

Award Title

Reframing the Retention Conversation: Promoting Action and Success through a Cross-Divisional Symposium

Awards Categories

Administrative, Assessment, Information Technology, Fundraising, Professional Development and related

Executive Summary

The University of North Texas (UNT) needed to re-think retention, student success and how assessment findings could be leveraged to address complex institutional challenges. Despite Student Affairs (SA) conducting a rigorous assessment schedule across all of its 22 departments, it did not have a forum to share this data broadly across campus. A vehicle was needed to demonstrate SA expertise engaging students on campus and changing perceptions about its role in student success. Finally, SA needed a way to reframe the conversation on retention and move the agenda towards a campus-wide approach that emphasizes everyone's role to help students succeed. The literature notes, "[t]he changing climate of education necessitates innovative approaches to support student success" (Pace, Blumrich & Merkle, 2006, p.313) and *Student Portraits: A Symposium for UNT Educators* modeled inter-division collaboration to help increase student retention and persistence at UNT.

Relying on a strong relationship between SA Assessment and Institutional Research and Effectiveness (IR&E), the assessment office approached senior leadership to co-sponsor a first of its kind gathering on campus to intentionally bring together a diverse population of attendees who engage students in and out of the classroom. This event, called *Student Portraits: A Symposium for UNT Educators*, was a free, day-long symposium for UNT faculty and staff to gain better insights into the student population and to provide a forum to discuss critical challenges UNT students face on a daily basis. The Symposium garnered interest and acclaim for SA across campus.

The Symposium allowed SA to share large amounts of assessment data about our students in a collaborative fashion. The Symposium provided a platform to showcase data outside of institutional silos. The Symposium was an intentional "time out" from the frenetic pace of the daily work on campus that highlighted key issues related to student success and retention. In total, 210 faculty and staff attended the Symposium, representing 89 distinct departments across campus.

"I think programs like this are critical to the success of UNT. In addition to the content, the ability to network with peers is invaluable. I witnessed so many instances of collaboration in process and this will make UNT a better place for everyone: students, faculty and staff." - Symposium Attendee

The day began with a panel of atypical students who shared their challenges and dreams for a college education. Attendees chose from 11 concurrent sessions over two blocks. Attendees discussed posters sharing assessment and research findings about students with 20 departments across both student and academic affairs. Throughout the day IR&E staff demonstrated where attendees could find key internet-based institutional data and resources about our students online in a dedicated computer lab. The day concluded with a panel of senior administrators (Provost, VPSA, Dean of Undergraduate Studies and the AVP Enrollment Management) facilitated by the AVP of IR&E which focused on critical issues at the cabinet level related to student retention and success and what leadership felt was the call to action for UNT faculty and staff.

Award Description

“It’s great to have the opportunity to hear about what other departments are doing and to have something of a sounding board to bounce around ideas.” – Symposium Attendee

Why Collaborate?

Re-thinking retention, identifying metrics of student success and leveraging assessment findings takes an entire campus. Far too often student and academic affairs operate in a vacuum with counter-productive results. Additionally, on most campuses, assessment findings within student affairs never reach the desks of decision makers and colleagues outside of these units. Further, student affairs staff frequently do not have a forum to share their assessment expertise. Finally, data must be used to impact decision making at all institutional levels in order to best serve the needs of a diverse student population. The literature is clear that operating together is critical for campus success. Bourassa and Kruger (2001) cite abundant literature that supports the challenges and obstacles that arise between student affairs and academic affairs partnerships. The authors note that obstacles include cultural differences, historical separation between the formal and informal curriculum, competing assumptions and a differential reward system for faculty and student affairs professionals. Despite these differences, a joint report from the American Association for Higher Education, ACPA and NASPA (1998) asserts that student and academic affairs must commit to and support a call for action that “goes beyond the individual faculty or staff member” (p.18) and promote a shared responsibility for improved student learning.

In keeping with this philosophy, the Symposium provided an opportunity for idea sharing and cross-divisional collaboration. Although student and academic affairs have vastly different understandings about the purposes of their work and how it should be measured, the Symposium’s frank and open discussions among attendees brought up mutual areas of concern including assessment, technology, changing student populations, retention and general education (Hirsch and Burack, 2001).

Relying on a strong relationship between Student Affairs Assessment and Institutional Research and Effectiveness (IR&E) as a catalyst for change, the assessment office sought to co-sponsor a gathering where the talents and perspectives of the entire campus could be brought to bear on a critical issue – student retention. Tactics, ideas and interventions launched solely in Student Affairs would not have the same impact as strategies developed across institutional boundary lines. To that end, staff from Student Affairs, IR&E, and students from the Master’s program in

Higher Education Administration formed a planning committee to develop and implement a Symposium.

Kezar (2003) notes higher education researchers began focusing on the benefits of increased collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs in the 1990s resulting in positive outcomes for students and institutions. Kezar confirms that support from senior administrators was reported to be the single most important strategy for creating partnerships. Furthermore, Maki (2004) stated, “[b]uilding a collective commitment to assessing student learning also involves establishing new or different kinds of relationships and opportunities for dialogue” (p. 3). The Symposium’s purpose aligned with Maki’s philosophy regarding developing a collective institution. In addition, the Symposium’s goal was to enlighten faculty and administration as to what they should expect from students and what students could achieve (Maki, 2004). The Symposium was also consistent with best practice identified by Schuh & Upcraft (2001) as it addressed critical campus needs by exploring sound assessment data. Ultimately, the Symposium mimicked the five-phase approach to collaborative strategic planning posed by Sanaghan (2009). Cross-departmental research was solicited, gathered and presented so that everyone left with a common vision (Sanaghan, 2009). As Maki (2004) asserts, “[s]ome of these relationships involve deepening or transforming working relationships that already exists, such as among faculty in a department, program, or division, or among professional staff in a service. Other relationships involve crossing boundaries to create lasting new partnerships, such as among academic affairs, student affairs, student services and those in library and information resources” (p. 3).

The Schedule

The Symposium began with a Presidential charge to empower attendees to make a difference in students’ lives through the use of data driven decision making. The planning committee intentionally scheduled a plenary session featuring 9 students who were selected for their academic achievement and unique life situations. The organizers wanted to complicate attendees’ definitions of a UNT student. The panel featured single parents, transgendered, privileged, older, spiritual, involved, Greek, and student athletes. Diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds were represented. Students shared their stories and insights as to how UNT was helping them succeed. Panelists took questions and shared strategies to help improve the campus experience for other students. Attendees then chose from six concurrent sessions in the Block 1:

- Who is the Class of 2015?
- The Balancing Act: Student Athletes on Campus
- Who are our Residents?
- Mental Health Issues in Higher Education
- Gender Patterns and STEM Students
- Engagement at UNT: What We Know and Still Want to Learn

Lunch followed with time to engage 20 departments who presented a formal poster session. These reflected a diverse array of assessment data across campus which helped to crystalize the ways in which UNT assesses students. Simultaneously, staff from IR&E showcased sources of data that can aid decision makers on campus. Although online, these datasets were relatively

unknown to the general faculty and staff. NSSE, CIRP, SRI and IPEDS datasets were shared and conversations occurred regarding how data could be leveraged for grants, research and intervention strategies.

Attendees then chose from five concurrent sessions in Block 2:

- Transitioning to UNT: The First-Year Experience
- UNT Distance Learners: Everyone and Everywhere?
- International Experience at UNT: Now and the Future
- Students that Use (Alcohol and Drugs)
- Community Engagement at UNT

As a capstone to the day, a final plenary featured senior administrators. Attendees heard from their key leader on the critical issue of retention. Each panelist shared his/her unique perspective on retention within a framework of their own campus responsibility. Each panelist also shared what challenges in retention “kept them up at night.” The Provost, VPSA, Dean of Undergraduate Studies and the AVP Enrollment Management gave powerful examples of how far UNT has come and still has to go in growing retention.

“Excellent Symposium. Quality of information was at the highest standard and the shared goals of the attendees (and the varied experiences of the diverse attendees) contributed to a great day with a high level of future impact on my work. I feel that I can continue this effort and further retention efforts at UNT. Thanks!” – Symposium Attendee

Impact and Ongoing Dividends

Given the success of the event, SA and IR&E have been approached by four other divisions on campus with interest in collaborating on the next Symposium. While SA and IR&E funded this past year’s event, divisions are now volunteering budgets to grow the event and ensure its ongoing longevity. A positive outcome of the Symposium was the creation of a campus-wide Research Assessment Group. Consisting of key assessment staff from Enrollment Management, UNT International, SA, IR&E, Decision Support, Equity and Diversity, and Athletics, this group is now meeting every 6 weeks to plan the 2012 Symposium and tackle issues related to data, assessment and student impact.

Internally, SA offices are also now more motivated to complete post-assessment executive summaries as staff plan on using these for next year’s poster session portion of the Symposium. Additionally, the relationships formed at the Symposium have spilled over into other committees around campus, and colleagues now have a better sense of the roles and work being done across campus within SA and beyond. Finally, this event has done a tremendous amount of good in promoting an ongoing culture of collaboration and trust.

Assessment Data

***“I really enjoyed the student panel and these students reminded me why we are all here. I think that we need concrete goals and ways to help students achieve their dreams.”-
Symposium Attendee***

Metrics for Success

The planning committee outlined the following Metrics for Success to determine if the Symposium made a positive impact on the campus:

1. Total number of poster presentations (target: 15)
2. Unique number of poster presenters (target: 20)
3. Unique number of divisions represented in the poster session (target: 5)
4. Total number of registered attendees (target: 150)
5. Total number of divisions represented by registered attendees (target: 5)
6. Total number of unique departments represented by registered attendees (target: 50)
7. Mean score of 4.00 out of 5.00 on evaluation questions
8. Keep cost per attendee at or below \$36.00

Poster Sessions

An important Metric for Success for the Symposium was the leveraging of assessment data from around the campus to showcase with attendees. Symposium organizers looked at total poster presentations as an important indicator of success. Another Metric for Success was the unique numbers of presenters and divisions represented. Among the posters were the following topics which were a direct indicator of impact for the event:

- Research Regarding Space and Pedagogy at UNT - *Space Management and Planning*
- Closing the Gaps: Enrollment of first year UNT undergraduates by hometown origin - *Division of Equity & Diversity*
- Multicultural Center Student Assessment - *Division of Equity and Diversity*
- Predictors of academic success and student opinion of teaching effectiveness in undergraduate statistics courses: Focus on the results from the College of Business - *Information Technology Decision Sciences*
- Office of Disability Accommodation: Serving the Mean Green Nation - *Office of Disability Accommodation*
- Foundations in Study Skills: Support Programs and Student Success - *Learning Center*
- Analysis of Greek 101: An Education Program for Greek New Members - *Greek Life*
- On-campus Student Employment and GPA - *Career Center and RAP*
- Supplemental Instruction Program - *Learning Center*
- How's the Food? - *Dining Services*
- GPA of Pohl Recreation Center Student Users - *Recreational Sports*
- Distinguished Lecture Series- *Student Affairs Administration*
- A Detailed Analysis of a Student Affairs Master's Degree Cohort - *Program in Higher Education*

- Our Students and Their Conduct: What You Don't Know About the Students Sitting in Your Class - *Center for Student Rights and Responsibilities*
- UNT Student Health Center Utilization - *Student Health and Wellness Center*
- Pulse beat: Checking in with International Students About Student Health Insurance - *Student Health and Wellness Center*
- Assessing Orientation to Impact Success - *Orientation and Transition Programs*
- Parents as Partners: What Parent Orientation Assessment Data is Saying About the Families of Our Students - *Orientation and Transition Programs*
- International Portraits: IELI Students at UNT - *Intensive English Language Institute*
- Eagle E.D.G.E. Certification Program – A Pre & Post Assessment of Learning Outcomes - *Student Affairs Administration*
- Student Veterans Success: A Comparative Analysis of UNT Progression & National Best Practices – *Campus Life*

The Symposium exceeded Metrics for Success 1 and 2 and met the goal for Metric 3. A total of 5 UNT Divisions participated in the poster presentations with 27 staff members on hand to discuss findings and take questions. Of these poster presentations, 2 came from Auxiliary Services, 2 from Equity and Diversity, 3 from Undergraduate Studies, 11 from Student Affairs and 3 from Academic Affairs. Planning committee members took photos to document the diversity of formats and to provide future poster presenters with examples of strong presentations. Departments utilized their posters as display items in their offices after the event to further communicate their assessment activities to visitors.

Impact and Quality

An online survey was used to capture registrations. This provided a headcount for the organizers and also generated direct evidence about attendees. The Symposium exceeded Metrics for Success 4, 5 and 6. Of the 225 registered attendees, Academic Affairs consisted of 48% of the total attendees followed by Student Affairs (23%), Enrollment Management (12%), University Communications (7%), International Programs and Auxiliary Services (3% each), Equity and Diversity (2%), and Athletics (2%). A final attendee represented Alumni Relations.

A paper-based survey was created for attendees and distributed during check-in. This survey was created so that it could be scanned in using automated survey scanning software. Surveys were output to SPSS for analysis. A total of 118 participants completed the assessment representing a 56% response rate. Surveys used a 5 point Likert scale with 1 being strongly disagree/very dissatisfied and 5 being strongly agree/very satisfied. The following list represents the key questions assessed in the evaluation. The Symposium exceeded all but one sub-item for Metric for Success 7. Each item indicates the question, mean response and (standard deviation):

- Overall quality of the Student Portrait Student Panel, 4.72 (.544)
- Overall quality of the Retention Panel, 4.43 (.644)
- Overall quality of the Poster Sessions, 3.81 (.786)
- Overall quality of the Symposium, 4.29 (.619)
- I believe that my department collects data that are valuable, 4.26 (.810)

- I believe that other departments (outside of my own) collect data that are valuable, 4.32 (.729)
- I believe opportunities to come together to share data about students are very important, 4.81 (.434)
- I believe I can definitely improve student success given the data presented today, 4.20 (.734)
- I feel empowered to make a difference in retention at UNT, 4.37 (.638)

The planning committee gathered after the Symposium to analyze the assessment data, discuss strengths and weaknesses of the event and examine attendee comments to identify themes for improvement and themes of success. Symposium evaluations were shared with leadership as an additional element to continue conversations started at the Symposium. Planning is in the early stages for 2012 with a focus on the impact of gender on retention and the expansion of assessment activities in out-of-classroom academic support services.

Financial

SA and IR&E covered all costs for this event. A total of \$5411 was spent on the campus space, A/V, catering for snacks and lunch, marketing, attendee bags and printed content. When comparing the costs of this event to losing a single student, UNT considers this expense a reasonable use of funding (StudentRetention.org, 2005). It should be noted that attendees did not have to pay a registration fee. This decision was done intentionally to clear a potential roadblock for participation. It is the organizers intent that this model continues moving forward with additional funding coming from a larger group of Division sponsors. Taking all hard costs into account, the cost per attendee was \$25.77 for the day which was below the threshold outlined in Metric for Success 8.

Conclusion

As evidenced by the strong performance along the Metrics for Success noted above, the Symposium was an innovative and impactful vehicle to re-think retention and student success. Furthermore, the Symposium demonstrated how assessment findings could be leveraged to address complex institutional challenges. Internally, the Symposium was able to expose 170 non-Student Affairs faculty, staff and deans to Student Affairs' expertise in engaging students on campus. Based on the enthusiastic qualitative responses and interest by senior academic leadership the organizers believed the Symposium played a key role in changing perceptions about the role Student Affairs plays in student success. Finally, the Symposium reframed the conversation on retention and moved the agenda towards a campus-wide approach that emphasizes everyone's role to help students succeed.

References

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