

Retention and Student Success FAQ Document

The Office of Retention and Student Success is a dynamic office with a core mission of student success and retention.

Through programs and services designed to integrate students in to the academic community of Utah State University, the office is poised to have an impact on students at the time of entrance to the university, through the first year, and throughout the college experience.

Services include information on research, development, design and implementation of programs and initiatives that directly enhance efforts to increase retention of enrolled students.

This information sheet is designed to help faculty, staff and students understand retention data and the issues behind initiatives created for student success.

1. What is the benefit of focusing on efforts that support the student's path to graduation?

There is considerable research that supports the value of higher education from a monetary standpoint. The opportunity costs weigh heavily that a college education results in increased income over a lifetime. But, college graduates also enjoy benefits beyond increased income. A 1998 report published by the Institute for Higher Education Policy reviews the individual benefits that college graduates enjoy, including higher levels of saving, increased personal/professional mobility, improved quality of life for their offspring, better consumer decision making, and more hobbies and leisure activities (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1998). According to a report published by the Carnegie Foundation, non-monetary individual benefits of higher education include the tendency for postsecondary students to become more open-minded, more cultured, more rational, more consistent and less authoritarian; these benefits are also passed along to succeeding generations (Rowley and Hurtado, 2002). Additionally, college attendance has been shown to "decrease prejudice, enhance knowledge of world affairs and enhance social status" while increasing economic and job security for those who earn bachelor's degrees (Ibid.) Research has also consistently shown a positive correlation between completion of higher education and good health, not only for oneself, but also for one's children. In fact, "parental schooling levels (after controlling for differences in earnings) are positively correlated with the health status of their children" and "increased schooling (and higher relative income) are correlated with lower mortality rates for given age brackets" (Cohn and Geske, 1992).

ERIC Identifier: ED470038

Publication Date: 2002-00-00

Author: Porter, Kathleen

Source: ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education Washington DC.

Title: The Value of a College Degree. ERIC Digest

2. Why are retention numbers important to the university?

The issue of student retention and persistence has continued to grow in importance throughout the history of higher education in our country. Early studies (Astin, 1977) focused on the characteristics of those students who did not persist and such studies were used as evidence for higher admissions standards or more quality control of recruitment. However, beginning the 1970's the research began to focus on what were the reasons students remained enrolled and how colleges and universities could make changes or develop programs which would increase the retention of their students.

Retention numbers are important way for Utah State University to measure institutional efforts to ensure that students are meeting with success in their educational endeavors. Institutional retention numbers provide one general barometer by which these measurements can take place; more specialized retention numbers that target specific student populations or characteristics provide the institution with more nuanced tools for analysis of student populations, behaviors, and

expectations. Like many other institutional figures, retention numbers at Utah State University are reported to state, federal, accrediting, and other agencies. Institutional retention numbers are available at <http://aaa.usu.edu/factsfigures/RetentionGraduation.htm>.

3. How is a retention rate figured?

Typically, the term retention rate refers to the retention of a cohort of students from the first to the second year of college, measured by fall enrollments. The process of determining this retention rate takes place through the following steps, provided by the Office of Analysis, Assessment, and Accreditation:

An initial cohort of fall term first-time, full-time, degree-seeking undergraduate students is identified. First-time students are those students who are attending a higher education institution for the first time since graduating from high school. Students who begin in the previous summer term are included in the fall term first-time cohort. Determination of first-time status is made using codes on the student Banner system which are entered by our Admissions Office. It should be noted that some students in our first-time cohort have advanced class level standing (sophomore, junior, etc.) because of college credits earned while they were still in high school.

During the year, the initial cohort is adjusted for students who are identified as: 1)deceased or totally disabled; 2)serving in the armed forces; 3)serving with a foreign aid service of the Federal Government; 4)serving an official church mission. This adjusted cohort becomes the denominator in calculating retention rates.

We have two ways of identifying our allowable exclusions. First, USU staff from the Registrar=s Office and The Office of Retention and Student Success work throughout the year to identify as many of our cohort as possible who meet the allowable exclusion criteria and mark these students on our student Banner system. Second, we work with the Utah System of Higher Education in providing a cohort file to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for identification of missionaries. The majority of our allowable exclusions are students serving official church missions.

The number of students from the adjusted cohort who return to school the following fall term are identified. These returning students from the adjusted cohort become the numerator in calculating retention rates. Students can return as either full-time or part-time students and be included as a returning student.

4. What are Utah State University=s retention rates?

Utah State=s retention rates are listed for the past ten years on the Analysis, Assessment, and Accreditation website: <http://aaa.usu.edu/factsfigures/RetentionGraduation.htm>. Our most recent retention rate is 73.5%. Our most recent graduation rate is 44.8%.

5. How does Utah State compare to our peer institutions?

Retention data is reviewed by comparing our retention numbers with peer institutions the Western Land Grant institutions.

Comparative retention data for our peer institutions is listed at http://aaa.usu.edu/FactsFigures/pdfs/unitdashboards/USUPerformanceDashboard_Graphs.pdf
Data for the Western Land Grant Institutions is as follows:

Institution

One Year Ret Rate

2006 cohort

Six-Year Grad Rate

2001 Cohort

Colorado State University - Fort Collins

82%

64%
Montana State University - Bozeman
71%
50%
New Mexico State University - Las Cruces
72%
37%
Oregon State University
81%
60%
University of Alaska - Fairbanks
74%
29%
University of Arizona
79%
56%
University of California - Davis
91%
81%
University of Idaho
75%
54%
University of Nevada - Reno
77%
49%
University of Wyoming
75%
56%

Utah State University

74%

45%

Washington State University - Pullman

82%

60%

Western Land

Grant Inst Avg

Utah State

Average First Year Retention Rate

77.7%

73.5%

Average 6 year Graduation Rate

53.4%

44.8%

6. *How does Utah State compare on a national level?

Utah

State

****Selective**

Institutions

All Institutions

Average

First Year

Retention

Rate

73.5%

78.0%

80.2%

Average 6

year

Graduation

Rate

44.8%

53.4%

58.1%

*Data is from all participating Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (CSRDE) institutions; includes over 400 institutions nationally, and USU does participate. The USU numbers in this table are from the 2006 cohort. The CSRDE numbers are from the 2005 cohort. They are the most recent available figures from CSRDE.

**Institutions are broken down into four categories: Highly Selective, Selective, Moderately Selective, Less Selective. Each category is designated by the average entering ACT or SAT score.

Highly Selective – ACT above 24.0 or SAT above 1100

Selective – ACT 22.5-24.0 or SAT - 1045-1100

Moderately Selective – ACT 21.0-22.4 or SAT 990-1044

Less Selective – ACT below 21.0 or SAT below 990

7. Why do students leave Utah State University?

Students leave Utah State University for many different reasons. Efforts to assess the factors in the departure of students from Utah State have been initiated across multiple platforms by the Office of Retention and Student Success, including surveys administered to students who have left the University, attempts to contact students individually, and cohort data analysis, among others. These efforts have revealed first, that the reasons for student departure are often complicated, and are a result of multiple factors. Common factors include academic difficulty or under-preparedness, financial concerns, and family reasons. Second, many students who leave Utah State University do so with the hope or intention of returning to Utah State at some point in their future. Third, and finally, because each student is confronted with a different range of challenges to their success, it is important to recognize that student retention efforts encompass a wide range of approaches and resources.

8. What difference do retention rates make on an economic level to the university?

- Retaining students preserves revenue that would otherwise be lost.
- Because tuition revenue is an essential element of the University's budget, it is more important than ever to maximize tuition revenue in any way possible. The following figures illustrate the degree to which this is becoming increasingly essential:
 - Tuition as a % of budget for the Logan campus
 - 10 years ago (FY1998-99): 24.5%
 - New budget (FY2008-09): 32%
 - State of Utah allocation of tax dollars to U.S.H.E.
 - FY1998-99: 15.2%
 - FY2007-08: 13.0%

(Source: USHE Data Book)

- The impact of a 1% increase in the first-year retention rate would have a meaningful impact on tuition revenue
 - A 1% increase in this retention rate means that 26 additional students would come back for sophomore year (some would be lost in the junior and senior years)
 - By the time of graduation, \$250,000 in net tuition will have been collected from these retained students that would otherwise have been lost
 - In addition to tuition, these students have a multiplier effect for other campus units (e.g. fees for auxiliaries)
 - (Data used in calculation: '07 freshman cohort: 2,617 AAA; 4 year avg. retention: 72.5% AAA; '07 gross tuition: \$51.1 mm B&P; '07 undergraduate waivers & cash (i.e. discount): \$13.7 mm B&P; total undergraduates FTE: 11,286)

9. Who should be involved in retention efforts?

Research indicates that successful retention programs are marked by partnerships between academic and student affairs, cross-functional collaborations, and responsive departments or units. Essentially, all members of the campus community, faculty, staff, and administrators each have a responsibility to improve retention rates and they must work together to promote student success.

10. What are some of the best practices recommended to improve retention?

There is an abundance of research on best practices in student retention. Understanding these practices is important in designing retention strategies that will meet the needs of our students.

The following strategies are from an ACT report that is widely cited as guidelines for development of best practices:

1. Determine student characteristics and needs, set priorities among these areas of need, identify available resources, evaluate a variety of successful programs, and implement a formal, comprehensive retention program that best meets the institutional needs.
2. Take an integrated approach in retention efforts that incorporates both academic and non-academic factors into the design and development of programs to create a socially inclusive and supportive academic environment that addresses the social, emotional, and academic needs of students.
3. Implement an early alert, assessment, and monitoring system based on HSGPA, ACT Assessment scores, course placement tests, first semester college GPA, socioeconomic information, attendance records, and non-academic information derived from formal college surveys and college student inventories to identify and build comprehensive profiles of students at risk of dropping out.
4. Determine the economic impact of the college retention programs and the time to degree completion rates through a cost-benefit analysis of student dropout, persistence, assessment procedures, and intervention strategies to enable informed decision-making with respect to types of interventions requiredCacademic and non-academic, including remediation and financial support.

ACT, Inc. (2004). What Works in Student Retention? (Research Report). Iowa City, IA: W.R. Habley and R. McClanahan.

11. What best practices are in place at Utah State University?

§ **SOAR** - A comprehensive orientation program. This program guides students through the advising and class registration process as well as provides an orientation to university life. Sessions are designed for specific populations that need additional information.

§ **Connections** - An academic course designed to ease students' transition to Utah State University and to prepare them for the academic environment. Students may select sections for their academic major or program. For example there are sections for Honors Students, Engineering or Agriculture majors, or those interested in Undergraduate Research.

§ **Peer Mentoring** - First-year students in the Connections course are introduced to a peer mentor who provides a student perspective, answers questions and guides student to appropriate resources. Peer mentors provide weekly e-mails to all first-year students informing them of important dates, upcoming events, and providing timely tips.

§ **Early Alert** - The Early Alert Program is designed to identify students who are having academic difficulty at any point in their four years at USU. By identifying these students, the staff of the Retention and Student Success Office can attempt to address their needs, thereby increasing the likelihood of their success. The primary goal of this program is to assist faculty and staff in improving the motivation and performance of underachieving students in an effort to better USU's capacity to retain these students.

- **Leave of Absence** - The Change of Enrollment program encourages students to return to USU. Students who plan to return are encouraged to use the Leave of Absence link on the Change in Enrollment website. Prior to departure, students are encouraged to meet with their academic advisors to devise a course schedule for their returning semester, as well as to complete a Release of Information form so that USU can partner with parents. The Retention and First-Year Experience Office (RFYE) also sends an e-mail to leaving students, to confirm the details of their departure, and to express our enthusiasm for their return to USU.

Just before priority registration for which the student is scheduled to return, the RFYE sends a detailed letter, as well as at least one e-mail, welcoming students back. We offer help to parents who may have questions about registering their student. We connect students with scholarships if they are in need. We provide academic colleges and departments with information about returning students so that they can welcome the students back, as well. Finally, RFYE connects with students who did not return as scheduled, and works to recruit those students back.

§ **Parent and Family Programs** – University Parent and Family Programs are designed to encourage parents and family members of students to partner with the University in promoting student success. Informational programs, events, and communication provide parents with access to and knowledge of important resources and policies, and incorporate them appropriately into the University community.

§ **University Retention Committee** - The University Retention Committee supports the mission and goals of Utah State University by providing student-centered, campus-wide leadership to develop, implement, and advocate student retention practices that facilitate the success of all students from their first semester through graduation from the university.

§ **Retention Plan** - <http://www.usu.edu/rfye/retentionPlan/> A comprehensive plan that features the current Utah State programs, the ongoing data analysis, research, partnerships and new initiatives focused on retention and student success.

§ **Retention Newsletter** - <http://www.usu.edu/rfye/newsletter/> This document is published biannually to highlight departmental efforts to support student success.

12. What are we doing to encourage students to return to the University?

Students are being encouraged to return to the University in both abstract and specific ways. In a sense, programs, organizations, activities, and departments at Utah State all exist to ensure that students' educational, social, and emotional needs are being met in meaningful ways. This philosophy holds that if students are satisfied, and their needs are being met, they are obviously likely to continue their experience at Utah State. Additionally, there are a number of different initiatives in place at Utah State geared toward actively encouraging students to return to the University. These include formal programs and policies, including the Change of Enrollment and Leave of Absence programs, as well as informal efforts, wherein students who have not enrolled for an upcoming or current semester are contacted by an administrator or peer mentor and encouraged and assisted.

The readmission process for students who left USU in less than good standing is another way in which RFYE works to encourage students to return to USU. Students with USU grade point averages of less than 2.0 who wish to be readmitted work with a readmission committee that consists of educators and staff from around campus. Upon readmission, students sign a contract with the Matriculation Advisor, which outlines specific obligations that characterize a successful student. Then, the student meets regularly with the Director of Academic Advising.

A recent assessment of the students who were admitted under this program shows that these students have met with academic success, and a majority is being retained. Of those readmitted, approximately 80% attain good standing. In the first cohort of readmitted students, 52% have graduated, or are on track to graduating.

12. What further retention research is planned for this office?

Tracking of student cohorts and analysis of institutional trends will continue to comprise a substantial part of the research undertaken by this office. In addition, this office will continue to assist academic departments, individual offices, and specific programs as they attempt to better understand the students with whom they work and the factors affecting them.

Examples of current initiatives:

§ Early Identification Alert - Use entering students ACT scores to identify students who may benefit from early additional academic resource information.

§ College of Agriculture -Fall 2008 Pilot program to administer ACT Student Readiness Inventory(SRI) to first year students. The SRI is a tool to assist in identifying and intervening with students who are at risk for either persistence or performance reasons.

§ Design and develop Connections USU 1010 sections for students registered at regional campus sites and for the first-year international students.

§ Expansion of Service Learning sections in the Connections USU 1010 program.

§ English 1010 for Non-Native Speakers of English - Pedagogically, this course differs from standard ENGL 1010 sections in its greater attention paid to English mechanics/usage and western academic rhetorical forms. One of the primary goals of the course is to foster a secure and stimulating learning environment in which non-native speakers can become both more proficient and more comfortable using English.