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They Just Named Me Head of Retention: Now What Do I Do?

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Abstract – Retention specialists come from many areas of higher education. Some, such as a First Year Programs Director, seem like a very natural fit. Others come from departments not traditionally associated with retention. At Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, which offers degree programs primarily in STEM fields, the Director of First Year Programs (FYP) had been considered the informal retention specialist of record until late 2013 when the Library Director was recruited to take on the newly created position of Dean of Retention and Student Success. This paper chronicles the ways in which the two colleagues learned about the state of retention at ERAU and worked with colleagues across campus to evaluate and improve programs designed to help students succeed, particularly in the gateway Math and Physics courses vital to the persistence of first-year students.

Introduction

Retention of students has been an important area of research and interest to institutions of higher education for over 40 years, but has taken on added significance more recently (Tinto, 2006-2007). Declining financial support for colleges and universities, combined with enrollment shortfalls and a greater demand for accountability measures and performance-based funding, are making the stakes higher for colleges and universities to retain and graduate the students they recruit (Hoover, 2015). To address this issue most institutions of higher education have created positions or departments responsible for raising retention.

In the early days of research on and the formal practice of retention, institutions focused on the first year experience, especially in regard to orientation programs and extracurricular activities. Responsibility often resided in Student Affairs departments (Tinto, 2006-2007). As the study and practice of retention has evolved, responsibility for this area has changed as well. In a 2010 survey conducted by ACT, seventy percent of private four-year colleges indicated a person on their campus was responsible for the coordination of retention programs while slightly less than a third (30%) indicated there was no person with this responsibility. From among the 13 positions listed, the top four positions that were selected by 10% to 20% of the group are Chief Enrollment Officer, Director of Retention, Chief Academic Affairs Officer/Dean, and Chief Student Affairs Officer (ACT, 2010).

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University (ERAU), the subject of this paper, has had a series of informally designated retention specialists for years, the longest of whom is a former high school English teacher and coach, who was recruited to ERAU as an advisor in First Year Programs (FYP) and subsequently promoted to head that department. Recently, the Vice President of Student Affairs created the formal position of Dean of Retention and Student Success, housed within her division, and asked the library director to move into this role. This paper will focus on the ways in which the former English teacher and library director researched retention issues, networked across the university, and developed new initiatives.

University Background

ERAU is the world's oldest and largest university specializing in aviation and aerospace and is the only fully-accredited aviation-oriented university. With two residential campuses—in Daytona Beach, Florida and Prescott, Arizona—and a distance learning campus, Worldwide, with over 150 centers and online programs, ERAU educates 30,000 students annually. Degrees range from an associate's in air maintenance science to PhD programs in aerospace engineering, aviation, engineering physics, human factors, and mechanical engineering (Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, 2015b). With very few exceptions, the programs offered at ERAU fall into the STEM category and cluster in a small number of programs. Of the undergraduates enrolled on the Daytona Beach (DB) Campus in the Fall of 2014, 25.4% were in Aerospace Engineering and 23.5% had declared for Aeronautical Science (Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, 2015a).

Each of the three campuses operates somewhat independently. With very different populations and some variety in programs and delivery methods, the campuses are measured separately for success indicators such as first year retention rates and persistence to graduation. Since the Daytona Beach residential campus, which is also the headquarters location for the university, is the home campus of the authors, it will serve as the primary subject of this paper, so data applies only to DB not ERAU.

ERAU is an enrollment-driven institution and, like most enrollment-driven institutions without unlimited endowments, it is looking to grow to stay competitive. Outward signs of growth abound. The university's flagship campus in Daytona Beach would be nearly unrecognizable to an alumnus who has not been on campus in ten years because of all the new buildings. Along with the improved facilities, various new academic programs, including its first PhD degree offerings, ERAU is transitioning to NCAA Athletics. Even with enrollments soaring as incoming students flooded the campus in record numbers in 2014 and 2015 and first year retention is approaching historic highs (see Table 1), ERAU students are facing constantly rising tuition and its graduates are saddled with debt.

Students piling on debt to go to college might attract all the attention, but colleges have been on a borrowing spree as well, nearly doubling the amount of debt they've taken on in the last decade to fix aging campuses, keep up with competitors and lure students with lavish amenities. (Selingo, 2013, para. 1)

As Selingo points out, it is becoming increasingly more expensive to attract new students and growth comes at a cost. So, where does a fiscally responsible university turn?

Retention is where the real revenue is created. Admissions costs money – significant amounts of money. Retaining students / clients costs from nothing to very little. Retaining students through graduation is also how colleges, universities and career schools meet their higher calling, their missions, their purpose and reason to exist and be supported. (Raisman, 2008, p. 66)

Could it be any simpler? To university administrators, especially enrollment managers, tied to the bottom line at an enrollment-driven institution, what could be more alluring? If only it were that simple. Retention does cost money and is no simple proposition. See Figure 1 for DB retention and graduation rates.

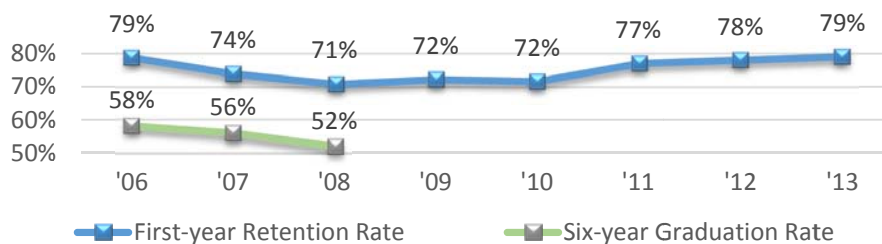


Figure 1: Daytona Beach first-year retention & six year graduation rates (2006 – 2013)

The Holy Grail of First Year Retention

After being lured from a tenured position as a high school English teacher and coach by a peer to higher education, the current Executive Director of Student Academic Support (Director of SAS) joined ERAU in 2004 as an Academic Advisor in First Year Programs (FYP). The newly instituted program was sold as the answer to the university's first year attrition problem. After three years of holding at around 80 percent, first year retention rates fell four percent before FYP was inceptioned (see Figure 2).

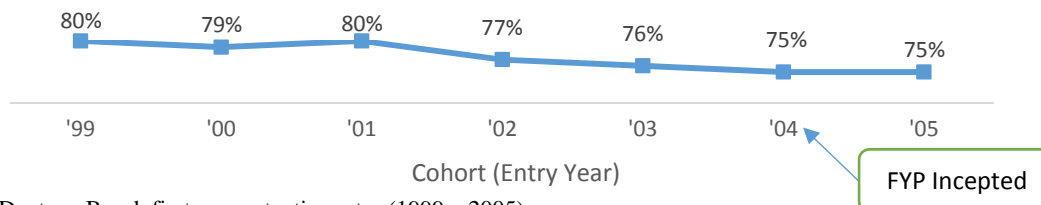


Figure 2: Daytona Beach first-year retention rates (1999 – 2005)

“The long sought-after holy grail of higher education is to bring together entering first-year students and institutions of higher education in a seamless transition toward an undergraduate experience with a lasting impact” (Barefoot et al., 2005, p. xiii). The department's four advisors and their director, charged with providing academic advisement to approximately 1,000 first-time, first-year students as well as teaching two sections per term of ERAU's College Success Course (UNIV 101), worked hard to provide a meaningful first year experience. FYP advisors scheduled intake meetings, monitored grades, set up intervention strategies, helped students develop academic plans, and even designed social events to help students bond with each other and the university. In the end, the team logged many more than three meetings on average with every student and quickly realized the important service they were providing for a campus previously bereft of standardized approaches to advisement. Yet, for the first two years of FYP's existence, first year retention rates fell one percent the first year and merely stabilized in year two.

For a campus promised an immediate answer to its attrition issues, stable retention rates would not suffice. The team assessed its processes and researched best practices at other institutions, but quickly realized the sphere of influence of an academic advisor could only go so far in helping students succeed. Barefoot et al. state the problem eloquently:

The long sought-after holy grail of higher education... The pitfalls along the way, however, are so very numerous: what the student is actually seeking is often not what the institution can offer; what the institution really excels at teaching is sometimes not what the student can or wants to learn; or the tasks in the process of transformation from high school to upper-division status are neither sufficiently well presented by the institution nor sufficiently well understood by the entering student to make the transformation from high school to college as meaningful, stimulating, and transformative as it can be. (2005, pp. xiii - xiv)

In other words, the student persistence problem ERAU faced could not be remedied by a single program working primarily in isolation. The time FYP advisors spent with the students paled in comparison to the time students spent in class, in their residence halls, or in the community at large. What effect could a single program have when faced with such a complex issue? Could multiple advising sessions remedy serious financial shortfalls or help ensure that students are academically and socially prepared for college success? Clearly, not in isolation.

In 2007, during FYP's third year, the Embry-Riddle Language Institute (ERLI), which is a pre-matriculation, academic preparation English language institute, was brought under the auspices of the director of First Year Programs to form the Student Academic Support Center (SAS). Leadership at the time, felt that the two departments would benefit from shared resources and a reorganization. Within months, Richard Nicols, who had moved up from advisor to director of FYP, was named the new Director of SAS and assumed responsibility for not only advisement and First Year Programs, but ERLI as well.

Operating as an independent unit for its first few years, SAS weathered several budgetary storms and administrative reorganizations until it was absorbed into the Division of Student Affairs in 2007 allowing important partnerships with the Dean of Students, Residence Life, Student Activities, and numerous others to flourish. Developing a supportive setting and assisting with social integration are key to student success (Turner & Thompson, 2014; Yu, 2012) and, for obvious reasons, Student Affairs proved an excellent partner in getting students active on campus, providing support in the residence halls, or partnering to support students in more serious behavior issues through the Behavior Intervention Team spearheaded by the Dean of Students. Over time, the university came to understand and agree with the new vision for FYP as a support structure designed to assist students with the difficult transition from high school to the university and not the sole unit accountable for first year retention.

Yet, the university lacked a vision or strategy for retaining students despite the obvious effect retention has on enrollments. In 2011, the Director of SAS was invited to participate in a university-wide Enrollment Management Symposium. Attendees presented the varying retention initiatives, such as advising and enhanced programming for freshmen and the Behavior Intervention Team, and a few major themes emerged – no clear vision for retention despite some excellent initiatives, no head of retention at a university or campus level. In addition, ERAU had made clear over the years that, as tied to incoming enrollments as the university is for survival, enrollment managers rarely get to focus on retention when their jobs are dependent on enrollments.

Shortly after that meeting, the Daytona Beach Campus led by four participants in the conversation (the Directors of Admissions, Financial Aid, and Student Academic Support from the Daytona Beach Campus and the University Director of Institutional Research) proposed a Daytona Beach Retention Committee to help educate the campus in regards to student retention and to design cross-campus collaborations to help students succeed and persist through graduation. The team proposed developing a small, but well-represented committee of individuals who would meet regularly to make recommendations to the campus regarding potential retention initiatives and to liaise with departments campus wide regarding retention and persistence. The proposal was endorsed by the Vice President of Student Affairs as well as the Chief Academic Officer at Daytona Beach.

The committee was formed at the beginning of the 2012-13 Academic Year. Membership was kept small although all major support and academic departments were represented. The committee's early work centered on studying the factors influencing retention at the university, studying best practices throughout higher education, and making recommendations for strategic initiatives designed to improve retention and persistence. In its early phases the committee came to several important conclusions based on its sphere of influence: the need for a Retention Plan identifying the Campus' Strategic Vision (short and long-term) based on realistic goals; to make its presence known and develop a short-term initiative to gain traction; and to develop task forces designed to develop academic, financial, and social initiatives which were not only feasible, but could be assessed and show some level of effect on retention and persistence.

Since the VP of Student Affairs had been integral in endorsing the Committee, she authorized the Director of SAS to chair the new DB Retention Committee. The Director of SAS and the other major contributors to the proposal felt that the committee should have co-chairs (one from Academics and the other, or even two, from the Enrollment Management and Support side). The committee agreed to name the Director of SAS as chair in order to avoid offending important champions on campus and that, once established, the team would look to expand or change leadership as necessary. The team promised that ego would not get in the way and that each member would be willing to put aside bias and myopic needs based on their current roles for the better of the university and its students. In fact, one of the first recommendations of the committee would be to name an "official" campus head of retention even though the Director of SAS seemed to garner the unofficial title more and more as the committee grew in prominence and retention was given more attention university-wide. In early 2014 the VP for Student Affairs accepted their recommendation and created a new position.

A Formal Retention Position

The new position, Dean of Retention and Student Success, would reside in the Division of Student Affairs, be on an equal footing with the Dean of Students, and be responsible for developing and evaluating retention and student success initiatives within the division. In addition, five departments from the division would report to this position: Student Academic Success, the Center for Faith and Spirituality, the Office of Diversity & Inclusion, the Hunt Library, and K-12 Outreach. The Vice President recruited the Hunt Library Director for the new position based on the director's use of evaluation and strategic planning techniques that enabled the library to provide innovative services and resources with declining allocations.

Arriving at the university in 2009 as the Hunt Library Director, the Dean was never formally involved in retention activities. However, with over 25 years of increasingly progressive managerial experience in academic libraries, she had observed the decline in the perceived significance of libraries as online search engines and e-books had begun to replace the traditional services and resources of a typical academic library. In response, she had led strategic planning, evaluation, and marketing efforts that allowed the Hunt Library to move into new areas to demonstrate the value of the library to the university community. She believed that libraries contributed to retention and was working on ways to demonstrate this perception more quantitatively.

Having received no clear direction from the VP on what she expected other than "raise the retention rate" and armed with a small budget dedicated to the task, the new dean began gathering information from a variety of sources to learn as much as possible about an area of higher education that she had only minimally experienced. Through her reading, discussions with counterparts at other universities, and participation in conferences, she began to develop an understanding of the issues of retention and student success. She also engaged her new direct reports in discussions about how they saw their departments contributing to the campus retention efforts, and encouraged them to increase programming in their areas and to measure student satisfaction and needs. In particular, she worked closely with the Director of SAS because he and his department, to that point, were most closely identified with retention efforts.

Perhaps the most important information-gathering the Dean engaged in during the early months, was to search for retention and student success activities that were underway on campus. She was aware that individual faculty were revamping their classes, providing tutorials and conducting evaluation to discover ways to increase the number of successful students in their classes. However, there was no central repository of information on retention efforts. She presented at the Faculty Senate, reached out to academic deans and department chairs, and met with as many of them as she could to learn what they perceived their needs to be and how they were addressing them. As the announcement of her new position was circulated, faculty began to seek her out to tell her about their or their colleagues' efforts to contribute to student success. The associate directors of the Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence (CTLE), subject specialists who reside in the colleges to assist in faculty development, became some of her staunchest allies in this quest for information. They assist faculty who wish to revise their courses to improve student success.

One theme continued to recur in the many conversations the Dean was having. The same gateway courses appeared at the top of the list of classes with high failure rates semester after semester. They were generally offered by the Math or Physics departments and were required of freshmen. As the Dean spoke to different people about these courses, there were a variety of suggestions made about the root causes and ways to address them. Some people blamed professors who did not change teaching styles over decades. Others suggested that students came to ERAU without the requisite knowledge in key areas, despite having all of the credentials on paper. Still others were of the opinion that students who failed these courses were not involved enough in extracurricular activities or were overinvolved, did not have good time management or study skills, or simply were not in the right major or at the right university.

Improving Programs and Developing New Initiatives

Planned Activities

In the first half of 2014, the Director of SAS and the Dean began to focus their retention discussions on the low-hanging fruit in their sphere of influence. They were increasingly aware of the pockets of retention activity in the colleges, but short of offering support and advice to their academic colleagues, they had no authority to begin new initiatives outside the Division of Student Affairs. The ideas they decided to develop during the 2014-2015 academic year were the enhancement of peer mentoring in the UNIV 101 classes, increased student programming, a Request for Proposals (RFP) for a retention solution, and an enhanced supplemental instruction trial, in conjunction with the Retention Committee.

The peer mentoring program was a great success. Intuitively, the benefits of a strong mentoring program are obvious. For resource-poor departments, peer mentors serve as an excellent conduit to reach more students and, as anyone who works directly with students will attest, students usually heed advice better from peers than they do faculty, staff, and administrators. Almost without exception, peer mentors at ERAU are student leaders with only the best intentions in mind for their peers. Yet, not all peer mentoring interactions are equal especially without clearly defined objectives as well as a well-designed formalized support and training structure available throughout the term. The typical stand-alone approach to training and support does not suffice when it comes to strong peer mentor program.

...formal mentoring programs should have an extensive training plan in place before their programs even begin.... Additionally, a time for meetings, weekly or bi-monthly, should be set at this point as well. These weekly or bi-monthly meetings may be one of the most important aspects of mentor training. Many mentors are unaware of the expectations they have for mentoring-frequently, mentors will need guidance when certain issues surface in the relationship. (Budge, 2006, p.81)

With this in mind, the Coordinator of Training and Instruction for FYP (CTI) and the entire FYP team sought to improve the peer mentor program offered through their College Success course (UNIV 101). They started by focusing on two key outcomes for the course – the development of an academic plan and an understanding of the advanced registration process. Mentor meetings were tactically designed with clear objectives to be delivered by the peer mentors at key points throughout the semester, so that students who successfully completed these meetings would meet the chosen objectives. Of course, none of this would be possible without a formalized training and support program available throughout the term. Formalized training was held prior to the beginning of term and covered the specific objectives of the program as well as the general expectations required of peer mentors on topics ranging from maintaining professional standards to understanding the UNIV 101 curriculum and how to support the teacher of record with the delivery of instruction. Yet, training did not end there. Peer Mentors were provided ad hoc as well as required training and support throughout the term from an entire team – the CTI, a Team Coach (an FYP Advisor), and a Peer Lead. Chosen based on leadership skills and proven success as a peer mentor, the Peer Leads were required to go through a separate, intensive training program and work daily as ambassadors for FYP.

Implementation, design, and resources for such a structured program designed to be administered to over thirty sections of UNIV 101 and approximately 750 first year students can be daunting. One major change was a requirement for peer mentors to meet with students in their assigned section of UNIV 101 at least twice during the semester as well as to review the students' academic plans before they turned them in. Prior to the 2014-2015 academic year any contact outside the classroom between peer mentors and students in their sections was informal and irregular at best. Based on some early assessments, which was fully implemented in Fall 2014, the program seems to be working quite well. For example, 95.2 percent of UNIV 101 students completed a Peer Mentor reviewed draft of an academic plan by the end of eighth week of the Fall 2014 term as compared to only 45.2 percent of UNIV 101 students completing the same assignment by the end of the twelfth week of Fall 2013 (see Figure 3).

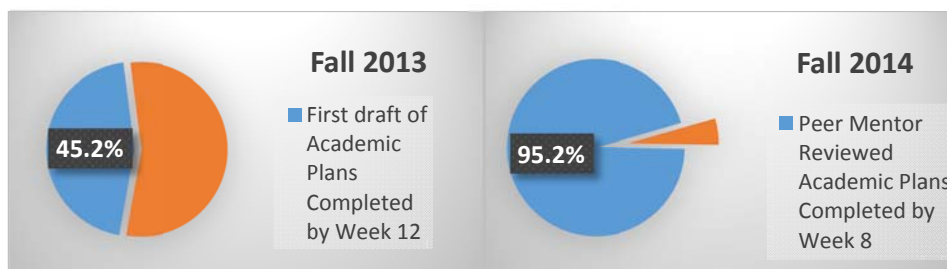


Figure 3: Percentage of academic plans completed (Fall 2013 and Fall 2014)

The CTI and the FYP team will continue to assess the program each year. The benefits the program provides the students will likely go far beyond the positive effect it has already shown in regards to meeting college success objectives. Students who were not sufficiently progressing in UNIV 101 are now more quickly and easily identifiable than they were prior to the enhancements which have allowed advisors to increase their sphere of influence and provide interventions in a more effective manner. Yet, the program's effects should go far beyond the students in obvious peril. Expanding the strategic support provided to all UNIV 101 students should improve first year retention rates for its participants and, by increasing the number and role of the peer mentors, the persistence to graduation of the peer mentors should improve as well – both theories will be assessed longitudinally as more data becomes available for the nascent program.

While the enhanced formal role of peer mentors in UNIV 101 was the major initiative of the year, other areas implemented new ideas. Both the Office of Diversity and Inclusion and the Center for Faith and Spirituality added several new programs to their repertoire, and often collaborated. The programs occurred once or twice per month and centered on education about different ethnic groups and cultures, appreciation of human beings regardless of size, shape, gender, nationality, or orientation. Other programs brought together religious leaders of different faiths for frank discussions or educated the community on the rituals of the many belief systems represented on campus. At each program, attendees swiped in with their university ID cards and were asked to participate in follow-up surveys. For the most part, participation was very light. Of the small numbers of students who did respond, reviews of the programming was generally excellent.

The RFP for a retention solution started on a small scale and grew to be quite large and all-encompassing. Initially a committee of four from Student Affairs were exploring two common retention tools on the market with the thought that the Dean would subscribe to one on a trial basis to ensure it was something that would benefit ERAU. However, as the Dean and Director of SAS mentioned this project to colleagues in the course of their conversations, they discovered a great deal of interest. Before long, Enrollment Management, Student Affairs and Information Technology staff, representing all three campuses, were part of the RFP team. They developed an exhaustive set of criteria and a substantial list of vendors to contact before being asked to merge their task with that of a team developing an RFP for a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) solution. University administration proposed the idea of a software solution that would support students from “cradle to grave”; in other words, tracks students from recruitment through alumni status. Including a retention component as a priority in the CRM elevated this important topic to a higher level in the organization.

Additionally, in the fall 2014 semester, the Retention Committee developed a proposal to incorporate a stronger supplemental instruction presence in a Math class and a Physics class that were required of freshmen engineering students and often had lower than normal success rates. Low grades in these courses could prevent students from progressing onto their specific engineering majors and this circumstance is considered to be a precursor to attrition or multiple years toward completion. With funding from the Provost, student tutors were hired to assist the professors in class and to teach one supplemental instruction a week in seven sections of the Physics course and six sections of the Math course. At the end of the semester, faculty administered questionnaires seeking qualitative feedback. The

assessments revealed that while the majority of students who attended found the sessions helpful, they did not think they should be made mandatory. Those students who did not participate generally cited time constraints. Additional analysis of grades and success in these sections compared to the same semester in the preceding year will be conducted by Institutional Research to determine whether there was some improvement.

Serendipitous Opportunities

Over the course of the 2014-2015 academic year administrators and faculty members reached out to the Dean with requests to head an Ad hoc committee and to partner on some interesting new ventures. The first of these was an invitation to join a learning community on the underprepared student, sponsored by ERAU's Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence (CTLE). The Dean recruited the Director of SAS to the group and he, in turn, involved a staff member from Institutional Research, who helps with data requests on retention topics. The learning community chose as its topic, the underprepared student in basic Math classes. The group drilled down through the Math placement scores of students and their relative success in the course they placed into and two subsequent courses. As a result of the exploration, the group developed a hypothesis about the relative efficacy of the ERAU proprietary Math placement test. They wrote a report recommending its revision in some minor ways to point out deficiencies in particular areas that the students could be directed to work on before coming to class.

In the late fall of 2014, the Vice President for Institutional Effectiveness charged the Dean with forming a committee of staff from the three campuses to develop a website with student achievement goals and data. The request came from ERAU's accrediting organization and the deadline they imposed was less than one month. The Dean invited colleagues from a wide range of disciplines, including the Director of SAS, who came together quickly and developed the requirements and the website (<http://erau.edu/about/student-achievement/index.html>). It turned out to be a good opportunity to explore retention issues beyond the smaller community of Enrollment Management, Student Affairs, and the Daytona Beach faculty, where the Dean and Director generally operated. When the Dean asked the Vice President why he chose her for this charge, he answered that there was no one else at the university as closely identified with retention as she.

Another opportunity came as a result of membership the Dean and Director of SAS were offered on the Student Government Association (SGA) Academic Committee. Led by students, the committee explored ideas to support students' academic endeavors. One early conversation focused on the lack of study space during the final exam period. The group brainstormed some ideas and decided to open one of the classroom buildings for study purposes. The Dean contributed funding for food and the Director of SAS worked with Institutional Research to set up some assessment. The committee organized the classrooms by general subject area to encourage students to study with others in their classes or majors. Survey results from participants reveal that over 60% agreed or strongly agreed that the designated study spaces were a valuable part of their final exam preparation (Heaton & Massey, 2015).

Future Plans

Plans for the 2015-2016 academic year are to continue many of the same projects. The enhanced peer mentoring program in FYP had some immediate benefits and the supplemental instruction trial with the two gateway courses was well-received. Both of these initiatives will be analyzed in greater detail to see if they appeared to contribute to ongoing student success and retention.

Another program ERAU will be looking to enhance is the Summer Free Remedial Program which has realized significant success, but to a limited number, helping prepare students in need of remediation in Mathematics – a nationwide problem. Approximately one third of students entering college are underprepared and in need of some form of remediation (Lesik, 2008, p.1) and ERAU is no different. Based on the Math Online Evaluation (MOE), an ERAU-developed Math Placement evaluation, 31.6 percent of the incoming ERAU students placed into Developmental Math from 2008 through 2013.

According to an ERAU study conducted by its Office of Institutional Research for the Fall 2000 through Fall 2006 first year cohorts, students who placed into Developmental Math courses and earned a

“C” or better in the course persisted through the first year at a significantly higher rate (80%) than students who received a “D” or “F” (56%) or required no Developmental coursework (72%). Research on the subject seems to back up these findings.

Students who do not enroll in remedial courses are 4.3 times more likely to withdraw from the university during their first three years (Lesik, 2007) when compared to similar students who were placed in remediation. Lesik found that remedial courses “have positive effects on student persistence for students at the margins of needing remediation” (Boatman & Long, 2010, pp. 1-2). Based on these findings, ERAU developed the early intervention program designed to help incoming students requiring remediation based on their results on the MOE to take faculty instructed developmental math courses on campus at no cost and get a head start on their peers. As part of the program, students were required to complete at least three credits of other coursework at full tuition and sign an Academic Success Contract through which they agreed to participate in lab work outside of class and meet with an academic advisor throughout the semester.

From 2009 (the first year of the program) through 2013 (the last year first year retention rates could be measured at time of publication), 90.9 percent of the participants passed the developmental class on their first attempt compared to 78.6 percent of the students taking developmental math classes during the Summer B term for the three years prior to the start of the program (2006 through 2008). Even more importantly, 80.0 percent of the students who passed the class went on to pass the next math class and 81.4 percent persisted through the first year.

Based on the program’s initial success, the Retention Committee hopes to make the program more accessible to incoming students. Held during ERAU’s Summer B term which currently starts towards the end of June, Admissions has had difficulty recruiting students to the program since many high school students are either still taking classes or have just recently graduated. As a result, the Retention Committee is looking to propose a program based on similar principles that will last three to four weeks, rather than its current six, in order to attract more students and, hopefully, provide similar results on a larger scale.

In addition, support for students and faculty in the Math and Physics gateway courses will be an ongoing concern. Faculty representatives from the Retention Committee are beginning to explore the prerequisites for Aeronautical Science and Aerospace Engineering majors to discover whether a curriculum developed 25 years ago is still entirely relevant. Also in the early planning stages are a proposal to centralize advising through the sophomore year and to conduct research among groups of students at risk, such as those who receive early warning of a potential low grade. In addition, with the success of new programming in diversity, inclusion, and spiritual life, staff in those areas are planning different programs with a more interactive approach.

Challenges

Perhaps the largest challenge faced by the retention specialists at ERAU is one that is common across colleges and universities – the lack of a strategic entity that brings together all of the disparate groups that contribute to retention and has a plan and structure to bring them together to make a profound difference. According to Tinto:

While many institutions tout the importance of increasing student retention, not enough have taken student retention seriously. Too few are willing to commit needed resources and address the deeper structural issues that ultimately shape student persistence. They are willing to append retention efforts to their ongoing activities, but much less willing to alter those activities in ways that address the deeper roots of student attrition. (2006-2007, p. 9)

The Dean and the Director of SAS are middle managers in the Student Affairs division of one campus of ERAU. They must go through layers of bureaucracy to bring a request or an issue forward. They have been successful for the most part because the administration of their area is very supportive, but they lack adequate funding and clear direction.

The other challenge that the retention specialists face is the perception that retention belongs to them. Even though they work primarily in one division on one campus, they are called upon to fill in and absorb responsibilities at the campus and university level because they are the most closely identified with retention. It can be a good experience to work with faculty and staff from across the university on an important retention-related project, but it can also be difficult to experience the expectation that they are the experts on every aspect of retention.

Conclusion

Both the Dean and the Director of SAS did not see their assignment to retention specialist as a natural progression. Undergraduate majors in English and Classics did not seem like the best foundation for developing and measuring programs designed to help students succeed and stay in school. But with experience in teaching, coaching, information-seeking, and project management, they brought to their responsibilities the ability to network and to effectively articulate the needs and goals of retention at ERAU.

The research and practice of retention is evolving. There is no one-size-fits-all. In fact, the ability to try and fail and try again is perhaps the hallmark of ongoing retention efforts. Being willing to take a chance on a new idea, ask for help and partners in a new venture, and bring people together to discuss challenges and solutions is the best way to proceed when an institution does not have considerable resources to dedicate to retention efforts.

At the beginning of their tenure in these roles, the former high school English teacher and library director often asked, "How did I get here? What did they see in me that made them think I could spend my work life raising retention at a school that primarily provides instruction in the sciences and engineering?" After a number of successes and the knowledge that more faculty and staff regard retention as everyone's responsibility, they have come to realize that they were chosen not for their education but for their ability to identify solutions and engage others to help attain them. This realization may prove useful to other academic professionals who find themselves cast in the role of retention specialist despite limited obvious skills and experience in this area.

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