

# Increasing enrollment and persistence through student success programming



## **Introduction**

American higher education institutions are facing many challenges with the shifting sands of policies of best practices. One of the greatest challenges being the declining enrollment and difficulty retaining postsecondary students. For the eighth consecutive year (Fain, 2019), enrollments have been down. As of May 2019, American higher education enrollment was down 1.7% (approximately 300,000 students) from the year prior (Fain, 2019). This decline in enrollment is creating a greater cavern in achievement, starving out many of the smaller schools while the large and elite thrive. As fewer people choose to pursue higher education, colleges are fighting to retain their students and see them through to credential completion. To combat this issue of retention, universities are implementing various success programming such as academic coaching, advising centers, first-year experience curriculum, supplemental instruction, tutoring, various organizations, and more. This paper will review many types of programming, but will focus on mentoring and its role in student success.

### Academic Coaching

Academic Coaching and mentoring are services that have experienced growing demand. In the early literature on higher education success programming there was not a clear definition of mentoring. However, mentoring has recently come into focus as a respected tool for enhancement and persistence in the undergraduate experience. In 2009, Crisp studied mentoring in higher education and developed a new definition as

Support provided to college students that entails emotional and psychological guidance and support, help succeeding in academic coursework, assistance examining and selecting degree and career options, and the presence of a role model by which the student can learn from and copy their behaviors relative to college going (Crisp, 2009).

Additionally, it has become clear through various studies that self-efficacy is positively linked to student academic success. Albert Bandura, a researcher at Stanford University, defined self-efficacy “ as people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives” (1994). Essentially, self-efficacy is the confidence in oneself to achieve an established goal. The typical American student benefits from education about and empowerment to practice self-efficacy. This social cognitive theory supports the college student through their transitional experiences, including the progression from high school to college, achieving academic excellence, as well as persisting to graduation with their cohort, (Bandura, 1994).

Academic coaches and mentors accept the charge to be a case manager for students seeking guidance in their college careers. As a part of their duties, they are put through a rigorous selection process and intensively trained before their employment and throughout their tenure to teach and workshop self-efficacy for their mentees. These students are often personally and professionally developing their peers while being developed themselves by their direct supervisor.

Additionally, it is commonplace to have peer mentors attached to a freshman college orientation courses to serve as a leader. At South Alabama, these students are called “JagPALS” and they attend a First-Year Experience course, hold office hours for their students, communicate with them reminders about upcoming assignments and events, as well as coordinate social engagement events. In this role, students are trained to be effective team builders and to identify when students need any additional resources (tutoring, counseling, student health, etc.). Later in this paper, first-year experience programs will be wholly defined.

### Advising Centers

Another support feature for students can be found in the centralized academic advising module. In addition to the specialized advising that takes place with faculty in the academic departments, many institutions are supporting a centralized advising for the first year (sometimes the second year, as well). Research literature on student retention and attrition suggests that contact with a professional advisor at the college is a vital factor in a student’s decision to continue enrollment in college (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Glennen, Farren, & Vowell, 1996). Advisors in centralized units are charged with taking an unbiased approach to a student’s academic and professional goals to make sure that their current actions will add up to future success. For example, a student who is studying forensic science because they love watching NCIS, but hate science, may be better suited in a theater arts program.

The advising staff is well-trained and heavily credentialed professionals. Many advisors have completed their master's degree and are active in their professional organization, NACADA. The network, NACADA, is the national educational development association for academic advisors, faculty, administrators, and students (About us, 2017). It supports advisors with tools and data needed to supplement the personal and educational development of their students. Additionally, NACADA members gain access to open forums, fostering a healthy exchange of concepts and exploration of publications.

### First-Year Experience

Generations of students ago, convocations would open by a dean telling the students to “ look to the left and look to the right,” followed by “ one of these two classmates will not be here this time next year,” (Hunter, 2006).

Thankfully, institutional support for first-year student involvement has increased over the last 40 years (Hunter, 2006). A 1984 study sponsored by the National Institute of Education titled *Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Undergraduate Education* claimed that higher education administrators needed to assign resources (faculty, real estate, marketing, etc.) to enhance the services provided to students in their first and second year of college (Neihaus, 2018). There has been a misconception by students that enrolling in college is comparable to beginning the 13th grade—this is simply not true. Secondary and postsecondary cultures are different in nearly every aspect (academically, socially, and financially).

Completing the transition from high school to college does not happen by chance, but by intentional planning and action on behalf of the university community, as well as the student. Because of this requirement for intentionality, many colleges have implemented a First-Year Experience course requirement for nearly all students in their first year of postsecondary education. In this course, typically taken in the student's first semester, major concepts and resources needed to successfully complete the first term are explored and reinforced. These concepts include time management, financial literacy, how to get involved on campus, using the library system, academic resources, counseling services, study abroad, and many more.

Another component of many first-year programs is participation in a common reading program. These look different across college campuses, but at South Alabama the book is built into the First-Year Experience curriculum.

University community members are invited to read the same book—this year titled *When the Emperor was Divine* by Julie Otsuka—and participate in discussions and activities in the classroom and on-campus. These common reading programs typically tie into supporting objectives of the University Strategic Plan. For example, at the University of South Alabama, the Common Read/Common World program supports Goal One of the Strategic Plan: Build upon the academic quality and learning environment of the University (University of South Alabama, 2015).

### Supplemental Instruction

Created at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, supplemental instruction (SI) “ is a non-remedial approach to learning that supports students toward

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academic success by integrating ‘ what to learn’ with ‘ how to learn,’” (SI, 2015). This program employs a student to go to a predetermined course and host study sessions outside of the scheduled class time to clarify concepts as the students need. The small group sessions are conducted by supplemental instructors who have gone through a fairly intensive training program to ensure proper conduct and instruction in a peer-to-peer teaching method. Typically, an SI is attached to high-risk courses as identified by faculty, while their day-to-day support and evaluations come from their supervisor who is trained in SI best practices.

## Tutoring

Course-specific tutoring is typically offered—for no additional cost—at the collegiate level for most freshman and sophomore level general education courses. The College Reading & Learning Association (CRLA) is the leading organization for training peer tutors and mentors at the postsecondary level. A tutoring center provides much more than the answers to homework. Often, these programs aim to create a new framework to view the learning process and teach the students how to learn the most efficient way for them.

A typical tutoring appointment often has five objectives: get to know the student and their expectations, assess their current knowledge on the subject identified, encourage the student to persist, clarify the concept, work together with the student to create a plan of action to complete the learning circle and ensure subject mastery (Agee et. al, 2012). A successful tutoring program can be a driving force behind impressive student retention. Take for example the University of South Carolina-Columbia (UofSC), a leader in the

field of student academic success. UofSC has their administration's full support behind their Academic Success unit. This unit provides tutoring (course and writing), workshops on academic integrity, sophomore initiatives, success consultations, supplemental instruction, student conduct education, transfer student support, and University 101 (first-year seminar). According to the 2017 Freshman-Junior Retention Report by School, UofSC has an 89% retention rate for students in their freshman to sophomore year, and 83% of their students persist from freshman to junior year. Clearly, the data shows that supporting the faculty and staff to provide success resources for students throughout their academic journey will pay dividends in the retention and persistence side of the house.

## Conclusion

Empowering students with the tools to persist to degree completion is a key focus of student academic success units across the country. We know that 40% of the students who pursue a postsecondary degree will abandon their goal before earning their degree (DeBerard et. al, 2004). Student success must be facilitated by intentional actions to support those pursuing higher education.

Additionally, many institutions are identifying that students with secondary qualifiers (veterans, transfers, adult students, etc.) are requiring specialized outreach. The University of South Carolina has implemented a department dedicated to the success of their students who have transferred in to USC, as well as a department for students who are veterans. While South Carolina serves as a model institution, other colleges and universities should follow

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their lead in being a student-centered and student-ready college by providing individualized success programming.

Higher education has experienced various eras (colonial, post-World Wars, Golden Age, etc.), but is now in the age of student consumerism. Prospective students are pursuing alternate forms of career preparation, such as technical programs, certificate trainings, community college education, and more. Many of the students enrolling at the university-level require a variety of support services detailed in this report, and it is a buyer's market. Institutions must be innovative in their student success support to be competitive in the market in light of declining enrollments across the United States.

## Resources

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