Student Success at the University of South Carolina: A comprehensive approach

Category: Academic Support

Summary:

The University of South Carolina Student Success Center offers a comprehensive array of academic support and early intervention programs for all undergraduates, with a focus on first year students and special populations. The Center officially opened in the fall of 2006, following the success of two pilot programs on campus, Supplemental Instruction and Creating Academic Responsibility.

Based on University of South Carolina student data demonstrating the connection between first-year GPA and persistence to graduation, the university in fall 2005 began Supplemental Instruction (SI) providing support in historically difficult introductory courses and the Creating Academic Responsibility Initiative focusing on professors referring students who are missing class and showing signs of academic disengagement. Over the past several years, the programs have grown in terms of student participation and faculty referrals. Our partnerships with faculty across campus have strengthened the programs and the impacts these programs have on students’ first-year GPA and their overall healthy transition to the university.

The success, demonstrated through regular assessment and feedback, of SI and the Creating Academic Responsibility Initiative led to the development of the University’s Student Success Center, complete with a centralized tutoring program, mentoring programs for out-of-state and transfer students, and a call center for communicating with first year students, in fall 2006. By offering programs that directly relate to academic success and successful transitions to the university, the Student Success Center takes a holistic and individualized approach. The following proposal highlights the purpose of each program and the data supporting our success.

Program Description:

The mission of the Student Success Center is to coordinate an intentionally-designed, comprehensive array of programs, resources, and services that guide students to degree completion at USC through promoting academic goal-setting and skill development, personal transition to the university setting, and effective decision-making. The Student Success Center mission directly ties into retention goals for the Division of Student Affairs and Department of Academic Support, as well as the overall university. Following analysis of student retention rates, a review of the literature, and research of best practices, the university began implementing student success programs in fall 2005.

Supplemental Instruction (SI), based on the University of Missouri-Kansas City model, was the first of these programs. SI provides three 50-minute sessions per week for students enrolled in historically difficult introductory or ‘gatekeeper’ courses to majors. After determining courses in which approximately 30% of students earned below a C or
withdrew from the course, staff members communicated with the academic departments to explain the benefits of SI. By gaining faculty and administration support for subject areas including accounting, biology, chemistry, economics, engineering, history, journalism, mathematics, philosophy, and psychology, staff selected SI leaders for these courses based on faculty recommendations. SI leaders are undergraduate students who have excelled in the course material, attend class with students, and facilitate three sessions per week that focus on the most recent lecture material. SI leaders participate in a 2-day mandatory training at the beginning of the semester focused on the SI model, expectations for SI leaders, and building strategies for collaborative learning. To assist with collaborative learning, SI leaders incorporate technology in their sessions through developing web sites to provide additional resources for students and using Blackboard to communicate and post materials. In the spring 2009 semester, SI leaders will also use smart boards in mathematics and engineering SI sessions.

The Student Success Center’s tutoring program is certified through the College Reading and Learning Association and follows their training and structural guidelines. Tutoring focuses on upper level courses and foreign languages. The tutoring program provides small group tutoring for upper level courses in subject areas such as chemistry, economics, exercise science, mathematics, nursing, physics, and foreign languages. Tutors collaborate with faculty members to ensure that faculty know about tutor availability and are more likely to encourage their students to attend. Students view tutoring times and make appointments via online scheduling software. Tutors attend a mandatory training to provide them with information about tutoring guidelines, focusing on students’ strengths to build their confidence in approaching difficult course material, and empowering students to become independent learners.

Early Intervention Initiatives consist of three major programs: Creating Academic Responsibility, First-Year Call Center and Gamecock Connection all of which individually meet the needs of every first-year student via face to face interventions, phone conversations, or online academic networking. Each of the approximately 4800 first-year students is offered the opportunity to have individual questions answered, learn of important dates and upcoming events, and find the campus resource to best meet their needs.

Creating Academic Responsibility (CAR), created in fall 2005, is an early warning system designed to identify any undergraduate student (100-400 level) showing signs of academic disengagement. Through CAR, instructors are asked to reinforce the importance of academic responsibility by referring students with excessive absences, decreased participation, or lack of academic preparation to the program coordinator. Once these students are identified, a member of the CAR team conducts an early intervention to identify and fulfill any needs the student might have. Finally, in an effort to increase awareness CAR authors and disseminates the CAR Matters brochure to over 5000 instructors, professors, graduate students and staff campus wide. These efforts have successfully increased faculty expectations for academic responsibility while also providing a working knowledge of campus resources available to them.
The First-Year Call Center created in fall 2006, contacts all transfer and traditional first-year students twice a semester to discuss important dates, expectations, and overall satisfaction on campus. Approximately 5000 students are contacted each semester via cell phone, each call averaging eight to seventeen minutes, followed by a personalized email with additional requested resources. Undergraduate students serve as callers to allow for a welcoming conversation with a fellow peer.

Gamecock Connection, implemented in January 2008, is an online academic and social network designed to meet the needs of first-year students through articles, discussions, and interactive quizzes. Currently, over 4000 first-year students are registered and using the site as a consistent source of knowledge. With nearly 74% of first-year students registered, individually meeting the needs of students 24 hours a day, seven days a week is possible.

To address the needs of our out-of-state and transfer students, the Student Success Center offers mentoring opportunities. Mentors must be out-of-state or transfer students themselves to better serve as resources for students who are undergoing similar transitions. Following an application and interview process, mentors attend a training to discuss fostering relationships with their mentees and building rapport. To maintain communication with the mentors throughout the semester, staff members facilitate monthly mentor meetings and collect weekly assessments to document the mentees’ transition. Other services for these student populations include day trips to close-by cities, on-campus mixers to socialize with fellow out-of-state or transfer students, and seminars, such as “What’s the Big Deal about Sweet Tea?”, that allow students to experience some of the local culture.

The Student Success Center relies on strong partnerships with faculty in various academic departments and offices across the Division of Student Affairs and Department of Academic Support to gain student participation in our programs. The Student Success Center is also home to a satellite office for the Academic Centers for Excellence, which offers individual meetings with academic skills coaches and writing consultants.

Through implementing Supplemental Instruction, tutoring, the Creating Academic Responsibility Initiative, a First Year Call Center, Gamecock Connection, and mentor programs for transfer and out-of-state students, the University of South Carolina enhanced their focus on academic success and providing students with the necessary roadmaps for their success. Although each program makes significant contributions to students’ academic success and transition to the university on its own, it is the combination of these efforts and programs that fully impacts University of South Carolina students.
Data

Assessment is the foundation of the Student Success Center. Data gathered in May 2005 demonstrated that the differences between 6-year graduates and students not persisting to graduation, when matched by similar SAT scores and high school GPAs, were their first-year college GPAs and the number of credit hours earned during their first year. Students not persisting to graduation took fewer credit hours and had lower first-year GPAs than those who graduated in 6 years. This data indicated the importance of centralized, academic support resources beginning during a student’s first year. In addition, retention rates show that transfer students and out-of-state students are retained at lower rates than in-state students and those who are first time, full time students. This data further supports the Student Success Center mission to focus on guiding students to degree completion. With data supporting the creating of the Student Success Center, there is a clear need to provide data to support the individual programs and demonstrate how they impact student success. By collecting both qualitative and quantitative data, Student Success Center programs demonstrate success and constantly seek feedback from students using the services.

Desired learning outcomes for SI focus on students’ enhanced understanding of course material and use of effective study skills. Data starting with the fall 2005 semester support that students attending Supplemental Instruction (SI) sessions earn approximately half a letter grade higher than students not attending sessions. For example, SI participation for fall 2007 was 2,079 students out of the 4,798 students (approximately 43.3%) enrolled in SI courses. Students attending at least one SI session in fall 2007 (n=2079) earned an average course GPA of 2.87, compared to an average course GPA of 2.64 for students who did not attend SI sessions (n=2719). Students attending 2 or more SI sessions earned an average GPA of 2.97 (n=1298) demonstrates that students who attend SI throughout the semester receive the most benefit from the program. In addition to grade differences, Student Success Center staff track the number of visits throughout the semester to demonstrate that students are making SI sessions a significant part of their study time. In the spring 2007 semester we had 7,484 visits to SI sessions from 1,527 students. When we look specifically at individual courses, the attendance and grade differences further support the effectiveness of SI. For example, over 50% of 300 plus students enrolled in Biology 101 in the spring 2007 semester attended SI sessions and earned an average 2.76 GPA as compared to the 1.93 GPA earned by biology students not participating in SI sessions.

The number of student visits to SI sessions consistently grows each semester. Visits in fall 2007 totaled 9,281 as compared to the 8,118 visits in fall 2006. Already in the fall 2008 semester students have visited SI sessions 6,950 times through the end of October, indicating that the number of visits will outnumber the fall 2007 total which was 6,201 by the first of November. In addition to the attendance, the percentage of students earning below a C or withdrawing from courses in which SI is offered has decreased since SI began, indicating that SI sessions are in part contributing to students’ success in these
introductory courses. For example, Biology 101 began with a DFW rate (percentage of students withdrawing or earning below a C in the course) of 43.60% and had a 26.6% DFW rate in the fall 2007 semester. Philosophy 110 experienced a 43.80% DFW rate in spring 2006 and had a 19.30% DFW rate in the spring 2008 semester. This trend applies consistently to nearly every course in which SI is offered at USC.

To supplement the attendance and grade data, students attending SI sessions complete satisfaction surveys at the end of each semester. Out of approximately 200 respondents in spring 2008, 96% indicated that attending SI helped them gain a better understanding of the course content while 88% indicated that attending SI helped them develop effective study strategies. In addition when asked about SI, a student said, “I always understood the material better after attending SI.” Another responded, “I learned how to see what the question was asking and how to get the solution faster, easier, and smarter.” Ninety-eight percent of students also indicated they would recommend SI sessions to a friend.

The SSC tutoring program began in the spring of 2007. The program employed 17 tutors for 24 courses in the following subject areas: Accounting, Arabic, Biology, Chemistry, Chinese, Computer Science Computer Engineering, French, Math, Physics, Russian, and Spanish. By the end of the spring 2007 semester, the program had assisted 284 students. In the fall of 2007, some courses were removed to avoid duplication with Supplemental Instruction (SI) and new courses were selected with high DFW rates in order to best utilize resources in our office. Grade distribution data is examined each semester and tutoring opportunities are modified as appropriate. The numbers of students participating in tutoring has grown consistently every semester, to a total of 729 students fall semester 2008 as of November 1st. As this data demonstrates, student participation in the tutoring program continues to grow in large part due to our continuous assessment of courses in the greatest need of tutoring resources.

Since its inception, the Creating Academic Responsibility Initiative (CAR) boasts a 67% retention rate for its 790 students and an average of 4.81 referrals per instructor. By means of the First-Year Call Center conversations, the University of South Carolina has been able to discern 93% of students are satisfied with their overall experience; students who meet their advisors more than once are 62% more satisfied than those who only meet once; and 82% of students believed the University met or exceeded their expectations. Additionally, the First-Year Call Center uses the time between sessions to administer specialized research projects related to retention. For example, the First-Year Call Center contacted over 1000 undergraduate males to discuss perceptions and expectations of the University. Through these conversations, the First-Year Call Center determined that 21% of black men believe the campus to be segregated and less than welcoming while 87% believe it’s diverse and are comfortable or satisfied with the campus climate.

The transfer and out of state student mentoring program has been widely successful. Over 100 out of state students received a mentor and close to 100 transfer students received a mentor in spring 2008. One hundred and fifty students attended the out of state student seminar titled “What’s the Big Deal about Sweet Tea” in fall 2007-2008 and indicated that the information was extremely useful and that “it made me feel better about being so
far from home.” The twenty-five students attending the transfer student seminar during Welcome Week had similar feedback regarding the usefulness of the information and commented that the seminar was “very helpful and informed me of the many opportunities available on campus.” Another attendee commented that the seminar was “a great opportunity to meet new people.” Feedback indicated that these seminars were indeed meeting the desired outcomes by assisting students in their transition into the university community.

Programs improve each semester based on data collected and the marketed use of this data to demonstrate to administrators, faculty, staff, and students the benefits of participating in the Student Success Center programs.