

What is the Preceptorial Program?

The USD Preceptorial Program was begun in 1973 to enhance student retention. It has evolved into a program that combines aspects of a freshman seminar course and academic advising with a regular class. Thus first and most importantly preceptorial classes are typically regular classes taught by experienced faculty members. The classes are limited to 16-18 students, all of whom are entering freshman. This class size makes them about one-half the size of the regular freshman classes. In addition to teaching the course, the faculty member serves as the academic advisor for the student until either the student declares a major or the start of their junior year (at that point advising is done by the Deans' offices of the College of Arts & Sciences and the School of Business).

The purposes of the preceptorial program are listed on the front inside cover of the Freshman Preceptorial Program brochure:

- 1) To fulfill a general education requirement by instruction in an essential academic discipline [this is typically for students who do not know what area they want to major in] or to prepare the student for a future major or minor [for those who do have a proposed major];
- 2) To provide early and continuing communication between the student and the advisor;
- 3) To assist the student in planning a cohesive and productive educational program;
- 4) To introduce the student to the intellectual resources of the University; and
- 5) To help the student develop the inquiring habit of mind that is fundamental to higher education.

At its most fundamental level, the Preceptorial Program is about making connections, both between the students and the faculty and between the students themselves. At the undergraduate level, one of the most salient features of our educational program is the emphasis that we put on student/faculty interaction. The Preceptorial Program is part of that emphasis in that it connects each student to an experienced faculty member who serves as a mentor to the student. This relationship should extend beyond the classroom and strictly academic concerns to include providing the students with guidance on career choices and informing them of the resources, both academic and non-academic, available to them at USD. Having made that connection to one faculty member, we hope that the students will interact extensively with other faculty throughout their undergraduate years and become part of the community of scholars that is USD.

The Program promotes connections between students through how it meshes with the Freshman Orientation Program and through its small group structure. The students attend most of the activities of Orientation week as part of their preceptorial group, and many of the activities are conducted at the preceptorial group level. Since the students were placed into preceptorial groups based upon their academic interests and possible majors, these students start with those interests in common and typically find other common ground as well. This socialization not only helps the students adjust to life away from home but also makes them feel part of the USD community. Also, many faculty encourage students to form study groups for their classes. The other students in the preceptorial group make natural study partners for the students in their non-preceptorial classes. Additionally, the Orientation team leader (an advanced student who was assigned to the preceptorial group) meets with the students a couple times during the semester, which helps to keep the group identity and sense of belonging active.

During the course of the semester, the preceptor will present pertinent information about USD to the class as a whole as well as to individual students based upon each one's needs. This information can range from add/drop deadlines, how to sign up for competency exams, services available through the Student Resource Center, the Counseling Center, and the Career Center, the functions of the Math, Writing and Logic Centers, or how to use the Copley Library. Additionally, starting in early November the preceptor will meet individually with each student to plan his or her schedule for the Spring semester. The preceptor will explain the mechanics of the registration system as well as the use of the Academic Record at this time. They will also discuss the student's progress, major selection, career goals, and any other academic issues of interest to the student at this time. Another such advising session will occur in the Spring.

One benefit to the University of this program has been a greatly improved rate of student retention. Currently around 95% of the students who are eligible to return to USD choose to do so. Another benefit has been that the Preceptorial Program is unusual. It gives us a distinctive profile and serves as the first tangible evidence to the students (and their parents) that USD will deliver on the statements we make about close student/faculty interaction. From the students perspective, the benefits of the Preceptorial Program include:

- 1) early and continuing interaction between the student and a faculty advisor;
- 2) introduction to the intellectual resources of the University
- 3) aid in developing a habit of intellectual inquiry;
- 4) personalized attention and counseling in planning a program of study; and
- 5) a structure whereby the student may obtain help for both academic and non-academic problems.

To conclude, the Preceptorial Program has been a very successful one, both for USD and for our students. It provides tangible benefits for both while establishing the close nature of the student/faculty interaction that is the hallmark of our undergraduate programs.