

Holding On

SU AIMS TO IMPROVE RETENTION
AND GRADUATION RATES THROUGH A
DIVERSE RANGE OF INITIATIVES DESIGNED TO
HELP UNDERGRADUATES OVERCOME OBSTACLES
AND IMPROVE THEIR STUDIES

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When Terrence Cush came to Syracuse University in fall 1999, he found the lifestyle changes so profound that he almost didn't make it past the first semester of his freshman year. "I'd never been on my own before," says the California native, now a senior in the School of Management. "There was so much freedom to do what I wanted, when I wanted. I was far from home and had to make the adjustment from the structured atmosphere of the small, private schools I'd gone to all my life to being at a mid-sized university. It was too much all at once, and I didn't know how to handle it."

Cush started on what he calls a "downward spiral" by skipping classes and neglecting his schoolwork. The results were painfully clear when he received his first-semester grades. "My grade point average [GPA] was about a 1.7," he says. "I thought I was a good student, so when I saw those grades I was stunned."

The thought of failing and leaving SU had never crossed Cush's mind until his faculty advisor, School of Management professor Paul Andreoli, warned him otherwise. "One of my downfalls is that I'm ridiculously optimistic," Cush says. "Even when things are going really bad, I tell myself that it will be all right. But after talking with Professor Andreoli, I realized I was in trouble and had to make some changes."

It wasn't easy, but Cush became disciplined, attending class and doing homework. By his sophomore year, he posted a 3.4

GPA—a change so impressive that it earned him the Marion Rich Waterman Meyer Award for Improvement. He credits his remarkable turnaround to hard work and the support of Andreoli and Hanna Richardson, assistant dean for undergraduate student services in the School of Management. "I've matured a lot since my freshman year," he says. "I've learned to budget my time. Now, if friends want to go out and I have a test the next day, I tell them no, and stay in and study."

Cush is not alone in succumbing to unfettered freedom and a non-stop social life, Richardson says. "One of the main things students struggle with is balancing competing demands for social and academic time," she says. "They haven't really come to the point of accepting responsibility for the fact that they are in college and that's where they want to be. So some of them have to be forced to confront that. They'll get kicked out of school, or close to it, and realize they really do want to be here. Then they can do what it takes to stay."

Not every student who comes to SU as a freshman graduates from the University, and many of those who leave are not in academic trouble. In fact, a study of one student group showed that 40 percent of those students choosing to leave SU did so in good academic standing, according to Horace Smith, associate vice president of student services in the Division of Student Support and Retention (DSSR). "Now that we know that statistic, we have to find out why and fix it," he says.

National studies reveal that students leave college for a variety of reasons. "Some students leave because they never intended to finish school, while others leave because they are uncertain about their goals," says Distinguished Professor Vincent Tinto, chair of the Higher



Supporting Students

Syracuse University has a variety of programs designed to assist students in achieving their academic goals.

Some of the programs are solely SU initiatives, while others are linked to state and federal programs. Here's a look:



Center for Retention Studies: All-University support for assessment on students' experiences, satisfaction, outcomes, and persistence to graduation.

CSTEP: Programs, jointly funded by SU and the state, that support undergraduates preparing for careers in science and technology.

Higher Education Opportunity Program: State-funded program that supports economically disadvantaged undergraduates.

Learning Resource Center: All-University academic support services for students; includes study support, seminars, workshops, and information dissemination about campus-wide resources for study support.

Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program: Federally funded program that supports undergraduates preparing for doctoral programs.

Office of Disability Services: Federally mandated support services to all students with documented physical, psychological, or learning disabilities.

Student Support Services: Federally funded program that provides support services for eligible undergraduates.

SummerStart: All-University summer transition program for entering first-year undergraduates.

Syracuse Academic Improvement Program: Provides year-round support for undergraduates at risk of leaving SU.

Education Program in SU's School of Education, and an authority on student retention. "Others find it hard to make the social and academic transition or adjustment to college."

Still other students depart because either they aren't prepared academically for college, or they find their college isn't academically challenging enough, Tinto says. Students will also leave college because of financial problems or family commitments, or because they don't make personal connections. "The lack of personal connections with others tends to be one of the most significant predictors of leaving," Tinto says.

The six-year graduation rate for students who came to Syracuse University as freshmen in fall 1994 is 74 percent. To improve that, and as part of the University's Academic Plan, Vice Chancellor and Provost Deborah A. Freund created a council to develop a five-year strategic plan aimed at boosting student retention. The Retention Council is made up of Smith; Barry L. Wells, senior vice president for student affairs and dean of student relations; David C. Smith, vice president of enrollment management; Ronald R. Cavanagh, vice president of undergraduate studies; associate deans of every SU school and college; and members of other related campus offices. After gleaning information from research, the council reviews institutional policies and makes recommendations about improvements to the current retention strategies.

The goal of the Retention Council's plan is to raise the six-year graduation rate for undergraduate classes entering fall 2001 and later to 80 percent in 5 years and to at least 85 percent in 10 years. To reach this goal, the University plans to

implement a comprehensive, campus-wide retention strategy that builds partnerships among all units and constituencies within the campus community. "I know we are more student-centered than any other university," Freund says. "Our students have a great experience here, better than at many places. But I believe we don't challenge our students enough and that's why they leave."

According to the SU Office of Budget and Planning, the attrition rate for first-year students in fall 1990 was 14.6 percent. For fall 1998, the attrition rate dropped to 9.4 percent. Horace Smith, chairman of the Retention Council and head of the office that implements the council's plan, says the University's overall approach to improving retention has three components: offering a variety of programs that support students; continuing research and assessment into what issues students face in choosing whether to stay at SU; and coordinating the retention concerns of all SU schools and colleges. "Our new system calls for all students leaving the University to have an exit interview," Smith says. "Before, SU's schools and colleges were disconnected in their efforts to track the reasons why students leave. We now have a comprehensive process to gather that information and funnel it to my office. Through collaborative relationships among the schools and colleges, and an environment that supports students' academic progress, we're working toward one outcome—a better retention and graduation rate."

Setting A Table For All

To attract students to Syracuse University and to see them through to graduation, DSSR offers a host of programs, from GEAR UP, an introduction to college for eighth-grade students, to the Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program, aimed at helping students from underrepresented groups succeed as undergraduates and then pursue graduate studies. According to the study prepared by the Vice Chancellor's Retention Council, five of the division's programs—SummerStart, the Office of Disability Services, the Learning Resource Center, the Syracuse Academic Improvement Program, and the Center for Retention Studies—are modifying current programming to further improve the performance and retention of the populations they serve. DSSR has also partnered with the L.C. Smith College of Engineering and Computer Science, the College of Human Services and Health Professions, the Office of Student Affairs, and University College to build a strategic relationship to promote improved student performance. Those units plan to do the following:

- track lower-division student performance to identify problem trends;
- improve academic advising, especially for students considering intra-University transfers;
- target interventions to meet the needs of specific populations of students at risk of leaving SU without finishing their degrees; and
- enhance the transition experience for incoming students through initiatives like SummerStart, a program designed to ensure a smooth passage from high school to college.

Students from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds find support and assistance in many of the DSSR programs,



according to JoAnn May, director of SummerStart and the Office of Supportive Services. “Our role is to ensure the success of the students,” May says. “We make sure that they use the opportunity to attend Syracuse University to the maximum, that the investment in these students is recognized, and that they graduate and be successful.”

The programs May administers serve approximately 300 students each year. “Although our programs target freshmen and sophomores, we follow them through their four years here,” May says. “We serve as advisors to make sure they take advantage of all the opportunities at SU.”

According to Mary Jo Custer, director of student affairs and associate to the senior vice president for student affairs, a caring attitude is an important attribute for staff members in the Office of Student Affairs. “We are a problem-solving office,” Custer says. “Typically, we’re able to calm upset students and refer

them according to their needs. We’re someone to talk to, someone who will listen and help students determine their options.”

Keeping track of who stays and who leaves is the function of the Center for Support of Teaching and Learning (CSTL), which has provided SU with all retention and graduation statistics for more than 15 years. “Our job is, in part, to provide the benchmarking, to track how our efforts to retain students are coming together to make a difference,” says Barbara Yonai, the center’s associate director and a member of the Retention Council and the Retention Steering Committee. “Our office also helps individual programs and units track how their students are performing.”

For a special program that is expected to have a long-term impact on retention, CSTL can follow those students statistically and provide the program with a profile analysis. “We can use that information to find out what works as far as retention goes,” Yonai says.

Students who feel connected to SU and the Syracuse community are more likely to stay than those who do not, says Stacey Riemer, associate director of the Center for Public and Community Service. “We create a web of relationships that help bind students to life here at the University,” Riemer says. “That increases their probability of staying.”

Syracuse University works hard to keep its students, according to Horace Smith. “We try to make the University more personable and responsive to students who are discovering themselves,” he says. “We want them to feel good about themselves and about their college experience.”

But for all the help the University makes available to students, the drive and desire to succeed has to come from each individual, according to management student Terrence Cush. His advice for students struggling with balancing fun and freedom with the goal of earning good grades: “You have to step out of the freshman mentality,” he says. “Look at your situation and make sure you don’t do anything to detract from your learning. The main thing is to go to class—skipping once or twice makes it vastly easier to skip all the time. And that hole is twice as hard to dig out of as it is to get in.”

Bolstering Student Persistence



Distinguished Professor Vincent Tinto, chair of the School of Education’s Higher Education Program, has studied student retention, or as he prefers to call it, student persistence, on a national scale for about 25 years. Tinto, author of *Leaving College* (University of Chicago Press), has found that many factors contribute to the decision students make to remain at an institution or to leave. “Nationally less than half—or approximately 48 percent of students entering a four-year institution—will finish their degrees at that institution in five years,” Tinto says. “The majority, about 52 percent, will not finish their degrees at their first institution. Quite a few, or about 15 percent, will transfer to another institution where nearly half will eventually finish their undergraduate degree, so that over time nearly 60 percent of all students who begin a bachelor’s program will earn their degrees somewhere.”

Not surprisingly, the average time taken by students nationally to finish a four-year degree is now more than five years. This is not only because of transfers, but also because more students

are working while in college or are going to school part time, according to Tinto. “Earning a four-year degree in four years is now the exception,” he says.

Increasing student retention isn’t simply a matter of providing advice or support. Though those things matter, Tinto says, student retention is primarily a reflection of student learning. Colleges that support and promote student learning, particularly through student collaborations and projects involving faculty, invariably enhance retention, he says.

Tinto notes that during the past 20 years, Syracuse University has made marked strides in improving graduation rates. “SU has adopted a number of strategies to increase retention and graduation rates, including freshman seminars, effective advising, academic and social support programs, and, increasingly, initiatives like cooperative teaching, collaborative learning, learning communities, and residential theme houses,” he says. “All those elements have contributed to SU’s gains in student retention, which is, by all standards, a remarkable achievement.”

—Paula Meseroll