

KEEPING STUDENT SUCCESS AT THE FOREFRONT OF STRATEGIC PLANNING

By Dr. Laurence B. Alexander

Like many contemporary universities, the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff has offices and personnel dedicated to the familiar student-success pillars of recruitment, retention, progression and graduation. However, the growth and enhancement of this key division of the university has occurred methodically over the last five years through innovative practices and systems born out of inclusive strategic planning and institutional integration.

When I joined this proud land-grant HBCU located in the Southeast Arkansas Delta, the institution had hit a rough patch: enrollment was in decline, admissions was a slow and cumbersome paper-driven process, and first-year retention and graduation rates were stagnant.

It became clear to me early on that we needed to immediately put a laser-like focus on student success, or else. Already one of our strategic priorities, student success has become a focal point of the University of Arkansas system, the board of trustees, the state coordinating board, the funding formula, and accreditation. Consequently, student success cannot be assumed or considered as an afterthought. It is so vital to the bottom line and reputation that it is incumbent on the chief executive to underscore it by increasing the involvement of faculty, staff, students and alumni. Guaranteeing student success takes the support of the entire village.

ALL HANDS ON DECK

Fundamentally, we needed to change our institutional approach to achieving greater student success.

First, we employed a dynamic strategic approach—one centered on innovative tactics through institutional integration, which is achieved through campus collaboration and engagement.

Second, we identified and secured a dynamic new leader, Dr. Linda Okiror, vice chancellor for Enrollment Management and Student Success (EMSS), and developed a strong and dedicated support team.

Third, recognizing the need to bring sustainable change to the institution, we reorganized EMSS, transitioning the functions from the Division of Student Affairs to a new standalone cabinet-level division, enabling its participation in bi-monthly cabinet meetings, and keeping all other senior leaders engaged.

Fourth, through bulletins, seminars and all-personnel auditorium gatherings, we communicated the need to have all hands on deck.

Fifth, we removed barriers separating EMSS units and started to bring some integration between the offices providing leadership in recruitment, admissions, retention and student success. This included establishing a Student Success Center, which raised the visibility of campus-wide retention and progression initiatives.

Sixth, we reached out to get faculty more involved in student success efforts as liaisons between EMSS and the academic units. A deeper engagement with faculty is ongoing.

Seventh, we launched several technology-based initiatives using new software, and we sought to combine those methods with a more traditional approach requiring a customer service-oriented personal touch. Specifically, we rolled out a completely paperless application process that works seamlessly with the admissions and registration processes. We also have employed data analytics tools, self-service course planning, advisement and registration software, and a 15 credit hour semester initiative. We will seek to improve the personal touch with the addition of student success coaches dedicated to the unique challenges within each academic area.

A WORK IN PROGRESS

In many ways, this is all a work in progress, but there are some early signs of success. Over the last four years, enrollment increased 12 percent before declining by 5.8 percent in fall 2017. During the same period, the first-time freshman retention rate rose by 25 percent, steadily increasing from 56.2 percent freshman retention in 2013 to 70.8 percent freshman retention in fall 2017. Also, retention of all students from fall to fall has grown from 71.9 percent in 2013 to 76.5 percent to 2017. Graduation rates have increased from 23 percent to 28 percent.

In summary, we have hired key leaders in student success, created a new cabinet-level EMSS division, integrated the work of its internal units, encouraged innovation through institutional integration, fostered cross-departmental collaboration, and prioritized funds for computer software and additional personnel. Though our student success transformation continues to evolve, the early indications and results are encouraging. **P**

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