

University Retention Report to Faculty Senate, December 2007
Presented by the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience
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Abstract

This report is prepared on an annual basis for the Faculty Senate at Utah State University in an effort to provide basic student cohort and retention data, and to explicate processes, initiatives, and programs central to student retention efforts at Utah State. Following a cursory depiction of cohort and retention data comprised of official figures from the 2005 cohort, and preliminary figures from the 2006 and 2007 cohorts, this report will annotate specific retention-focused programs and processes at Utah State University, with sections highlighting recent accomplishments, updating current initiatives, and introducing future programs and imperatives. The report will conclude with a statement emphasizing the critical nature of collaboration among faculty, staff, and administrators in efforts to meaningfully enhance the student experience at Utah State University.

Function of the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience

Established just over one year ago, the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience at Utah State University exists to comprehensively and cohesively approach the processes of student transition, integration, and persistence through programs, initiatives, and research. Primary programmatic functions of this office include:

- Student enrollment confirmation
- Student Orientation, Advising, and Registration (SOAR)
- The University Connections course
- University Parent and Family Programs
- Matriculation and leave of absence advising
- Research and analysis of student and institutional retention data

Beyond the scope of these programs, the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience collaborates extensively with myriad departments, offices, and individuals from across the University to identify and implement programs and initiatives meant to enhance the capacity of the institution to contribute to student success and mitigate student attrition.

Enrollment, Program Participation, and Retention Figures

2007 Figures (Preliminary)

First-Time, Full-Time, Degree-Seeking Students, Logan Campus (Initial Cohort): **2,617***
First-Time, Full-Time, Degree-Seeking Students, Total USU (Including Regional Campuses): **2,744**
Number of Students Entering Fall 2007 Enrolled in Traditional, Pre-Semester Connections: **1,495**
Number of Students Entering Fall 2007 Enrolled in All Sections of Connections: **1,654**
Number of Students Entering Fall 2007 Participating in SOAR: **2,915****
Number of Students Entering Fall 2007 Attending SOAR on Campus: **2,463**
Number of Parents Attending Orientation on Campus during 2007: **1,051**

*This figure represents the number of First-Time, Full-Time Degree-Seeking Main Campus students in the Fall 2007 cohort prior to adjustments for all allowed reporting exclusions. Adjusted cohort totals and corresponding retention figures are prepared each spring by Analysis, Assessment, and Accreditation for the previous academic year's cohort of entering students.

**This figure includes all students who attended SOAR on campus as well as all students who completed the SOAR requirement online.

2006 Figures (Preliminary)

Initial Cohort (unadjusted for reporting exclusions and official leaves of absence): **2,375***
Number of Students Entering Fall 2006 Enrolled in Traditional, Pre-Semester Connections: **1,454**
Number of Students Entering Fall 2006 Enrolled in All Sections of Connections: **1,589**
Number of Students Entering Fall 2006 Participating in SOAR: **2,790****
Number of Students Entering Fall 2006 Attending SOAR on Campus: **2,170**
Number of Parents Attending Orientation on Campus during 2006: **897**

*This figure represents the number of First-Time, Full-Time Degree-Seeking Main Campus students in the Fall 2006 cohort prior to adjustments for all allowed reporting exclusions. Adjusted cohort totals and corresponding retention figures are prepared each spring by Analysis, Assessment, and Accreditation for the previous academic year's cohort of entering students.

**This figure includes all students who attended SOAR on campus as well as all students who completed the SOAR requirement online.

Official 2005 Cohort Figures:

Initial 2005 First-Time, Full-Time Degree-Seeking Logan Campus Cohort: **1,906**
Adjusted Cohort (with allowed reporting exclusions): **1,583***
Number of Students from Adjusted Fall 2005 Cohort Who Returned Fall 2006: **1,143**
Official 2005 Retention Rate: **72.2%**
Number of Students on Official Leave of Absence or Otherwise Excluded from 2005 Cohort: **323**
(313 Religious Missions, 5 Military, 3 Foreign Aid Service, 2 Deceased)
Number of Students Entering Fall 2005 Enrolled in Connections (Pre-semester only): **1,388**
Number of Students Entering Fall 2005 Participating in SOAR (On-campus only): **1,590**
Number of Parents Attending Orientation on Campus during 2005: **581**

*Adjusted cohort figures reflect initial cohort figures less the number of students noted as allowed reporting exclusions. Reasons for such exclusions include church, humanitarian, and military service, among others. For further explanation of cohort adjustments and reporting exclusions, visit <http://aaa.usu.edu/factsfigures/RetentionGraduation.htm>.

Recent Student Retention-Focused Accomplishments

Early Alert

Beginning in Fall Semester 2007, the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience, in conjunction with the University Retention Committee, implemented an Early Alert program, targeting freshmen and sophomores experiencing academic difficulty. In this program, participating faculty members refer students who demonstrate signs of academic difficulty at early points in the semester, primarily utilizing poor results on early exams, troubling attendance patterns, and other indicators of early academic distress as conditions for referral. These students are then contacted by the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience and encouraged to stop in for a brief consultation regarding available academic resources and strategies. Following a brief assessment by professional staff, students are connected to offices, departments, and/or specific resources that will be of potential benefit to them. Follow-up inquiries regarding resource utilization and remediation are conducted on a student-by-student basis by the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience. Additionally, first-year students enrolled in the University Connections course who receive a grade of B- or lower when Connections grades are reported in the early part of October are also referred into this program. This referral is based upon internal research which has indicated that students who receive a B- or lower in Connections are substantially more likely to experience later academic difficulty and are less likely to be retained to a second year at Utah State University. Assessment and participation data for this program will be available following the conclusion of the first semester of this program.

Collaborative Retention Data Analysis

Efforts undertaken within the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience to research and determine both the significance of the effects of directed University efforts to assist and provide for first-year students, as well as the predictive capacity of many other variables to identify prospective factors leading to attrition have been expanded to incorporate data provided centrally from the Registrar's Office, as well as individual departments, colleges, and programs. These collaborations have been established in efforts to both understand and enhance contributions to the student experience by individual units, as well as expand institutional knowledge of student attrition patterns and tendencies. To this end, in the past year the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience has engaged in partnerships with University Housing, the College of Natural Resources, and the Honors Program, among others, with whom baseline data sharing and analysis has taken place, as well as strategy discussions for appropriate steps to be taken on the basis of future data collection and analysis. In addition to these partnerships, an ongoing collaboration between the Office of Analysis, Assessment, and Accreditation, and the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience has led to a successfully piloted assessment of students who have left Utah State University to determine specific causes for attrition. Following this successful pilot, this survey is scheduled to be administered to all students from the Fall 2006 cohort who did not return to Utah State for Fall 2007, with the intention of collecting this data on a yearly basis to allow for longitudinal analysis.

University Retention Symposium

Co-sponsored by the Office of the Provost and the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience, a University Retention Symposium convened on October 11, 2007. This symposium featured workshops, panels, presentations, and forums intended to facilitate broad conversations regarding best practices for student success across campus. Successful retention efforts in individual colleges, departments, offices, and regional campuses were shared in an effort to perpetuate the positive momentum toward a culture of focusing on student success and persistence throughout the University. The Retention Symposium luncheon featured a keynote address from President Stan Albrecht. This address highlighted issues surrounding student retention and persistence at Utah State University, focusing particularly on current and future institutional efforts to enhance student success, and emphasizing the critical role of individual departments and offices in these efforts.

Math Placement Testing

Faculty leaders from the Mathematics and Statistics Department, in partnership with colleagues from the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience and the Registrar's Office, have implemented extensive math placement testing for incoming students. For a substantial number of incoming first-year students, these tests are taken in conjunction with Student Orientation, Advising, and Registration for the sake of both convenience and efficacy in ensuring that students are directed toward the appropriate initial math course at Utah State as they commence their introductory advising and registration processes. The goal of this program is to see to it that students are more likely to meet with initial success in their math coursework at Utah State, with the explicit intention of limiting student attrition on the basis of potentially avoidable academic difficulty experienced as a result of inappropriate initial math course placement. Data and analysis of the preliminary results of this process will be available following the completion of the 2007-2008 academic year.

Online Leave of Absence

In collaboration with the Financial Aid Office and the Registrar, the University Matriculation Advisor, the Admissions Office, and the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience have moved the process of taking a leave of absence from Utah State online. For students, this both simplifies and clarifies the process of taking a leave from the University. For the institution, this allows for easier student tracking and ensures that better student data will be available for analysis. In addition, this process has eliminated a number of extensive paper trails that previously existed as information on students taking leaves of absence is shared between the Financial Aid Office, the Registrar's Office, and the Office of Retention

and First-Year Experience. Because this process has allowed for more nuanced levels of student tracking, departments are now notified in advance of a student's scheduled return from leave, allowing them to contact the student to welcome them back to the University and update them on any information that may be critical to their successful return.

Updates on Previous Initiatives

Expansion of University Connections

The University Connections course (USU 1010) continues to serve as a positive transition experience for first-year students at Utah State University. The Fall 2007 event marked the largest enrollment in the history of the program, with 60 total sections accommodating 1,495 students in the traditional pre-semester format, and an additional 159 students in the 8-week in-semester sections, for a total of 1,654 enrolled students. In addition, Connections featured new enriching experiences with the addition of an education program designed by Nutrition Department undergraduate research fellows and several sections offering service-learning experiences. Additionally, 2007 Connections students were introduced to the use of Blackboard Vista through their participation in the course, enjoyed an introduction to the local community through the annual "Taste of Logan" event, and participated in enhanced evening and extracurricular activities sponsored by the Associated Students of Utah State University. This year, Connections students participated in the annual Common Literature Experience by reading *Complications: A Surgeon's Notes on an Imperfect Science*, and enjoying an opening Convocations lecture featuring the book's author, Dr. Atul Gawande. The peer mentoring program, wherein students in each section of Connections interact extensively in the course and throughout their first-year with a designated member of the University A-Team, continued to expand, providing students with valuable transition and integration assistance. Assessment of the Connections course, conducted by the Office of Analysis, Assessment, and Accreditation, indicated student satisfaction with the experience, with 83.8% of student respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that they received useful information in the Connections course and 79.6% of student respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that the Connections course helped ease their transition to USU.

Connections Data Analysis

In an effort to determine the impact of Connections on first-year students, and also to determine additional areas of utility provided by the course, the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience has initiated data analysis processes designed to examine the Connections course in greater detail. These analyses revealed a retention rate for Connections students of over 8% higher than for students who did not participate, and also a much higher retention rate among students who received a grade of B or higher in Connections than for those who received a grade of B- or lower. Findings from the second data set are now being utilized in conjunction with the Early Alert program, as all students who receive a B- or lower are targeted for early intervention. Future analysis will include further longitudinal studies on this data, and regression analysis to assess the strength of correlations between Connections participation and measures of academic success and persistence. Data from the initial analysis follows:

Student Retention

Among students from official Fall 2005 cohort:

Adjusted retention rate for students who completed Connections: **74.90%**

Adjusted retention rate for students who did not complete Connections: **66.13%**

Central early-alert mechanism utilization

Among students from official Fall 2005 cohort:

Adjusted retention rate for students who received a B or higher in Connections: **78.33%**

Adjusted retention rate for students who received a B- or lower in Connections: **47.5%**

(Students at B- or lower (n=120) targeted for coordinated interventions in October in conjunction with the Early Alert program.)

Parent and Family Programs

The Office of Retention and First-Year Experience has introduced and expanded a number of connected programs and initiatives directed specifically toward the establishment of intentional and proactive relationships with parents and families of Utah State University students. These programs have been designed with the intention of enabling parents to become more impactful resources in contributing to the success of their students. Programs include dedicated Parent Orientation sessions, held in conjunction with SOAR, with 1,051 parent participants in 2007. Parents of first-year students are also encouraged to become a part of the Utah State Parent and Family Association, which boasts a current membership of 1,355. In addition to other resources, all Parent and Family Association members receive an online monthly newsletter designed specifically for parents of current USU students. Additionally, a growing number of Regional Parent Advisory Boards have been established to give parents from specific regions the opportunity to participate in planning and feedback processes for retention and parent-focused programs and initiatives. Based on expressed parent interest, advisory boards have been established in Idaho Falls/Pocatello, Cache County, Ogden/Davis County, Salt Lake County, Utah County, and online for parents outside these designated areas, with 65 total active participants in these boards. A Parent and Family Weekend, held October 12-14, was also introduced this year in an effort to perpetuate and reinforce appropriate and meaningful parent involvement in the student experience, and was well-received by over 300 attendees.

Early Registration/Course Clusters

Thanks to an ongoing collaboration between the University Registrar, the University Advising Office, and the Office of Student Orientation, Advising, and Registration, within the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience, the process of course selection and registration for new, first-time incoming students has been refined and expanded, resulting in students being able to pre-register for a set of courses in conjunction with their registration for participation in SOAR, the University's mandatory pre-matriculation advising and registration process. As students register to attend SOAR and submit their University Deposit, students are placed in a set of classes in advance based on their major, preferences, standardized test scores, and previously earned credit, with the opportunity to refine and add to this partial schedule once these students meet with their respective academic advisors while at SOAR. The impetus for this process is twofold; by allowing students the opportunity to be placed in a baseline set of courses that reflect their interests and meet their general education requirements, students are more likely to be satisfied with their initial academic experience, and by allowing this process to take place outside normal priority registration protocols, incoming students are ensured that these courses will be on their schedule in their first semester. Based on both national research and comments from Utah State University students, the effort to make certain that students are engaged in appropriate, applicable, and desired coursework in their first semester is a significant component of student satisfaction. Though this process has been in existence for several years at Utah State, the extraordinary efforts of the University Registrar and the Program Administrator for New Student Orientation to expand the scope and purpose of this process in the past year have led to substantial progress in the capacity of this process to meet its long term aim of better serving, and ultimately retaining students.

Transition Assistance: Admissions Office and Student Orientation, Advising, and Registration

In an effort to continue to improve institutional capacity to assist students in their transition from recruitment through admissions to matriculation and beyond, the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience and the Admissions Office have partnered on a number of platforms. Beginning with recruitment, students are now introduced to the office and processes they will encounter after their admission to the University. Contact with admitted students to inform them of their next steps, including SOAR registration and the submission of the University Deposit to secure their enrollment at the university, are coordinated between Admissions and SOAR personnel. Student Ambassadors (University Recruitment and Admissions Ambassadors) and the University A-Team (New Student Orientation Staff and Peer Mentors) are engaged in multiple collaborations throughout the year to ensure that incoming students experience a successful transition to Utah State.

New Student Handbook and Planner

In response to both student comments and extensive analysis of information provided to incoming students regarding University resources, services, and policies, the Office of Student Orientation, Advising, and Registration introduced a new handbook for incoming students beginning with the entering 2007 cohort. This handbook provides a quick and easy reference to resources available to Utah State University students, and incorporates helpful features including: calendar information, dates and deadlines, policies and procedures, transportation information, phone numbers and locations, and emergency contact information. This handbook is utilized at both SOAR and Connections as students enter the university in an effort to familiarize them with the resources and information noted in the handbook. Students are encouraged to refer to the information in this handbook for general, quick-reference information, and to consult the *General Catalog* for complete, in-depth information.

Excellence in Instruction for First-Year Students Faculty Award

As a part of the University's commitment to supporting students in their first year of college, Utah State University recognized five outstanding faculty members for their efforts in mentoring first-year students. Award recipients included Kim Corbin Lewis, Associate Professor in the Communicative Disorders and Deaf Education Department; Cathy Ferrand Bullock, Assistant Professor in the Journalism and Communications Department; Lawrence Culver, Assistant Professor in the History Department; Ted J. Alsop, Associate Professor in the Environment and Society Department; and Scott Ensign, Professor in the Chemistry and Biochemistry Department. The recipients of this award were selected from a group of more than 100 faculty members who were nominated by first-year students. This award has been designed to serve as an annual way of recognizing the extraordinary efforts of faculty members in contributing to student success, and the nomination and awarding process is currently under review.

Proposed and Pending Initiatives

International Connections

In collaboration with the Office of International Students and Scholars, a section of Connections will be offered beginning in the 2008-2009 academic year specifically for international students. This section will allow incoming international students the opportunity to receive many of the same curricular and extracurricular resources and benefits as students participating in traditional Connections sections, with specific elements added to address the individual and collective needs of newly arriving international students.

Additions to Connections Curriculum: Student Finance

Following the aforementioned collaborative success bringing issues of student nutrition into the Connections curriculum, a new partnership with the Department of Family, Consumer, and Human Development and the Family Life Center will introduce Connections students to critical information regarding budgeting and finance. Given that concerns about money and finances are often cited by students as factors in their departure from the University, this is obviously a matter of great import, and providing assistance to students in this arena is intended to ultimately provide both individual and institutional benefits.

Expansion of Early Alert

Following the successful pilot of this program in Fall Semester 2007, the Early Alert program will continue to expand to incorporate the participation of as many courses impacting first- and second- year students as possible, based on the willingness of faculty members in these courses to provide names or A-numbers of students demonstrating early indicators of academic difficulty for referral. Whereas currently, faculty members are asked to visit a separate, dedicated website maintained by the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience to make these referrals, work is underway to explore the possibility of building

such a system into Blackboard course management software, ultimately allowing for quick and integrated faculty participation in this process. Future expansion of the Early Alert program will also allow other individuals, both on- and off- campus, to refer students who may be experiencing academic difficulty for assistance.

Expanded Development of Data Collection and Analysis Capacities/Departmental Collaborations

Based upon positive results obtained from collaborations with individual departments and programs to obtain and analyze specialized student participation and retention data, the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience is continuing to expand its capacity to obtain and analyze relevant student data. Thanks to the substantial assistance of the Registrar's Office, and the cooperation of several key offices, including the Financial Aid Office, the Academic Resource Center, and University Advising, the scope of the data available for analysis in future individual collaborative projects and in large-scale University-wide student retention-focused studies will be broadened significantly. With this access, the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience will continue to aggressively pursue opportunities to collaborate with as many campus entities as possible to assist individual departments and offices in their efforts, and to contribute to the growing knowledge base impacting the University's ability to better serve its students.

Faculty and Collaboration

According to Kinzie and Kuh (2004), "Sharing responsibility for educational quality and student success is woven into the tapestry of educationally effective institutions." A review of the student success and retention-focused accomplishments noted in this report reveals the significance of effective and efficient collaboration among faculty, staff, and administration in developing effectual initiatives and engendering positive outcomes for students and the institution. While each of the aforementioned initiatives certainly demand the contributions of multiple constituents, it is important to note the central role played by faculty members not only in these initiatives taken individually, but perhaps most critically, in the comprehensive effort to provide for student success and retain students at this institution. The proximity between faculty members and students on a daily basis in teaching, research, and advising capacities allows for members of the faculty to have unparalleled influence on the lives of students, an influence that Richard Light (2001) claims many faculty members often wrongly underestimate. Faculty members' efforts, both in their individual work with students on a daily basis, and their participation in centrally-sponsored programs and initiatives such as those outlined in this report, are fundamentally critical to the Utah State University's student retention endeavors and accomplishments, and should be emphatically noted as the basis for the accomplishments listed in this report, and the foundation for the successes to be achieved in the future.

References

Kinzie, J., & Kuh, G.D. (2004). Going DEEP: Learning from Campuses that Share Responsibility for Student Success. *About Campus*, 9(5), 2-8.

Light, R. (2001). *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 104.