

## Take active role in fostering student persistence, success

Student affairs professionals can have a significant impact on student persistence and success. To make the most of the influence you have, you'll need to watch for danger signs, but also take preventive action.

In fact, *Student Affairs Today* Advisory Board members agreed your action plan must start as soon as students arrive on campus. That's when you need to begin focusing on student engagement. It's one of the most valuable items in your persistence and success toolbox.

### Connect to student groups

Mercer University directs new students to go directly from freshman convocation to a student involvement event where food, music, demonstrations and props attract them to clubs and organizations, fraternities, sororities and club sports.



DOUGLAS R. PEARSON

said Eugene L. Zdziarski, II, vice president for student affairs and dean of students. "It gives the personal touch, being able to meet some of the people in the organization."

Zdziarski also uses orgsync, a Web-based organizational management tool, so students can view student organizations' mission statements, email addresses and officers. They can even join various groups electronically. Student organizations hold elections, submit budgets, schedule meetings, send messages to members, keep electronic records for new officers, and link between Facebook and the organizations' Web pages.

Although the program meets today's students where they are — online — it also "gets them out from behind their computer and out on the campus to connect," he said.

First-year experience or freshman inquiry classes and orientation programs also help students succeed. If you provide enough incentives and stress the benefits, the programs needn't be mandatory, the panel agreed.

"It's a real quick way for them to integrate," said Douglas R. Pearson, vice president and dean of students. "Involvement with institutions and integrating with campus culture is key to retention."

Roanoke College hosts a student activities fair the first week. "It brings students, staff and faculty together and begins to build that campus community,"

Numerous studies show colleges have six weeks to engage students, otherwise you lose them, Zdziarski said.

But engagement the second year and beyond also impacts student success. "If students can't figure out their academic connection in their sophomore year, they're probably going to leave," said Lori M. Reesor, vice president for student affairs at the University of North Dakota. An early alert system can identify sophomores and juniors not accepted into a program or with undeclared majors. Redirect them to other majors or programs and ensure a smooth, easy transition.



LORI M. REESOR

### Communicate with faculty

Early alert and intervention systems detect signs students aren't connecting academically, such as skipping or failing classes, and provide academic support, Reesor said.

"It clues faculty members in to tell Student Affairs they're concerned about the student," she said. Academic and resident advisors and faculty members can then reach out to them.

Mercer's system triggers faculty members to alert the associate dean of students about patterns, such as not seeing a student for a couple of weeks, so he can check on those students.

Roanoke's faculty members submit progress reports for first-year students during the first few weeks of class.

The college's behavioral intervention team goes beyond threats and violence to track students not attending class or in disciplinary trouble plus chooses the best person to reach out. Sometimes that's their RA or professor, or the recreation director for students in club sports. "If someone has an established relationship with them, try to find natural connects so it's not a cold call," Zdziarski said.

Mercer's faculty members volunteer to go door-to-door in the residence halls asking first-year students how they're doing, what they think of student life and their academic experiences, and if they have questions.

"Anytime you bring faculty, academics and students closer together, you have a big impact on student retention," Pearson said.

### Support at-risk students

Every institution has at-risk students, whether they're underrepresented, first-generation, minorities, men or others.

Zdziarski assigns male staff members to mentor about five male students selected for their predicted GPAs. Starting early in the semester, staff mentors build a relationship with the students, providing coaching, advisement and encouragement through meetings, calls and emails.



EUGENE L. ZDZIARSKI

"Some of these guys need hand-holding and a kick in the pants to get things moving along. If someone is there prodding them, they make that connect," Zdziarski said. In the first year, about 87 percent in the experimental group versus 70 percent in the control group returned the following year, he said.

This approach could help any high-risk group. But tailor your approach to fit your institution's needs, culture and data. For example, you might mentor students with a certain SAT or ACT level prone to needing more help, Reesor said.

### Reach student-athletes

Sports programs attract new students, but not all will make the team. So Mercer's collaborative program of academic affairs, student life, athletics, the provost, the academic support/resource center, and advising integrates student-athletes into the university, monitors academics and intervenes. Early morning practices allow student-athletes to connect with student organizations, Pearson said.

Intentional communication between athletics and campus recreation is key, Zdziarski said. Roanoke's coaches provide campus recreation with a list of students cut from teams in hopes of connecting them to club or intramural sports, he said.

### Connect with all students

Students need to know they matter, according to recent research, Reesor said. "So when we have signs there are deficits, we show someone cares about them and give them the support and services they need," she said.

The student billing office may be the first to know a student has late notices, isn't paying bills, or has violations. "A lot of times our systems aren't talking to each other, so we make sure we connect those dots," Reesor said. "Larger institutions have even more silos, so you may not see a lack of payment

could constitute a larger problem." That is, unless you create a system for noticing and communicating that type of information.

"But even smaller institutions have to develop an intentional system for connecting the dots to show who our struggling students are and how we're reaching out," Zdziarski said.

"Some will think we're doing too much coddling and hand-holding. But when you think of the cost, we need to do what we can to help them succeed," Reesor said.

### Consider the right fit

You're pressured to keep retention numbers up and you don't want to lose performance-based funding based on quantitative retention/graduation rates.

Following these best practices can help you improve retention. "But sometimes you have to advise students it's probably not the right place for them," Pearson said. So avoid the "retention at all costs" mentality, he said.

"For some students, four and a half years is the right time for them," Reesor added. "It doesn't mean the institution failed. Help people understand the qualitative aspect and the difference between failing or skipping and just finding a better fit." ■

### THE BOTTOM LINE:

#### Help students persist, succeed

To improve student persistence and success at your institution, follow these practical tips from our *Student Affairs Today* Advisory Board:

- ✓ Tailor student persistence and success efforts to fit your institution's culture, needs and data.
- ✓ Get students engaged and involved as soon as they arrive.
- ✓ Hold on-campus fairs highlighting student organizations so new students will know of them.
- ✓ Offer online systems for students to explore and join student organizations.
- ✓ Emphasize the benefits of first-year experience seminars and offer incentives for enrolling.
- ✓ Find ways to keep sophomores engaged in the campus community.
- ✓ Identify and support at-risk students via mentoring, coaching and advising.
- ✓ Redirect students cut from academic or athletics programs or with undeclared majors.
- ✓ Develop an early-alert system and collaborate with faculty and others to monitor students' grades, attendance, violations, late notices, etc.
- ✓ Intervene when students demonstrate patterns of concern. ■