

## **Retention, Progression, and Graduation Task Force Retention Sub-Committee Final Report**

### **Introduction – Overview**

In January 2013, the Retention, Progression and Graduation (RPG) Task Force was formed to address issues associated with improving student persistence at USCA. In the first meeting of the task force, the group decided that the comprehensive and significant charge would be better addressed by breaking into two independent task forces. Accordingly, we formed the Retention Task Force and the Progression and Graduation (P and G) Task Force. Mr. Ahmed Samaha, Assistant Vice Chancellor of Student Life, agreed to serve as chair of the Retention Sub-Committee and Dr. Charmaine Wilson, Professor of Communications, agreed to lead the P and G Sub-Committee, and to coordinate the efforts of the two groups. This report summarizes the efforts of the Retention Sub-Committee.

### **Task Sub-Committee**

After splitting into two groups, the charge for the Retention Sub-Committee was to explore issues related to improving USCA's retention rates, specifically within the first two years of a college student's career.

### **Membership of the Retention Sub-Committee**

**Mr. Ahmed Samaha**, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Student life, Retention Task Force Chair

**Ms. Aja Vaughn**, Assistant Director of Student Life – Diversity Initiatives

**Ms. Alisha O'Banion**, Data Coordinator of Institutional Effectiveness

**Dr. Bill Jackson**, Chair of the Biology/Geology Department

**Mr. Brent Wustman**, Director of Campus Dining - Aramark

**Mr. Corey Feraldi**, Director of Career Services

**Dr. Deb Kladviko**, Vice Chancellor for Student Life and Services

**Mr. Deri Wills**, Director of Housing

**Dr. Ed Callen**, Chair of the Psychology Department

**Ms. Kari D. Weaver**, Assistant Professor of Library Science/Library Instruction Coordinator

**Dr. Mohammad Hailat**, Chair of the Mathematics Sciences

**Dr. Nathan Hancock**, Assistant Professor, Department of the Biology/Geology

**Dr. Tara Beziat**, Assistant Professor of Educational Psychology

**Dr. Stacie Williams**, Director of the Academic Success Center

### **Meeting Schedule/Timeline and Brief Overview of Issues Covered**

The first meeting of the RPG Task Force was January 23, 2013. As noted, in the first meeting the decision was made to separate into two groups. Subsequently, the Retention Sub-Committee generally met weekly between January 31<sup>st</sup> to April 11<sup>th</sup>. Early discussion focused on a variety of issues, including at risk students, academic support, student life/experience, suspension and probation policies, and academic advising. After the first two meetings, the sub-committee decided to focus on two major areas of concern in regards to retention: how we might more effectively intervene with students who are struggling academically during their first two years and how we connect students to the campus. The issue of the academic readiness of students was split into two different types of students: students who get into trouble academically while enrolled and students who are identified as at risk prior to entrance to the institution. The majority of the sub-committee time was focused on the academic readiness issues. As a point of information, a student task force was created by the Assistant Vice Chancellor for Student Life in January to examine student perceptions of USCA traditions which will inform the campus community about how traditions

connect students to campus. A report from that group is due to the Assistant Vice Chancellor for Student Life by April 15<sup>th</sup> and it will expand our knowledge about how students view campus life and traditions on campus which ties directly to the connectedness of students to USCA.

### **Relevant Factors**

An extensive list of resources and best practices in the areas of retention, progression and graduation was compiled by committee member Kari D. Weaver and shared with the task force by publicly available Google Doc. The list of material examined is found in Appendix A of the Progression and Graduation sub-committee report.

### **Overview of Best Practices and/or Benchmarking Data Examined**

Articles and books covering best practices in retention efforts at colleges and universities were examined. In addition, practices at aspirational peer institutions were examined. A list of peer and aspirational institutions provided by the Institutional Effectiveness Office was distributed to the task force and used as a basis for comparison. IE provided a wealth of USCA data related to benchmarks, including graduation rates, retention from year to year, DFW rates, numbers of majors in by discipline, etc. The sub-committee also reviewed the results from a survey conducted in Fall 2012 about student perceptions of campus life and the 2012 EBI Survey conducted by the Housing Department of residential students. All the information and data was examined by sub-committee members and taken into consideration when developing these recommendations.

### **Recommendations for At Risk Students** (*Forward Together Themes addressed by recommendation*)

#### **Recommendation 1.1 Identify Factors that Place Incoming Freshmen At Risk Sufficiently Enough to Classify Them As Provisional Upon Admission** (*Grow the University, Be More Responsive to a Broader Range of Students, Enhance Organizational Efficiency and Innovation*)

- Re-examine the current formula for provisional admission.
  - Work to identify the variables that contribute to a student's classification as provisional. For example, is the student weak in math or writing skills? Is it a general lack of academic study skills?
  - The Professional Freshmen Advisors (see recommendation 2.1), would work with the Admissions Office to review appropriate transcripts to help identify the areas of weakness.
  - While labor intensive, the long term benefits would outweigh the initial work because the First Pace program would be designed (see 1.2) to specifically address the weaknesses of provisional students as opposed to our current method of "one size fits all". Data reflects the weakness of our current provisional program (the First Pace program) which is not designed to meet the specific needs of provisional students.

#### **Recommendation 1.2 Revision of the First Pace Program** (*Grow the University, Be More Responsive to a Broader Range of Students, Enhance Organizational Efficiency and Innovation*)

- Provisional students would be required to participate in a bridge program prior to the start of the academic year.
  - The length of the program would be 2-4 days. Provisional students would have to attend one of the earlier orientation programs in July.

- A combination of academic and transitional skills workshops would be designed to address the specific needs of the students.
- By the end of the bridge program, each student would have an individualized academic plan for their first semester.
- During the fall semester, provisional students would have to:
  - Attend mandatory academic skills workshops that are designed to strengthen their weaknesses.
    - For example, a student weak in math would not take a math course their first semester but rather attend mandatory math enhanced skills workshops to help them improve in math.
  - Meet on a regular basis with a Professional Freshman Advisor to review their academic plan for the semester.

### **Recommendation for All Students**

#### **Recommendation 2.1 Professional Freshmen Advisors** *(Be More Responsive to a Broader Range of Students, Enhance Organizational Efficiency and Innovation)*

- The hiring of professional Freshman advisors is necessary. The EVCAA will work with the Academic Success Center to determine how to allocate or obtain resources necessary to develop a professional Freshman advising program. The impact of this recommendation is as follows:
  - Allow for the development of a program to identify the variables of provisional students to improve our First Pace program.
  - Allow some faculty to be relieved of heavy advisement loads.
  - Provide specialized attention for specific groups of entering freshmen (first generation, underrepresented groups, etc.).

#### **Recommendation 2.2 Development of a Comprehensive Tiered Academic Recovery Program** *(Grow the University, Be More Responsive to a Broader Range of Students, Enhance Organizational Efficiency and Innovation)*

- First tier of the program would focus on students who are not succeeding in a class at the midpoint of the semester.
  - Student would meet with the instructor of the class after midterm and develop a plan to enhance the student's performance through study suggestions, tutor assistance, workshop suggestions, and other methods.
  - Advisor of student would be notified through an early warning/grading computer system (see below).
- Second tier of the program would focus on students placed on probation.
  - Student would have to participate in a mandatory experience (could be an academic skills/counseling program).
- Third tier of the program would focus on students who are on probation for more than one semester.
  - A formal committee (similar to SS&P consisting of faculty and staff) would meet with the student at the beginning of the semester and the development of a comprehensive plan for the semester would be developed for the student.
- Before this program can be implemented, the following recommendations have to occur:
  - The purchase or development of an early warning/grading computer system (similar to MAP-Works). Cost of the program ranges from \$24,000 to \$40,000 depending on the package if purchased from MAP-Works. Supplemental

information about MAP-Works will be forwarded to the EVCAA to support this request.

- Mandatory use by all academic advisors, professors, and appropriate administrators.
- Mandatory midterm grade reports for all 100 and 200 level classes.
- The EVCAA and Academic Council will discuss ways to implement a policy mandating the monitoring and reporting of attendance issues in all 100 and 200 level classes.
  - Research shows a strong correlation between academic success and attendance.
- Move the withdrawal date for classes to 4 weeks later (similar to USC Upstate's W date).

**Recommendation 2.3 Examine the Current Staffing and Funding Levels, as well as the Distribution of Responsibilities, in the Academic Success Center.** *(Grow the University, Be More Responsive to a Broader Range of Students, and Enhance Organizational Efficiency and Innovation)*

- The Academic Success Center would be responsible for the development, implementation, and maintenance of the above recommendations. In order to do so, current responsibilities of staff members should be examined as well as staffing and funding levels.

**Recommendations for Connectedness of Students to Campus**

**Recommendation 3.1 Develop Discipline-Specific Gathering Places/Lounges in each Academic Building** *(Grow the University, Be More Responsive to a Broader Range of Students)*

- The lack of gathering places within academic buildings is seen as a major deterrent for students to build relationships with other students within their major as well as the faculty and staff.
- The development of space within each building that serves as a lounge (similar to the nursing building eating area) would promote students to gather and study together as well as give faculty the opportunity to engage students in a different environment.

**Recommendation 3.2 Develop a Learning Commons** *(Grow the University, Be More Responsive to a Broader Range of Students)*

- While part of the long range plans, the sub-committee wanted to endorse the concept of a location where students can go for all of their academic development needs. A building which houses all components of academic support services would be more effective and convenient for students.

**Recommendation for Assessment and Data Collection**

**Recommendation 4.1 Replace the CIRP Survey Given during Orientation with a Survey Given at the End of the Freshmen Year.** *(Grow the University, Be More Responsive to a Broader Range of Students, and Enhance Organizational Efficiency and Innovation)*

- Cost for the new survey is similar to the cost of the survey we would no longer be administering.
- A home grown survey has been developed which provides much of the same information that the CIRP survey given during orientation provided.

- The survey offered at the end of the freshmen year would provide information about the academic and social experiences of our freshmen as well as provide us information about whether a student plans on returning (as well as follow up information if they are not).
- The information gathered from this survey will provide data to assess how the above recommendations are working as well as provide information on how students connect or do not connect to campus.