# Masteries at SFASU

## Distinctive Identity Implementation Committee
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## Why Masteries?

Too often, the idea of a college education is a thing unto itself, with no reference to the abilities developed in each course and the goals behind degrees. Every university talks about a quality education, but few articulate the abilities that distinguish a well-educated person. The masteries approach will help SFASU project a distinctive identity by giving specific form to the university's promise to educate students.

The masteries approach tells students and their potential employers the skills SFASU conveys to its students, in the process assuring parents that sending their child to SFASU will contribute to their professional success and personal growth. While the many advantages of a university education may seem obvious to those who work on campus, the full breadth of skills contained in higher education are less clear to students and parents. This is especially true for the first generation students considering SFASU.

Within the University, the masteries approach can help instructors and administrators see the role their efforts play in the broader education of a student. It reminds faculty and staff of the institution's hopes for each student and guides evaluation by defining the level of skills students should have by the time they graduate. The term "masteries" has been chosen to encourage students and faculty to remain committed to high academic standards.

The masteries approach can also address the growing movement in Texas and other states toward assessment and accountability in higher education. By more clearly spelling out the university's goals for its graduates, a masteries approach creates a means of assessment that is broad enough to allow accountability while preserving both the broad mission of university and the unique contribution of each discipline. Drawing together classes into a cohesive educational package will help with retention by encouraging students to get their entire education at SFA rather than viewing us as providing individual classes.

In incorporating the masteries approach SFASU joins a few innovative institutions that have brought the focus of higher education back to the set of abilities that students need to succeed. This approach will help us more effectively distinguish ourselves from other institutions while providing faculty and staff with a new way of viewing the quality education that has been a hallmark of our graduates.

The strategic plan calls upon SFASU to enhance our distinctive identity by focusing our attention on the masteries with which graduates will leave college. SFA '08 commits us to giving our graduates masteries in the areas of: communication, creative problem solving, career preparation, and civic engagement. Combined with a broad-based general education, we believe this set of talents embraces all the elements of a quality education and is a package that students, employers, and the general public will value.

### Communication
SFASU will provide our graduates with the ability to communicate effectively and professionally, using written, oral, and artistic means, as well as current technology.

### Creative Problem-solving
SFASU will equip our students to become independent thinkers armed with the skills needed to confront the challenges of a changing world.

### Career preparation
SFASU will give our students learning opportunities and mentorship to gain the necessary knowledge to guide them toward professional success.

### Civic engagement
Through work in and outside of the classroom (service learning/experiential learning), SFASU will teach our students the skills and values needed to serve fully as citizens of the state, nation and world.

### Broad-based university education
SFASU will give its graduates a breadth of knowledge that will help them to continue to grow intellectually throughout their lives and fully participate in the social, scientific, and artistic communities around them.

# How might the masteries approach be implemented?

The Distinctive Identity Implementation committee is charged with helping the campus implement the masteries approach. In order to increase participation in the implementation process, separate masteries committees will be formed for each mastery area. Mastery committee membership will include representation from each college, a student, and a librarian or staff member. The first two masteries committees (communication and career preparation) were created in the fall of 2004. The remaining masteries committees will be formed as implementation proceeds.

These mastery committees have been charged with coordinating development of the over-arching university definitions for each of the masteries broad enough to accommodate the many majors found on campus. The masteries committees will develop definitions based on examples from other universities and input from the SFA community, and present them to the deans and chairs of each college. Based on this feedback and discussion the definition will be revised and then be presented to the provost and president for approval.

The masteries approach could include several steps, requiring students to demonstrate basic, intermediate, and advanced skills: "foundations," "applications and growth," and "mastery." Foundations could be largely accomplished through core courses or other requirements common to all students. Growth and mastery levels can be left to departments, with some opting for traditional written coursework while others use artistic performances, presentations, internships, or other assignments appropriate to their field. While the specific courses and components would vary by major, the general structure of the approach should be consistent across the university.

In many cases, departments already have requirements in place to develop masteries in their students. Such departments will simply need to explicitly state how what they are already doing fits the framework. In some cases, the framework may encourage departments to re-evaluate the skills they emphasize. The possibility of digital portfolios may enable some departments to find new ways of meeting program goals.

Departments that are able to specify their specific goals sooner (e.g. possibly prior to fall 2005 or spring 2006 semester), will be able to act as pilot departments for one or both of the first two masteries. These departments will be recognized and showcased in university publications.

# What the masteries approach is NOT…

The masteries approach is not an attempt to change what individual instructors do in the classroom. It is an attempt to make the way that classes fit together a package that is more intuitive to students considering SFASU.

The masteries approach is not an attempt to redefine an education at SFA. It is an attempt to develop a common language that departments across campus can use to showcase student success traditionally valued as part of an SFA degree.

The masteries approach does not raise standards. It does highlight the full range of skills that SFA wants to give students so that they can succeed in the community and the workplace.

# Why consider Digital Portfolios?

Digital portfolios have come into use as a means of showcasing and assessing students' work. Digital portfolios would allow class products ranging from traditional written assignments to videos of artistic performances that can be viewed and assessed by instructors. These products could also become part of a student's on-line resume that would allow potential employers to get a better view of specific skills.

Most importantly, digital portfolios will serve as a tangible record of student development. Most of the time, students do not go back and review completed and graded assignments from past courses. In fact, once returned, assignments are often trashed or lost. Student that receive a "B" on a freshman writing assignment, and a "B" on a junior-level writing assignment might assume that they have made no progress in his writing skills. This can be frustrating for students, and lead to lowered appreciation for the education they are receiving. As faculty we know our standards increase as student move from basic to advance courses, and thus, although the grade is the same, development must have occurred. By using digital portfolios to regularly document products, students (and faculty, parents, etc.) will be able to appreciate the development of skills and track progress in each mastery.

The costs of this service could be distributed to students for less than the cost of a single textbook each year. Similarly, with the simple web-based interface available from various vendors, students could bear responsibility for up-loading these assignments. The College of Education is currently implementing one type of digital portfolio application. We have formed a subcommittee that will investigate application options and gather feedback from the College of Education about their experiences.