

## 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 summary depiction of current and recent available cohort and retention data, 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 two years 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 (USU 1010)
- University Parent and Family Programs
- Matriculation, change of enrollment, 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.

## Retention, Enrollment, and Program Participation Figures

### Cohort Retention Figures, 2004-2007 (All figures from Analysis, Assessment, and Accreditation)

Initial 2004 First-Time, Full-Time, Degree-Seeking, Logan Campus Cohort: **2,028**<sup>1</sup>  
Official 2004 Retention Rate: **71.0%**

Initial 2005 First-Time, Full-Time, Degree-Seeking, Logan Campus Cohort: **1,906**  
Official 2005 Retention Rate: **72.3%**

Initial 2006 First-Time, Full-Time, Degree-Seeking, Logan Campus Cohort: **2,375**  
Official 2006 Retention Rate: **73.5%**

Initial 2007 First-Time, Full-Time, Degree-Seeking, Logan Campus Cohort: **2,617**  
Official 2007 Retention Rate: Not Yet Available<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Each initial cohort figure represents the number of First-Time, Full-Time, Degree-Seeking, Logan Campus students in an entering fall semester cohort prior to adjustments for all allowed reporting exclusions used in calculating the University's retention rate. For more information on these adjustments, see <http://aaa.usu.edu/factsfigures/RetentionGraduation.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> All adjusted cohort totals and corresponding first- to second- year retention figures are prepared each spring by Analysis, Assessment, and Accreditation for the previous academic year's cohort of entering students.

## **2008 Cohort Enrollment and Program Participation Figures (Preliminary)**

First-Time, Full-Time, Degree-Seeking Students, Logan Campus (Initial Cohort): **2,549**  
First-Time, Full-Time, Degree-Seeking Students, Total USU (Including Regional Campuses): **2,665**  
Number of Students Entering Fall 2008 Enrolled in Traditional, Pre-Semester Connections: **1,597**  
Number of Students Entering Fall 2008 Enrolled in All Sections of Connections: **1,737**  
Number of Students Entering Fall 2008 Participating in SOAR: **3,021**  
Number of Parents Attending Orientation on Campus during 2008: **1,123**

## **2007 Cohort Enrollment and Program Participation Figures**

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 Parents Attending Orientation on Campus during 2007: **1,051**

## **2006 Cohort Enrollment and Program Participation Figures**

First-Time, Full-Time, Degree-Seeking Students, Logan Campus (Initial Cohort): **2,375**  
First-Time, Full-Time, Degree-Seeking Students, Total USU (Including Regional Campuses): **2,508**  
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 Parents Attending Orientation on Campus during 2006: **897**

## **Recent Student Retention-Focused Accomplishments and Initiatives**

### **University Retention Task Force**

In an effort to facilitate the creation of a university-wide retention plan based on best practices, data, and research findings, a University Retention Task Force has been established. Comprised of representatives from the President's Office, the Provost's Office, Admissions, Financial Aid, Regional Campuses, Retention and First-Year Experience, the Registrar's Office, ASUSU, and the faculty, this task force has also been charged with setting appropriate retention goals for the University on the basis of findings from appropriate data. This task force has already commenced its analysis of key data and research findings and initiated a review of the impact of programs designed to enhance student success and persistence, ultimately in an effort to ascertain the impact and efficacy of these programs, as well as the University's efforts to retain students and contribute to student success.

### **Aggie Experience Passport Project**

With the stated goal of increasing student exposure to the wide range of cultural, social, and academic offerings available through both the University and the local community, the Aggie Experience Passport project was launched Fall Semester, 2008. Over 2,000 passports were distributed to primarily first-year students at the outset of the semester, and students were encouraged to bring these passports to carefully selected campus and community events to be stamped, indicating the student's attendance at, or participation in the event. Students obtained stamps on their passport in pursuit of a range of donated prizes available at tiered levels of participation in the program, with a final reward for participation in the program entailing a special dinner at the home of President and Mrs. Albrecht for all students who obtained at least ten stamps on their passport. As of the compilation of this report, over 500 unique stamps have been issued to students at more than 14 activities and events. Future research into the effects of this program will include analysis of the students who participate at various levels to determine

any potential impact on student retention and/or program participation. Based on the results of this analysis and assessment, along with feedback from both participants and campus and community stakeholders, an enhanced version of this program will return in Fall Semester, 2009.

### **Online Change of Enrollment Expansion**

Building on the successful implementation of the online leave of absence process for students wishing to take a leave from the University for at least one semester, this function has expanded to incorporate other changes of enrollment, including complete withdrawal, partial-semester leaves, and in-semester dropping of all classes. From the perspective of the student, this change allows for more convenience and simpler protocol, as all changes in enrollment status can be managed in the same place, at an easy to use, secure, dedicated website hosted jointly by the Registrar's Office, Financial Aid, and Retention and First-Year Experience. For the University, not only does this expansion allow for better student tracking and data analysis, but it also further simplifies the instructions various offices and/or advisors must give students as they prepare to make a change to their enrollment status, ultimately resulting in a more uniform, cohesive system for both student and institution.

### **Student Retention as a Component of the University's Commitment to Sustainability**

Members of the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience have been invited to participate as members of subcommittees to the University's Sustainability Council in an effort to better integrate the concepts of sustainability into retention-focused programs initiatives and vice versa. To this end, sustainability units have been integrated into Connections courses in an effort to meet the University's mandate to provide sustainability education in "other educational experiences" (USU Sustainability Education Draft Policy, 2008) and sustainability information has been included in the New Student Handbook and the Connections manual. Additionally, the Sustainability Council has been prominently included in orientation and welcome events and information fairs, concepts of sustainability have become an ongoing focus of the weekly emails sent by peer mentors to first-year students, sustainability issues and teaching strategies have been conveyed to Connections instructors, and students, including a substantial population of first-year students and their peer mentors have initiated participation in the forum/wiki community on the University's new sustainability website. This collaboration will continue to allow for further exploration for potentially synergistic initiatives involving the continued integration of students into communities and projects designed to enhance university, community, and individual sustainability efforts.

### **Updates on Previous and Ongoing Initiatives**

#### **Early Alert**

The Early Alert program, first piloted in Fall Semester, 2007, continues to expand in an effort to identify students experiencing academic difficulty at early points in the semester, through referrals from faculty members and also on the basis of poor academic performance in the University Connections course. Referred students are encouraged to meet with a professional staff member in the Retention and First-Year Experience Office for a brief consultation regarding available resources and strategies. Following referrals to appropriate offices, departments, individuals, or resources, the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience follows up with the student via email to check on resource utilization and remediation. As of the compilation of this report, 465 students have been contacted by the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience in Fall Semester 2008 alone, all having been referred to intervention designed to direct them to resources intended to help them succeed.

#### **University Connections**

The University Connections course (USU 1010) continues to play a critical role in facilitating first-year students' effective integration into the academic community at Utah State University. Course sections in Fall 2008 were marked by the largest enrollment in the history of the program, with 1,737 students enrolled in all sections of Connections. This year, Connections students participated in the annual

Common Literature Experience by reading *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, and enjoying an opening Convocations lecture featuring the book's author, Ishmael Beah. 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, continues to expand, providing students with valuable transition and integration assistance. Beyond the expansion of innovations made in recent years, this year's program featured a substantial increase in the number of courses integrating a service learning component, with additional courses adding units on sustainability to the curriculum, as well. Significantly, in partnership with both University Advising and Distance Education, an online version of the Connections course has now been made available to distance learners, and in collaboration with Regional Campuses, discussions have been initiated regarding the further expansion of the Connections course and curriculum to additional Regional Campus sites.

### **Parent and Family Programs**

The Office of Retention and First-Year Experience continues to facilitate and promote the growth and expansion of programs designed to enable parents and families to become better resources in contributing to the success of their students. Over 1,100 parents attended orientation with their students in preparation for Fall Semester, 2008. Nearly 2,000 parents currently receive monthly correspondence from the University as members of the USU Parent and Family Association, and 380 parents, students, and family members attended Parent and Family Weekend 2008. This expanding set of programs is entering its third year at Utah State University, and the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience is poised to continue to draw upon the growth of these programs to develop a more extensive support network for Utah State students.

### **Collaborative Retention Data Analysis**

One of the key functions of the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience is to attempt to provide research and support for efforts to better understand the significance of the effects of programs meant to assist students, and also to look more closely at the correlation among a substantial number of variables that can affect student success, persistence, and attrition. Previously, Retention and First-Year Experience has collaborated with the Registrar's Office, University Housing, the College of Natural Resources, and the Honors program in this effort, and many of these partnerships are ongoing. This year, Retention and First-Year Experience has expanded the reach of these collaborations, working with the Office of Admissions, the Financial Aid Office, Alumni Affairs, Regional Campuses, the College of Agriculture, and the Academic Resource Center, among others, in an effort to contribute more effectively and efficiently to student success and also expand institutional knowledge of student needs and trends. Collaboration between the Office of Analysis, Assessment, and Accreditation, and the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience to develop better instruments designed to understand the causes of student attrition, and to obtain as much viable student cohort data as possible, is ongoing.

### **Current, Proposed, and Pending Initiatives**

#### **Student Readiness Inventory: College of Agriculture**

The Student Readiness Inventory (SRI) was developed by American College Testing (ACT) to examine psychosocial and cognitive factors in foreseeing college student persistence for those enrolled in a first-year experience class. The Student Readiness Inventory is being administered to College of Agriculture freshmen in Fall Semester, 2008. The SRI is a 108 item survey with 10 scales designed to determine motivation, academic ability, and social engagement of the student. Researchers agree that when Student Readiness Inventory test results are added to standardized achievement test scores, institutions can identify students who may be at risk for dropping out of school or may be having academic problems. This study will provide quantitative information about how well students are prepared for college and their ability to remain in school, and the results will be used to develop intervention programs to help students succeed both within the College of Agriculture and throughout Utah State University. Based on the results of this pilot program, the College of Agriculture and the Office of Retention and First-Year

Experience will explore the possibility of expanding this program to additional colleges and departments, as well as the feasibility of utilizing this tool, or similar tools on a University-wide basis.

### **Early Identification**

A subcommittee of the University Retention Committee has convened with the intention of exploring opportunities to identify at-risk students in specific areas of need (i.e. individual subject areas) based on predictive factors in their academic background prior to their attendance at Utah State. The primary focus of this effort involves identifying students who may not otherwise be targeted for intrusive academic intervention on the basis of grade point average or composite standardized testing scores, but whose individual subject test scores or other academic indicators may indicate the potential for benefit from targeted resources in these areas. The guiding philosophy behind this effort holds that the potential for academic difficulty or even attrition can be mitigated by establishing an appropriate and meaningful connection between students and resources before the student ever sets foot on campus, and by following up with these students to ensure that these resources are being properly and effectively utilized. At current, there are challenges to obtaining the needed data in a consistent and cohesive manner, but members of this committee are currently exploring ways to obtain the necessary data in an effort to expedite implementation of this program.

### **Expansion of Early Alert**

Following a year-long effort to incorporate the Early Alert system into the university's Blackboard course management software, and after experiencing a number of setbacks with this attempt both internally, and with third-party software providers, attention has now been turned to incorporating this system instead into the Banner system. In this scenario, participating and concerned faculty members will be able to simply access their course rosters within Banner and refer students to the Early Alert program as they see fit, on the basis of poor test performance, attendance issues, or other academic factors. Registrar's Office officials, in partnership with the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience, are currently pursuing feasibility studies and drafting plans for this integration.

### **Pre-Registration/University Deposit**

The pre-registration and university deposit process for incoming first-time first-year students, extant for several years, will be updated in 2009 to allow students to complete this process entirely online with the advent of a new system that will be able to receive payments online. This new system will eliminate a number of processes that previously required extensive labor, collaboration, and reconciliation between the Student Orientation, Advising, and Registration program and the Registrar's Office, and will allow for more instantaneous course placement and orientation registration. For students, this will eliminate the need to send a check for all university deposits and will reduce the number of steps and time needed between their deposit payment, their official orientation registration, and pre-registration for their appropriate set of courses as designated by their major advisor.

### **A Concluding Note on 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.

Utah State University, (2008). *Utah State University Sustainability Education Draft Policy 2008*. Accessed at <http://sustainability.usu.edu/htm/sustainability/education>. November 3, 2008.