***Academic Advisement Strategies to Improve Retention and Progression***

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Pace University Retention Conference, June 15, 2018

USC Aiken: Senior comprehensive university in South Carolina system, COPLAC Member Institution, #1 for Public Regional Comprehensive Universities in the South by U.S. News and World Report, Undergraduate degrees and few graduate degrees, Fall 2017 Enrollment: 3548, 40% first-generation.

2016 – Created ***Retention, Progression, and Graduation Committee***:

* + Address high DFW rates (particularly those that impact large numbers of students);
  + Evaluate the purpose and educational goals of placement testing and effectiveness in identifying academic readiness for various courses;
  + Ensure that early intervention initiatives are having a positive impact in a way that is cost and work load effective (e.g., academic services, diagnostics, reporting processes);
  + Improve academic advising processes and approaches.

***Advisement-Related Recommendations***

Organization Items:

* **Develop clear organizational advisement framework/structure**; continue to have the problem of inequality of advisor loads in academic units, many continue to have more advisees that they can adequately cover, training of advisors nonexistent in any formal way, for both new advisor training and experienced advisor retraining, freshman advisors – what do they do differently; should there be sophomore advisors?

Programmatic/Process Items:

* **Early warning system** – make it more effective, tie into the existing midterm grades and absences databases; develop better ways to intervene and “close the loop” when risks identified.

Reporting/Communication Items:

* Seek advice on the implementation of a formal Hold on classes so that students cannot withdraw from a class without the advisor removing the hold after meeting and guidance.
* Identify students who hold Life and Hope scholarships and are at GPA for risk of losing the scholarship early enough to provide intervention, perhaps with Fall GPA run.
* Have unit heads review all courses in their program and identify which level the courses are appropriate for non-majors, either through academic standing, prerequisites, or semester.
* Develop a more focused area of the university website that addresses possible needs of students that may impact RPG, such as links to course description and appropriate audience, month by month needed links (e.g., withdrawal, fee payments, registration), possibly links to specific year in school/major and resource needs.
* Have programmatically-produced reports of any GPA drop in two successive semesters (e.g., murky middle findings) and develop a formal system to act on students at risk, through notification system involving student, advisor, counselor, etc.
* Have all degree programs develop a Major Map (to be available in a central area for all advisors and students) for the major to serve as a guide to course sequencing, high impact practices, extracurricular opportunities, capstone and other options, as well as career options/outcomes.
* Improve overall communication to advisors regarding course readiness, prerequisites, and the appropriate student academic support services, such as tutoring and CSA counseling.
* Provide academic advisors and unit heads a semester by semester overall report of GPAs of students, with those at risk for any factors identified by risk factor (see some of items above, such as two consecutive semester GPA decreases).

***Miscellaneous Recommendations***

* Student support programs – many scattered programs with no apparent structure or organizational flowchart or mission; improve organization, develop hierarchy of responsibility, place all under one Student Achievement Director umbrella.
* First Generation students and other special populations – enhance and develop a more formal support academic structure beyond specific clubs; e.g., orientation sessions, advisors, new First Gen Committee to take on more formal oversight role.
* Develop and initiate more financial support for students to enhance RPG, e.g., special dedicated Retention scholarships.
* Examine ways to provide an increase in financial resources for retention initiatives.
* Develop strategies to address the Murky Middle problem with initiatives in the second and third year of enrollment.
* Have Department Chairs include a section in the annual program review of steps taken to address RPG in their units and outcomes as well as regularly review and analyze unit DFW reports.
* Consider development of a Major Mentor program, where seniors in a major are paired with freshman as their mentor.
* Examine possible ways to modify the USCA app to include automatic links to various academic support services, faculty, staff, advisors, etc.

***New* *Center for Student Achievement***

* New location in university library
* Two Psychology graduate students as counselors
* Changes of majors/advisors are processed through office
* Academic consultations for students who need additional support in non-course specific areas (time management, study skills, test-taking tips, picking a major, etc.)
* Workshops on those same non-course specific topics as well as workshops on priority registration
* “Thrive Guide” contains important information about university office and contacts and answer new students’ most frequently asked questions.
* Process the attendance reports and early warning forms.
* Tutoring Services

**Student Support Resources – General Programs**

* *First-Year Mentoring*: a program for first-semester students to help them acclimate to the university. It focuses on social development and learning about resources. New students are paired with upper-class students for the semester for regular meetings and activities.
* *Compass Leadership program*: a program for juniors and seniors to be paired with professionals in our community to learn more about the they might be interested in and what they need to work on.
* *The ACE Club* (specific to first-generation students): The purpose of the ACE Club is to promote the retention and graduation of first-generation college students by providing academic, social, and cultural support and awareness of opportunities while in and beyond college.
* *First PACE*: cohort support for provisionally admitted students. This program includes additional support services for students, such as tutoring, intrusive advising, and mentoring.
* *Summer PACE program*: a summer program designed to prepare some students for college life. A summer program over a couple days, during which we have Math and English workshops; discuss advisement and address concerns students may have; students get to meet faculty and ask questions, etc.
* *All Subject Tutoring*: provide tutoring services to all students across campus in all subjects except: Math tutoring goes through the Math Department and Math Lab; Writing help goes through the English department and Writing Room.

**Action Item for Fall 2018 – Develop a Comprehensive First Year Experience Program**

* **Develop a new course University 101:** Develop a new hybrid First Year Success course called University 101 that combines the Critical Inquiry and Freshman Seminar courses into a 1 hour course with a more general focus and goal of first year success. This course could incorporate information literacy with some critical thinking exercises, as well as academic success strategies, time management, advisement, community and diversity appreciation, financial literacy, and personal health/welfare. The course may be tailored for certain special populations as needed (e.g., first generation, international, veterans, adult learners, etc.).
* **Themed Inter-Curricula Enrichment (ICE) Events**: Our current ICE program has been very successful in its generation of events in numerous disciplines. Consider a “theme” for each semester or year (perhaps related to the freshman reading). As part of the new hybrid First Year Success course the themed ICE events could be a targeted component each semester.
* **Examine freshman orientation** to be aligned with a start of the year-long process for freshman success. Consideration could be given to more advisement and academic hands-on experiences and examine whether other non-academic information can be conveyed virtually or online.
* Institute a new **intrusive freshman advisement program with professional advisors** and graduate assistants. All freshman assigned an advisor who will be responsible for multiple, mandated and timely, contacts (touches) for students throughout the year. A protocol could be developed where at specific dates certain relevant contacts are made. *Special focus and intensity should be on the first six weeks*, given that all available data suggest this is the most critical period for success or failure.
* Implement a **peer advisor or mentor program**. Incoming freshman assigned upper class student (major or not) at orientation, and that person is another potential source of touch contact points throughout the semester, less formal than the faculty advisors.
* Develop an **Academic Behavioral Intervention** program for first year students. This could take the form of identifying students at different risks after completion of their first semester (e.g., GPA predictive of risk for later probation, GPA at risk of losing Life or Hope, etc). These students could be given a short survey to identify variables that may have contributed to the poorer than desired performance and after an interview an action intervention plan can be worked out by the advisor in consultation with the student with specific to the goals identified for success.
* Develop **first year learning communities**. This is a high impact practice that a campus of our size should be able to utilize, perhaps starting at orientation.

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