

Provost Fellow Reflection
2021-2022 Academic Year
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I applied to be a Provost Fellow because I wanted to learn more about how decision-making happens at Southern Utah University. From meetings with students, faculty, staff, and administrators, I learned more than I ever would have predicted. It quickly became clear that, at a large institution like SUU, with its varied groups of stakeholders (students, faculty, staff, community members, students' families, community partners, and others), it is incredibly challenging to design solutions that are satisfactory to all parties. From my narrow perspective as a faculty member in one department, solutions to campus-wide problems sometimes seemed glaringly obvious. I felt frustrated when the seemingly obvious solution was passed over in favor of another option that seemed worse in every way. Serving as a Provost Fellow provided me with a broader perspective, and a deeper understanding of the challenging balancing act involved with implementing campus-wide decisions and programs.

Throughout my time as a Provost Fellow, my favorite experiences were attending meetings with the student leaders. These meetings served as an opportunity for student leaders to communicate with administration (specifically the Associate Provost and the Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs) about the issues that were important to the student body. From the students, I heard some feedback that I expected – concerns about housing, mental health, and COVID protocols. Other issues were more surprising to me – students expressed frustration with the campus minimum wage, and they worried about unclear career paths associated with their majors, especially in the early years of college.

While some of the problems are daunting, I think the issue of career paths is an area where faculty can help ease students' concerns with relatively minimal effort. Toward that end, I designed a "Career Path" document that I am hoping will serve as a template for departments who would like to provide early guidance to students about how to best utilize their time at SUU to prepare them for a specific career. Examples of these documents can be found [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

Another student concern was mental health. The proposal of paying faculty members a small incentive to complete Care and Support Team (CAST) Training struck a chord with me. I believe paying faculty an incentive to complete CAST training would accomplish a number of goals. First, even a small incentive could entice some faculty members who would not otherwise complete this training to do so. Engaging hesitant faculty is particularly valuable, because faculty who complete the training without incentive are likely those who already in a place to help students navigate mental health struggles. That is, faculty who are hesitant to complete the training, but could be enticed with a monetary incentive, are likely in greater need of some training to better help students with mental health challenges. Second, faculty members have been burdened with a great deal of additional responsibility since the onset of the pandemic. Incentivizing training is one way to acknowledge the value of faculty time and effort. Third, concerns over student mental health came up repeatedly and across multiple stakeholder groups in the meetings that I attended. Providing incentives to train faculty to help students with mental health is a clear message that addressing student mental health is a priority for SUU. Finally, and most importantly, if incentivizing this training results in greater uptake of the training (as I believe it would), faculty will be better equipped to help students with mental health crises when we inevitably encounter such situations.

During the spring semester, my Provost Fellow experience took an unexpected turn after Dr. MacLean left SUU. At the same time, I took over as Interim Director of the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies (MIS) program. The position came with opportunities for service at the university level (e.g. Graduate Council), as well as the typical challenges associated with taking on a new role. I started working with the new Associate Provost, Dr. Bill Heyborne. We discussed the difficulties of taking on a new role, especially in the middle of an academic year. I proposed creating a faculty handbook for the MIS program, which would ease future transitions in the program. We agreed that this would be a good project for me in the spring semester. It would provide a service to the MIS program while also allowing me to incorporate some of the lessons I learned as a Provost Fellow. The MIS faculty handbook I created will be almost immediately useful, as I have accepted a position in SUU's History, Sociology, & Anthropology Department this fall. This change will leave the MIS program with new people in each of its two full time positions—Director and Lecturer. The complete turnover of the MIS program faculty highlights the importance of having clear, written guidance for incoming administrators and faculty. Such guidance is especially important for positions at the Director level, which include responsibilities that are outside the realm of ordinary faculty duties and are therefore likely to require more training and guidance.

Overall, my time as a Provost Fellow was informative and eye-opening. I was inspired by the level of passion and enthusiasm that I saw from students, faculty, staff, and administrators as they shared their ideas for improving SUU. I have seen apathy at other institutions, but I never saw that here. I am grateful to work on a campus where so many people are deeply invested in decision-making processes, even if we do not always agree on the best decision.