

## **Campus Retention Report to Faculty Senate, December 2006**

Presented by the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience

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### **Executive Summary**

This report has been prepared for the Faculty Senate at Utah State University to provide an overview of specific enrollment and retention data and to explicate processes, initiatives, and programs central to student retention efforts at Utah State. Following a cursory depiction of specific enrollment and retention data, and a brief introduction to the functions of the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience, this report will focus primarily on initiatives introduced in conjunction with the inception of this new office. Updates on previously extant initiatives will also be provided, recent retention-focused accomplishments will be highlighted, and pending and proposed initiatives will be noted. This report will conclude with a brief note regarding the importance of collaboration among faculty and administrators in retention efforts.

### **Establishment of the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience**

During the summer of 2006, the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience was established as a new unit within the Division of Student Services. Created in an effort to comprehensively and cohesively approach the processes of student transition, integration, and persistence, the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience is a dynamic office with a core mission of student success and retention. This office incorporates a number of previously distinct programs, services, and initiatives, along with a number of significant new goals designed to integrate students into the academic community of Utah State University. Functions of this office include:

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

Under the auspices of the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience, these programs and initiatives individually and cumulatively contribute to the central goal of improving institutional effectiveness in assisting and retaining students.

### **Enrollment, Program Participation, and Retention Figures**

#### **2006 Figures (Preliminary)**

Number of New Freshmen Enrolled According to Third Week Figures: **2,567\***

Number of Students Entering Fall 2006 Who Attended Connections: **1,454**

Number of Students Entering Fall 2006 Who Attended SOAR on Campus: **2,170**

Number of Parents Attending Orientation on Campus during 2006: **897**

\*Preliminary unadjusted cohort of First-Time, Full-Time Degree Seeking Main Campus Students was not yet available from Analysis, Accreditation, and Assessment at the time of the preparation of this report. The figure listed represents the total number of freshmen enrolled at Utah State for Fall 2006 as reported by the Office of Admissions, and is not delineated by full- or part-time status, or whether degree seeking or non degree-seeking, among other factors.

#### **2005 Figures (Preliminary)**

Preliminary Cohort (unadjusted for reporting exclusions and students on official leave of absence): **1,906\***

Number of Students Entering Fall 2005 Who Attended Connections: **1,388**

Number of Students Entering Fall 2005 Who Attended SOAR on Campus: **1,590**

Number of Parents Attending Orientation on Campus during 2005: **581**

\*This figure represents the number of First-Time, Full-Time Degree Seeking Main Campus students in the Fall 2005 cohort prior to adjustments for all allowed reporting exclusions. These adjusted cohort totals and corresponding retention figures are prepared each spring by Analysis, Accreditation, and Assessment for the previous academic year's cohort of entering students.

#### **Official 2004 Figures:**

Preliminary 2004 First-Time, Full-Time Degree Seeking Main Campus Cohort: **2,028**

Adjusted Cohort (with allowed reporting exclusions\*): **1,681**

Number of Students from Adjusted Fall 2004 Cohort Who Returned Fall 2005: **1,184**

Official 2004 Retention Rate: **70.4%**

Number of Students on Official Leave of Absence or Otherwise Excluded from 2004 Cohort: **347**  
(344 Religious Missions, 2 Military, 1 Deceased)

Number of Students Entering Fall 2004 Who Attended Connections: **947**

Number of Students Entering Fall 2004 Who Attended SOAR on Campus: **1,862**

Number of Parents Attending Orientation on Campus during 2004: **479**

\*Adjusted cohort figures reflect preliminary 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**

### **Peer Mentoring Programs**

A significant component of the comprehensive strategy for improving the ease of transition and depth of integration into the University community, the peer mentoring program has expanded considerably since 2005. Incoming students are now contacted by a peer mentor shortly following admission to introduce them to orientation, registration, and enrollment processes. Following these conversations, extensive in-person contact between incoming students and peer mentors is initiated at Student Orientation, Advising, and Registration, and peer mentors remain available to provide assistance to incoming students with all transition-related concerns prior to the semester. The most intensive aspect of this program takes place during Connections, as peer mentors are assigned to each course. Peer mentors provide:

- Academic assistance, insight, and friendship through the duration of Connections
- Weekly e-mail contact with first-year students through the end of the first year
- Ongoing updates on University events, important dates, and deadlines

Following the pilot of this program in 2005, 78.8 percent of participating Connections students agreed or strongly agreed that the weekly contact they received from their peer mentor was beneficial (2005 AAA Connections Survey). With the full-scale expansion of this program during 2006, all first-year and transfer students, whether or not they attended Connections, now receive contact from a peer mentor on a weekly basis. The refinement and expansion of these peer mentoring processes, now entering their third formal year, will continue to play a substantial part in the improvement of efforts to better integrate students into Utah State University academically and socially.

### **Expansion of University Connections**

The Utah State University Connections course (USU 1010) boasted a Fall 2006 enrollment of 1,454 students. Demand for Connections was considerable; several additional sections were added late in the summer to accommodate student demand, and another expansion of available sections is being contemplated for 2007. Recent enhancements to the Connections experience have further increased this course's impact on first-year students. These enhancements have included:

- Increased participation of tenure track faculty teaching Connections

- Delineation of specific Connections sections by department and major
- Addition of a career exploration component to the curriculum
- Introduction to the use of WebCT
- Night out in downtown Logan, assisting students' integration into the community

The common literature experience for incoming students, this year utilizing Melba Patillo Beals' book *Warriors Don't Cry*, has also expanded to incorporate the participation of the Logan and Cache community. Reflecting some of these recent enhancements to Connections, among the sizable percentage of students who participated in an assessment of the program, 75 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with their Connections experience, as opposed to 63 percent in 2005 (AAA University Connections Survey, 2006).

### **Introduction and Proliferation of Undeclared Orientation Sessions**

In order to provide undeclared students, traditionally a population of students more likely to be at-risk for attrition, with more personalized attention as they prepare to undergo the transition to Utah State and make important choices regarding coursework and majors, a number of orientation sessions for undeclared students have been added to the traditional slate of SOAR offerings. At these undeclared orientation sessions, attendance is typically limited to a very small group of students, providing:

- Small student-to-academic advisor ratios
- More personal attention for individual students
- Enhanced interaction between incoming students and peer mentors
- An overall emphasis on mitigating potential future attrition through early identification of individual student concerns and subsequent action and assistance

From the Fall 2006 entering cohort, 144 students participated in these undeclared orientation sessions, with responding overwhelmingly positively in assessing their experience at these sessions. Future tracking and analysis of this group will determine not only the success of this specific endeavor, but also the potential expansion and refinement of similar initiatives going forward.

### **Updates on Previous Initiatives**

#### **Data Analysis and Cohort Tracking**

The ongoing effort to track students through the dedicated work of the University's matriculation advisor, now an integral part of the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience, has continued to meet with success in identifying and proactively assisting students who intend to take a leave of absence or withdraw from the University. This identification has led to enhanced collaboration with the Office of Analysis, Assessment, and Accreditation, whose collection and reporting of data regarding students on leaves of absence from the University is benefited by the application of allowed cohort exceptions for students involved in missionary and military service, among select additional factors. Beyond the data collection and reporting benefits, this process has also led to improved institutional ability to track and subsequently assist students. Previous efforts to identify student leavers from available cohort data continue, including partnerships with Honors and University Advising. Measures to recruit these students back to Utah State are ongoing, as well. A number of new initiatives involving data analysis and cohort tracking have been introduced in conjunction with the creation of the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience; these endeavors will be discussed in conjunction with the section listing current and pending initiatives.

#### **Presentations**

Noel-Levitz National Conference on Student Recruitment, Marketing, and Retention, Krystin Deschamps with Melissa Miller Kincart, *Collaborative Partnerships: Essential in Creating Conditions that Matter for Student Success*, Denver, Colorado 2006.

Western Regional Teaching Symposium, Aaron Andersen, *No More Catch and Release*, Poster Presentation, Logan, Utah 2006.

## **Current Initiatives**

### **Expansion of Data Analysis and Cohort Tracking**

Commencing with data from the 2005 cohort of first-time, full-time degree-seeking students, a substantial effort is underway to analyze student data in a number of respects. First, data from students in the 2005 cohort who did not return to Utah State for Fall Semester 2006 is being analyzed to determine patterns of student leaving and commonalities among students who leave, primarily in an effort to identify more specifically those factors that can both predict and cause student departure. A secondary, and more comprehensive analysis is also being undertaken with the complete Fall 2005 cohort, examining the relationship between a considerable number of predictive variables (i.e. whether a student participated in the University Connections course, whether a student received an academic scholarship, among many others) and factors such as first-year grade point average and student persistence. This analysis represents an effort to 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. The results of this examination, though not yet available at the time of the preparation of this report, will be utilized annually to create and augment successful intervention strategies and engender increased partnerships across campus geared toward improving student persistence on the basis of strong and consistent data analysis.

### **Assessment Instruments for Departed Students**

In addition to the aforementioned data analysis, another measure has been introduced to obtain information on the specific causes of student attrition at Utah State. In conjunction with the Office of Analysis, Assessment, and Accreditation, the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience has developed a survey instrument designed to obtain specific information from students who have departed from Utah State University. Beginning with students from the Fall 2005 cohort who did not return for Fall 2006, this survey asks students to:

- Identify the primary reason(s) for their departure
- Evaluate very specific aspects of their experience at Utah State
- Assess their overall experience at Utah State
- Indicate both general and specific factors that might have led to their persistence or could increase their propensity to potentially return to Utah State in the future

Once again, due to the very recent introduction of this survey, results are not yet available. Once these results have been obtained, the University will be provided with valuable perspectives regarding the factors that contribute to student attrition, as well as student perceptions of University programs, policies, and procedures. As with other ongoing data analysis efforts, this survey will be administered over the course of a number of years to provide needed longitudinal data on these matters.

### **Students with Academic Difficulties**

The University Matriculation Advisor and the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience are developing an "Early Alert" program, targeting freshmen and sophomores experiencing academic difficulty. Using a pilot program, struggling students will be identified by faculty and/or academic advisors early in the semester, so as to be useful to both students and the institution. These students may be referred to the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience for a discussion about "show-stopping" issues, counseled to meet with their advisors, and/or directed to the Academic Resource Center. Additionally, these students will receive an e-mail from the Financial Aid Office, discussing aid/scholarship repercussions, as well as an e-mail from the Vice President for Student Services, indicating that USU cares.

Readmitted Students: Students who have left USU with less than a 2.0 USU cumulative GPA are readmitted through a more in-depth process. Students are interviewed to determine educational goals and commitment. In addition, students must sign a readmission contract outlining a minimum GPA and required courses, made with the advisor's input. A candid discussion with the student about what it will take to succeed will also take place. Academic structure, coupled with intrusive advising and support, are the cornerstones of success for readmitted students.

### **Peer Mentor Interventions**

Representing a unique synthesis of ongoing institutional efforts to better track students and the expanding role of peer mentors, this endeavor identifies students from the fall cohort who have not yet registered for spring semester following priority registration. These students each receive a personal email from their individual peer mentor encouraging them to register for classes and directing them to available support resources, including academic advising and assistance, or appropriate information regarding leave of absence processes. This process is repeated following the priority registration period for fall semester, and provides yet another opportunity for intentional and intrusive contact and assistance.

### **Parent and Family Programs**

Parent attendance at SOAR has increased by more than 50 percent between 2004 and 2006 alone, with 897 parents attending orientation during 2006. The increase in parent participation at SOAR during recent years continues to provide one example of mounting evidence of the increasing involvement of parents in the lives of their college students at Utah State. Given the intensified participation of parents in their college students' lives, a trend taking place nationally (Bigger, 2005), the University has recognized that parents can increasingly be relied upon to have an influence on their students' persistence and success. In addition, in light of the notion that parents have become progressively more inclined to initiate contact with institutions of higher education regarding various matters involving their students (Lowery, 2004; Forbes, 2001), the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience has introduced 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. The introduction of programs and initiatives to facilitate these relationships will be generally directed toward the education of parents and families regarding appropriate ways to support their Utah State student, with the ultimate goal of facilitating greater student success and persistence. Parent and family programs administered through the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience include:

- Parent Orientation
- Monthly Aggie Update (the monthly newsletter for Aggie parents)
- Parent and Family Weekends
- The Utah State Parent and Family Association
- Regional parent advisory boards
- Website with information and links exclusively for parents
- Central point of contact with the University, where parents can find answers to their questions and direction to appropriate resources

### **Refocused University Retention Committee**

Having functioned for several years in both planning and evaluation capacities, the University First-Year Experience committee has been renamed the University Retention Committee to reflect an expanded focus on retention-centered strategies, programs, and policies for students at all stages of their experience at Utah State University. The mission of this refocused Campus Retention Committee is to provide campus-wide leadership to advocate and implement retention strategies and initiatives. While students in their first year remain a central focus for this committee, retention strategies for students at every level are now fundamental to the functioning of this committee. Proposals from across a number of University departments and offices meant to aid and assist second year students are a current focus of the committee, many of which will be considered and implemented in the coming academic year. It is important to note that this committee now consists of administrators, faculty and staff committed to the

success of every USU student from the first year to graduation, and features a number of focused subcommittees charged with examining and assessing specific retention issues.

### **Partnerships with Regional Campuses**

Recognizing that the issue of student retention is a matter critical to the entire University, and not simply the main campus, steps have been taken to partner with Utah State's regional campuses in an effort to better utilize resources, data, and methods related to student retention. These burgeoning partnerships between regional campus representatives and the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience have led to the provision of Connections course materials to regional campuses for use in similar programs and the sharing of specific strategies for orienting, advising, and tracking students. Reflecting the importance of incorporating the perspective of Utah State's regional campuses into University retention efforts, a regional campus representative now sits on the University Retention Committee.

### **Math Placement Testing**

One very specific issue that has consistently led to difficulty for many incoming students, and has often subsequently led to ongoing frustration for students, faculty members, and administrators, has involved the appropriate placement of students in their initial mathematics course at Utah State. Improper placement has often led to student academic difficulty, which has, of course, been identified as a significant factor in student attrition. Faculty leaders from the Mathematics and Statistics Department have taken noteworthy steps to address this issue, and are in the final stages of obtaining approval for a new approach that will lead to widespread placement testing in order to ensure that students begin with the appropriate math course at Utah State. In studies examining the effects of similar placement tests at other institutions, such as the University of Wyoming and Washington State University, the implementation of these tests has been noted to have a significant positive effect on student success, and subsequently student retention. These placement tests will address issues such as dated ACT scores, lengthy gaps without math coursework prior to matriculation, and other common issues that have typically led to student problems. Because these placement tests will be applicable to a sizable group of incoming students each semester, faculty leaders from the Mathematics and Statistics Department have partnered with administrators from Retention and First-Year Experience, and specifically Student Orientation, Advising, and Registration, to discuss and develop a plan for administering these tests in a convenient and sensible manner to incoming students. The culmination of these discussions will ultimately result in the incorporation of these placement tests into the fabric of SOAR in a way that does not inconvenience students while providing both individual and institutional benefits.

### **Proposed and Pending Initiatives**

#### **First-Year Faculty Award**

This award has been proposed in an effort to recognize the extraordinary efforts made by many members of the faculty at Utah State to assist and work with first-year students. Because faculty members are so uniquely positioned to have profound influence on the intellectual growth and success of first-year students, these efforts are unquestionably critical to the mission of the University and particularly to the effort to engage and ultimately retain students. Though the effects of this work cannot be overstated, because the needs of first-year students are often unique and personal, such efforts often require dedication far beyond the already demanding rigors of the faculty appointment. Accordingly, the First-Year Faculty Award has been proposed in an attempt to recognize the value of the critical work that these dedicated members of the faculty have undertaken. The award committee asked students to nominate faculty members who had met these criteria by extending themselves to work with first-year students. Students responded with more than 100 nominations, clearly indicating the widespread dedication of faculty members to first-year students on this campus. In conjunction with the Provost Office, the committee has emerged with a list of faculty members whose dedication to first-year students was particularly compelling and deserving of recognition. This award is intended as an ongoing, annual exercise in recognizing the excellence and dedication of the faculty of Utah State University in working with first-year students.

## **Campus Retention Symposium**

A University-wide retention symposium has been proposed for February 2007. Led by the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience, this symposium will facilitate broad conversations regarding best practices for student success, presentations focusing on specific successful retention efforts in individual colleges, departments, and offices, and candid discussions about current problematic issues in retaining students across the University. From the collaboration engendered at this symposium, a comprehensive, revised University-wide retention plan will be introduced, incorporating methods and initiatives from across the University.

## **Source Book: Quick, Convenient Reference and Guide for Incoming Students**

In response to student comments from the Student Services Advisory Council indicating the need for a convenient guide to available student resources and services, along with a lengthy analysis and exploration of materials provided to incoming students, the Office of Student Orientation, Advising, and Registration will introduce a new version of the *Source* guidebook for new students beginning with the entering 2007 cohort. Though much of the information to be provided in the *Source* can be found in great detail in the *General Catalog*, this format will provide a quick and easy reference to resources available to Utah State University students, and will also incorporate helpful features including:

- Calendar information
- Dates and deadlines
- Transportation information
- Phone numbers and locations
- Emergency contact information

In addition to providing a small, convenient, and reusable guide of this nature, the consolidation of this information into a single publication will ostensibly significantly reduce the once often confusing and unwieldy stack of information provided to new students individually by many campus offices and departments.

## **Faculty and Collaboration**

As mentioned in the previous section, faculty members at Utah State have contributed significantly and meaningfully to efforts to improve student persistence. Recognizing that faculty members function in teaching, advising, and mentoring capacities with students, they are uniquely positioned not only to influence student persistence, but also to alert administrators in other key offices across campus to individual student issues or problems that may indicate the potential for attrition. While official mechanisms for such alerts between faculty and administrators are on the horizon, it is important for interventions with at-risk students to result from appropriate collaborations involving faculty and staff members, each of whom can contribute certain specific resources to the effort to assist individual students. With the establishment of the Office of Retention and First-Year Experience, faculty should know that there exists an office where they may refer at-risk students, seek assistance in determining appropriate resources for such students, and partner with in supporting students. Tinto (1993) notes that “the success of institutional retention efforts ultimately resides in the institution's capacity to engage faculty and administrators across the campus in a collaborative effort.” Though Utah State University faces a unique set of challenges, its efforts to retain students through an ongoing, campus-wide focus on collaborative student retention efforts will certainly improve the University's capacity to mitigate student attrition and encourage student persistence.

## References

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