Survey

Normally, we wouldn’t combine these two disparate topics, but there are some interesting alignments occurring between some of the notes from our most recent SACSCOC Annual Meeting and our Foundations of Excellence Student Survey.

First, one of the sessions we attended discussed research by Dr. Laura Rendón (www.laurarendon.net) on validation theory as it relates to student success. Dr. Rendón emphasizes that an integral part of students’ experiences in college revolve around the need to know that:

- they matter
- someone cares about them, as a person and not just as an individual
- they can be valuable members of the college community
- their voice is as valuable as what others think and know
- what they are learning reflects who they are
- they have a clear pathway from entry into college to completing their degree.

They also need to believe in their own abilities to succeed. They want to be excited about learning, and they want to be a part of the learning community.

These points are clearly reflected in the results of a student survey we conducted as part of our Foundations of Excellence work. One of the open-ended questions we asked students was to identify ways that UT Martin could improve their transition to college. Several ideas consistently showed up in the responses.

Effective communication from UT Martin was one of the most common themes among student responses. Students asked for more and better communication regarding:

- General announcements from the institution
- Campus events
- Community events
- Financial Aid opportunities
- Student resources
- Academic and non-academic support services
- Academic and other programs offered
- Dining options
- Opportunities to engage with people from diverse backgrounds
- Mental and physical health support
- Scheduling classes
- Parking
- Information from professors
- Information from advisors
- Information for students living off-campus
- Lab classes (especially the first week)
- Navigating the UTM portal
- Navigating campus in general (especially buildings and finding classrooms)
- Campus clubs and organizations (especially prior to and during their first semester so that they will know what opportunities are available for them)
- Contact information for faculty and staff

A need for more social events were mentioned quite often. Students noted that they needed more opportunities to socialize, meet new people without being pressured to do so, have more variety in social events, and have opportunities to socialize outside of clubs. They specifically asked for more events and opportunities for students of color, transgender
students, and students with different ethnicities, religious beliefs, and other diverse identities. They also asked for opportunities to meet with faculty and students in their majors in a more social atmosphere than in the classroom, lab, or office.

Academically, they have asked for more one-on-one time between professors and students to build a better understanding of classroom expectations. (We realize that office hours are designed to address this, but there seems to be a disconnect between professors’ intentions and students’ understandings.) They have also asked for more STEM lab times, more SI times and sessions, more opportunities to receive tutoring, and dedicated places to study outside of the library. They noted a need for more communication between professors and students regarding course expectations, deadlines, etc. They want to get to know faculty and staff.

Financial aid information is a recurring theme. Students asked for more opportunities to meet one-on-one with financial aid advisors who could help them understand their options. They would like to have more communication regarding financial aid deadlines, scholarships and other opportunities, and refunds. They have also asked for professors and advisors to be better informed about financial aid opportunities in general and the Tennessee Promise in particular.

They would also like some help and support when dealing with homesickness. One student commented that they felt alone and that no one was in their corner when they first arrived on campus. Another student suggested more opportunities for family visits, like family weekends. They would like to have a better understanding of what living in a dorm is like before they arrive—what to expect, how to handle issues that arise, and who to contact if they need help.

Dining and parking were frequently mentioned. When it comes to dining, they want more variety, better options on weekends, more locations, and more options for meal plans. With parking, they asked for more spaces, especially near their dorms, and a better understanding of where parking is allowed.

The suggestions we received just from this one question reflects the points that Dr. Rendón has made in her research: that students want to feel like they matter, that they are valued as individuals, that they can make positive contributions in the classroom and in the greater college community, and that they belong here. One of the speakers at the SACSCOC conference noted that there can be no progress by maintaining the status quo, and that to change the system, each of us must change to some degree. What changes can we make in ourselves that will make a difference in our students’ experiences? What can we do, in our own units, in the spring semester that will address these suggestions made by our own students?

Happy Holidays! May all your holiday dreams come true in the coming year!