

University of Arizona

First-Year Initiatives

Towards a Culture of Responsibility

Rationale: Building a Culture of Responsibility.

University of Arizona seeks to create a culture of responsibility around the first-year experience. Given our size and complexity it would be naive to rely on one or even several programs for first-year students. Retention figures reflect the total culture and character of a university campus.

Culture of responsibility means that faculty, administrative staff, and students share responsibility for making our campus conducive to a rich and rewarding first-year experience (University of Arizona: Student Retention, Toward a Culture of Responsibility, p4 <http://w3.arizona.edu/~uge/srr/>)

Our approach is an integrated campus-wide effort that includes the students themselves as well as the faculty and staff in a variety of integrated efforts all designed to produce involvement and sense of community. UA has integrated first year success across the board, from curriculum redesign (The General Education Program), to a building designed for that curriculum (The Integrated Learning Center) to classroom collaboration between faculty and students (The preceptor program). Because our campus is as large as a city, we shelter our first-year students by providing them with many small and friendly neighborhoods, programs carefully targeted on particular groups and multiple retention issues (examples include Courses in Common, Multicultural Programs and Services Department, and New Start). We even provided a neighborhood community center: the Integrated Learning Center (ILC). And within the ILC the Freshman Year Center offers consolidated support services for first-year students including information, academic advising, tutoring, and major exploration. In addition we have examined our policies with the needs of first-year students in mind, then changed those policies in a manner designed to improve the first-year experience (examples include Residence Hall priority for first-year students, mandatory first-year advising, general education courses taught by tenured faculty).

Retention Context. The core University of Arizona admission policy is set by our Arizona Board of Regents (ABOR). Over the years the board has consistently favored policies that enhance access to higher education in the State's public universities. Admission policies here tend to be broader and less restrictive--that is, many students are admitted to the U of A who would not be admitted to many other highly regarded, more selective, public research universities. Thus we have "a (retention) context of a strong research-oriented university coupled with enabling admission criteria ..." (Toward a Culture of Responsibility, pp3-4).

Policy that Enriches Academic Experience During the First Year

General Education Reform Perhaps the most fundamental reform that has improved the academic experience for first year students was the shift from traditional, discipline-centered general education to the new program. Since 1998 general education courses provide:

- Multidisciplinary teaching efforts
- Enriched writing experiences
- Collaborative learning even in large classes
- Interactive experiences (often) involving technology)
- Contact with tenured faculty for all first-year students
- Faculty Colloquia: small issue-focused courses taught by ranked faculty help students test the academic waters.

Retention Policy Review was conducted in 1998 during which each major administrative unit of the campus identified strategies and goals to support retention. (Toward a Culture of Responsibility, pp 10-27 <http://w3.arizona.edu/~uge/srr/>).

Key Programs: Creating Neighborhoods for First-Year Students.

A complete list of retention programs is shown in Appendix A. A few examples of these programs and how they have created neighborhoods for first-year students include:

- Teaching Teams Small teams of undergraduates volunteer to work with the faculty member in one of their General Education Courses to improve the course and increase access to the instructor for all students. Each teaching team becomes a little neighborhood located in one general education course.
- Courses in Common Student participants sign up for a common schedule of general education courses and attend class together, thus creating a small learning community.
- Integrated Learning Center (ILC): The U of A's neighborhood center for first-year students. A key location for integrating freshmen into the UA community, disciplines into the General Education Curriculum, and technology into teaching & learning. All first-year students will take courses General Education courses at the ILC, learn to use technology in its 250 workstation, 24-hour access Information Commons, and get help with advising, tutoring, and major selection at its First-Year Center.
- While the architectural design of many buildings on a typical college campus includes features, which may actually discourage a sense of community, the ILC was designed especially for students in transition and including many features that say to new students: "This is your home. Live here. Work here". There are outdoor conversation spaces in a large community courtyard, cozy conversational niches, comfortable small group meeting rooms, comfortable furniture, and centralized student support resources. The ILC is designed for people. It will make our large campus feel smaller and friendlier.
- Other Programs Space does not permit a full description of all U of A programs that create neighborhoods. An annotated list is provided as Appendix A).

Evaluation: Student and Faculty Results

Just as no single program can create a rich first-year experience no single study can demonstrate that our enrichment effort is working. Not every program and policy change has been evaluated. But, we keep working at it. And the results so far are very encouraging. For example:

- General Education Program and Overall First-year Experience at UA NSSE benchmark data shows UA students rate their first-year experience well above that of students at other NSSE institutions on relevant indices.
- Teaching Teams Three years of survey data (of undergraduate preceptors, participating faculty, TAs, and students in preceptored courses) has consistently demonstrated effectiveness. FIPSE is urging us to do a dissemination project
- Finish in Four Program Four year graduation rate of participants in various colleges of the Universities was higher for participants than for non-participants (most differences were large (>10 percentage points).
- Tutoring Program A causal modeling study published in a peer-reviewed journal (CRLA) demonstrated that UA tutoring improves grades in math.

Appendix A

University of Arizona

Programs and Policies that Enrich the First-year Experience

What the University has done

The University is responsible for providing adequate information about the requirements for success, excellent advising service, a stimulating and inclusive learning environment, and programs of study suitable to legitimate diverse student needs... (University of Arizona: Student Retention, Toward a Culture of Responsibility, p5)

General Education Reform resulting in a true interdisciplinary general education program that addresses the needs of non-majors. Our program contrasts starkly with traditional specific education that is discipline based and focused on students planning to major in the discipline).

Integrated Learning Center) A key location for integrating freshmen into the UA community, disciplines into the General Education Curriculum, and technology into teaching & learning

The Freshman Year Center The focus for all new students for academic advising, tutoring, and major exploration. Located in a wing of the ILC where all first-year students take their general education courses.

Office of Undergraduate Education Office created by the Provost to oversee the new general education program and insure an integrated approach for other needed reforms.

University

Retention Policy Review was conducted in 1998 during which each major administrative unit of the campus identified strategies and goals to support retention.

Residence Hall Policy amended to give priority registration to freshmen. Studies suggest students living in residence halls achieve higher grades and persist at higher rates than their counterparts who live off campus do (University of Arizona: Student Retention, Toward a Culture of Responsibility, p21)

Finish in Four This simple but effective program clearly articulates for new students and parents a map of what is required to finish the University in four years. Students make a formal commitment. A surprising number of program participants succeed: there are consistent large differences in four-year graduation favoring program participants.

Courses in Common Student participants sign up for a common schedule of general education courses and attend class together, thus creating a small learning community.

The Freshman Convocation The evening before classes freshmen attend a ceremony in which the President of the University inducts them into campus citizen ship.

Wildcat Welcome is the social counterpart of the freshman convocation. It is a week long event on the mall that is designed to acquaint new students with clubs, resources, and other opportunities for social integration on our campus.

Multicultural Programs Currently this office runs four cultural centers and a variety of programs including the New Start program.

Multicultural Programs and Services Unit For two decades UA has provided support for minority access via a formal administrative unit. Programs and cultural centers for each of our major minority ethnic groups (Black, Asian, Hispanic, and Native American) are centralized under this unit which provides support for the transition to college for minority and first-generation students.. Each culture center provides a neighborhood for one particular ethnic group.

New Start Program During the summer prior to their first semester newly admitted minority students

live on campus in a residence hall and learn the ropes of being a successful student from by mentors and tutors. Peer mentors are often former program participants themselves.

What the Faculty has done

“Faculty members are responsible for engaging students the moment they arrive on campus if not before. Every member of the faculty should demonstrate the belief that all first-year students deserve faculty attention, and that a public university must provide appropriate instruction for those whom it admits”(University of Arizona: Student Retention, Toward a Culture of Responsibility, p4)

General Education Reform Faculty and staff have responded well to the challenge of General Education. Faculty helped design the program, set its goals, and developed hundreds of new courses to meet the guidelines. Faculty continues to oversee the program via the General Education Committee. And have taken a role in significant retention programs for first year students.

Teaching Teams Program resulted from a multidiscipline faculty team interested in implementing certain goals of the new general education program. The team wrote a successful FIPSE grant that provided seed money for the program. A council of faculty and students continues to oversee the program, which remains very much a grass-roots effort.

University Partners Faculty mentors, nominated by the Deans of their respective colleges offer mentoring and a version of “University 101” to academically at risk students during their first two semesters at the University.

Faculty Fellows Outstanding teaching faculty spend a portion of their time in various residence facilities to mentor and encourage first-year students.

Freshman Colloquia Faculty members offer seminars for freshman often on some high-interest topic. Student registration is entirely voluntary.

What the Students have done

...once here students are responsible to discover and use appropriate resources. Moreover, they must be responsible for a realistic understanding of the nature of academic work at the University, put forth the effort required both in and out of the classroom to succeed, and commit to approaching college work with the seriousness of mind that it presupposes. Students are responsible for meeting regularly with an academic advisor...(University of Arizona: Student Retention, Toward a Culture of Responsibility, p4)

We have discovered that the best tools we have for developing a culture of responsibility among the students are the students themselves.

Teaching Teams Program The preceptor program exemplifies students taking responsibility for their own learning. Students work on teams with the faculty, hold office hours to assist their fellow students with projects and conduct classroom activities some of which they design themselves to liven up the classes. Undergraduate preceptors allow faculty to keep their finger on the pulse of real students in their classes. Often this leads to significant innovation and change in their teaching. Faculty love working with preceptors!

New Start Program Peer mentors and tutors play a key role in the New Start Program help minority and first-generation freshman transition to the University. Peer mentors are often former program participants.

Peer Tutoring Peer tutors are utilized extensively in tutoring programs in the First Year Center, New Start, SALT program for learning disabled students, and some departmental tutoring programs. Peer tutors are typically upper division students who have a history of academic success in the courses they tutor. Most receive training and are certified by our CRLA (College Reading and Learning Association) approved tutor training program.