Executive Summary

Not unlike other institutions, Northern Kentucky University is engaged in conversation about retention and graduation of students and how to improve student success. A major focus of the university strategic plan and one of two major foci for the division of student affairs is on improving the student experience, their success and ultimately retention. To that end, utilizing over 40 years of combined experience in retention, academic support services, student success and co-curricular programming in both academic and student affairs at several different types of colleges and universities, Vice President Davenport and Assistant Vice President Rhine have developed an original, innovative model that spans institutional boundaries called the C.I.R.C.L.E Model: Changing Institutional Retention Through Co-Curricular Learning Experiences.

The CIRCLE model integrates six elements including predictive analytics, institutional mapping, realigning of student support services and integration of a technological infrastructure, identification of learning constructs and co-curricular alignment of learning outcomes to retention programs. This realignment of student support services resulted in the centerpiece of the CIRCLE Model: University Connect and Persist (UCAP). UCAP increases efficiency and effectiveness of programs, improves productivity of services, streamlines processes, re-focuses programs and services, and leverages utilization of technology. UCAP matches programs and services to student needs and interests tailoring a roadmap for engagement and success before they encounter the challenges of the college transition. Proactively and intentionally creating the networks during and even prior to the first college year emphasizes the value of co-curricular involvement and sets the expectation for engagement. UCAP employs principles that promote student success in college including helping students to map out a path to success and proactively connecting students to co-curricular learning opportunities, recognizing that what happens outside the classroom influences learning inside the classroom. The research-based CIRCLE model translates research into practice while incorporating student learning outcomes, assessment and continuous improvement. The redesigned service delivery model improves the lives of personnel by enhancing intra- and inter-office communication and allowing immediate access to the information service providers need to perform their jobs most effectively. Students succeed and all personnel celebrate their role in that success.
Award Description

Addressing the Critical Issue of Retention

Tying the CIRCLE Model to the Institutional Mission

In October of 2008, the Division of Student Affairs began a four-year strategic planning/visioning process that spanned the academic year 2008-09. The university mission, institutional strategic priorities, the NKU Business Plan, the dashboard indicators and the Student Affairs self-study were the basis of the planning process and ensure alignment of Student Affairs’ work to the institutional mission. In Spring 2009, Student Affairs facilitated campus-wide and external focus groups to obtain input from all stakeholders and incorporate that feedback into the final plan. The process resulted in the development of the Student Affairs mission, broad goals and strategic priorities as well as student learning outcomes directly related to each strategic priority for the division. Two foci emerged under which align nine strategic initiatives. These foci for the Division of Student Affairs are retention and institutional effectiveness.

Simultaneously, in response to enrollment growth, changing student needs, continued innovations in technology, financial constraints, and increased accountability for improved retention rates and degree completion, Northern Kentucky University was compelled to review delivery of retention services to students. Student Affairs was charged with developing a campus-wide, comprehensive retention model that includes a boundary-spanning retention strategy, and develops learning in engagement, social development, leadership, cultural, personal and professional competencies as students transition in, through and out of the university.

An Original Idea Focused on Collaboration and Systemic impact

Dr. Zebulun Davenport and Dr. Lisa Rhine created an original, forward-thinking, comprehensive approach to organizational change that redesigns the structure and functioning of a comprehensive array of student success programs and services in academic and student affairs called the C.I.R.C.L.E. (Changing Institutional Retention through Co-Curricular Learning Experiences) Model. This systemic review and rethinking of campus-wide co-curricular service and program delivery sought to utilize the findings from more than three decades of student retention research, capitalize on existing best practice programs, facilitate the next logical step for achieving greater student impact, align assessment, learning outcomes and retention and engage service providers in academic and student affairs in a systemic, collegial process of institution-wide service delivery and assessment. While this initiative is systemic and impacts all departments in Student Affairs and co-curricular services in Academic Affairs, it might best be included in either the first year or assessment NASPA category. Key components of the CIRCLE Model are an Institutional Scan, Predictive Modeling, University Connect and Persist Retention Strategy, RetentionPro Technological Infrastructure, Learning Domains Identification and Mapping of Learning Outcomes to Co-curricular Programs and Services.

An Eye Toward Efficiency, Effectiveness and Productivity
Re-conceptulization of student success programming resulted in a systemic approach called University Connect and Persist (UCAP) which is a retention strategy that increases efficiency and effectiveness, improves productivity of services, streamlines processes, and re-focuses programs and services. Not unlike other universities, NKU’s student success programs are responsive initiatives that are distributed across campus, span divisional lines, are loosely-coupled and preserve an identity and a degree of separateness. This familiar model worked reasonably well in an earlier day, in a less complex institution. However, our rapidly expanding, emerging metropolitan university now welcomes a different generation of students. The existing model no longer meets students’ changing needs and expectations for comprehensive support. A serious rethinking and reconfiguration of university resources, functionality, and expected results was necessary to enhance organizational efficiency, flexibility, and response to students from a systemic perspective. Davis, Haltiwanger and Schu (1996) note that reconfiguring for efficiency and productivity “takes a view of the academy that stresses the well-being and effectiveness of the institution as a whole rather than of single parts in isolation.” Redesigned practices and new technologies provide the infrastructure, foundation and the added efficiencies necessary to improve our service delivery and redirect our focus to retention and degree completion.

University Connect and Persist (UCAP) is designed to improve efficiency, effectiveness and productivity while enhancing student engagement and the student experience. It is anticipated that a byproduct of this systemic change will be improved semester-to-semester retention rates and ultimately significant gains in degree completion.

The CIRCLE Model takes advantage of technology that increases efficiency by enhancing intra- and inter-office communication, and allowing immediate access to the information service providers need to perform their jobs most effectively. EMAS RetentionPro was selected to improve connectivity and services by offering better communication, better tracking and reporting, and shorter response times between service providers. Recognizing productivity as a function of both quality and efficiency, the technological infrastructure for UCAP suggests that we will realize savings in costs and labor and improvement in service to the students and university offices that rely on this data and communication to perform their functions. EMAS RetentionPro’s technological advances allowed NKU to critically examine communication and work flows and processes. Since many work processes were designed using paper as the primary medium, the electronic processes resulted in a radical redesign of how services are delivered and communication occurs. According to Fink (1997) the importance of the physical location of campuses and the facilities that comprise them is decreasing. Advances in computer-based technologies and the implementation of EMAS RetentionPro has allowed NKU the opportunity to co-locate retention services virtually rather than physically, resulting in cost savings and improved efficiency. This technological solution coupled with UCAP forms a creative way to deliver a full range of services proactively to students in ways that enhance their effectiveness and do not increase marginal costs.

Assessment Data

Innovative Integration of Assessment and Learning Outcomes

The model practically applies twenty years of retention research and integrates the use of predictive modeling, learning outcomes and programmatic alignment of those outcomes. Participants in the pilot year 2009-10 included two student groups: 1) SOAR Students: honor student STEM majors that fall in to low-income, first-generation categories, and 2) Academy Students: Conditionally enrolled students with at least two college deficiencies in reading, writing or mathematics required to participate in a summer bridge program.

Learning Domains, Outcomes and Co-Curricular Alignment

The CIRCLE Model project started by reviewing retention research and identifying what it is that schools that outperform their peers in student retention do. From that review, nine key actions were identified and institutional mapping completed articulating where these actions were occurring on campus and who was responsible for their outcome. Then, through a facilitated process of discernment, learning domains were identified that describe the learning that the institution intended students to achieve when engaging in those programs and services grouped in the nine key action areas. Eight learning domains or categories of learning outcomes that support student success and retention were identified. These eight co-curricular learning domains include engagement, social responsibility and cultural awareness, leadership development, critical thinking, social integration, academic support, self-discovery and self-management and life skills. Next, thirty-nine learning outcomes were created to support the eight learning domains. The next step was to align our co-curricular programs and services with those eight co-curricular learning domains. Through a year-long effort, the institution conducted a co-curricular mapping process which aligned our key programs and services with the eight learning domains. In this way, one can easily identify which programs are intended to achieve the retention and student success goals identified and begin to measure their success in doing so.

Predictive Modeling

Using historical student profile data and integrating non-cognitive variables, the CIRCLE Model incorporates the use of predictive modeling for retention. Carefully constructed models are used to predict individual student behavior and to match students with the appropriate intervention based on the established risk factors. The model allows selection of the most significant factors that impact retention, tailored to the institution’s characteristics. Additionally, anticipated retention rates are generated for identified student populations and measurement of anticipated retention rate versus actual retention rates are measured. It is by improving on the actual retention rate in comparison to the anticipated rate, group by group, that an institution may impact its overall institutional retention and, ultimately, graduation rate.

Impact on Student Learning, Retention and Success

An assessment approach was designed for the center piece of the CIRCLE Model: University Connect and Persist (UCAP). The 2009-2010 UCAP Assessment Strategy included three key
components: Student reactions and feedback, learning and development, and enrollment and academic outcomes. Student reactions and feedback were gathered via online survey and collected students perceptions and evaluations of their UCAP experience. Learning and development was captured utilizing direct measures that UCAP is designed to impact. Finally, grade point averages of UCAP participants were recorded and compared to others similar to them in profile. Gathered baseline levels for

Student reactions and feedback were captured through an online survey that was distributed twice to each student: once in the Fall 2009 semester and then again, in the Spring 2010 semester. Six aspects of the UCAP experience were identified including the value of the relationship with their network Captain, value of the relationship with their support network, engagement in goal setting, level of learning about resources, success in accessing campus resources, and assistance with problem solving. Students were asked to rate from 1 to 5 each aspect of the experience via online survey. When asked to what extent they found each aspect of the experience helpful, Students rated all aspects helpful with an average rating of 4.1 on a 5 point scale. To measure general satisfaction, students were asked if they would participate in UCAP again and if they would recommend UCAP to a friend. Eighty-five (85%) indicated they would participate in UCAP again and ninety-five percent (95%) would recommend it to a friend. In Fall 2009, The identical survey administered in the Spring 2010 revealed that students rated all UCAP aspects even more favorably than in the fall with an average rating of 4.6 on a 5 point scale. One-hundred percent (100%) rated learning about resources the strongest aspect of the experience. Fifty-seven percent (57%) reported that UCAP had a significant impact on their decision to return to the institution in Fall 2010 and twenty-nine percent (29%) said they would have ultimately left NKU without the UCAP experience.

Learning and development was captured using scales to measure attachment, perceived cohesion and mattering, all major goals of UCAP. The measure of attachment determines the extent to which a student identifies with NKU and its members. Some research on attachment suggests that students decrease in University attachment after the start of their first-year called the Orientation Effect, as New Student Orientation and the excitement of beginning college elevates students’ baseline levels. Students that become unattached are at risk for leaving. Results indicated that students’ attachment increased sizeably during the fall but returned to baseline levels by the end of the Spring. It is a positive sign that students were moderately higher in attachment at the end of the year than at the beginning (the Orientation Effect). Overall, students’ attachment scores were high throughout the year (mean score 3.5 on a 5 point scale).

The measure of perceived cohesion reports a sense of belonging to and positive affect (feelings of morale) about the University. Previous research on perceived cohesion indicates that students commonly see decreases in perceived cohesion after the start of their first year. Because perceived cohesion scores have a largely affective component, students’ excitement about a university typically drops after the initial enrollment phase. This is one part of the phenomenon commonly referred to as the “Sophomore Slump.” While students decreased in their perceived cohesion, these drops mirrored those of other students. The Orientation Effect along with the Sophomore Slump tell us that it is difficult to keep students as excited about attending the university as they were when they first came to college.
The measure of mattering indicates one’s perception of attention from others (Awareness), feelings of others’ care (Importance), perception that one’s value to others is based on his/her accomplishments (Ego-Extension), and perception that others are dependent on one’s self (Reliance). Mattering emerged as a construct in counseling literature, and has not had a great deal of exploration in educational arenas. As a measure of social support, research has shown that mattering should be related to retention. As with perceived cohesion and attachment, initial levels of mattering may be significantly impacted by the Orientation Effect. Mattering scores increased in the Spring for all UCAP students.

Academic measures included end of semester grade point average. For SOAR students, those enrolled in UCAP received a higher GPA than those who were not (d=1.66). For Academy students, GPA differences were small (d=.12).

Plans for the 2010-2011 year include

• Collaborating with New Student Orientation and First-Year Programs in hopes of increasing students’ perceived cohesion throughout the year.

• 2010-2011 students will be assessed in two other key outcomes of UCAP: adjustment to college and goal-setting. Additionally, mattering items will be targeted more toward the academic experience.

• More effective comparison groups are needed in order to understand the development of UCAP students. By gathering data on nearly the entire incoming 2010 class, we will be able to target more appropriate comparison groups. In addition, we must be more ardent in our pursuit of student assessment data. Limited samples prohibit our ability to make inferences about student populations at this point.

Sustainable and Replicable

The pilot expanded to include additional student groups for 2010-11. Among other accolades, the centerpiece of the CIRCLE model, University Connect and Persist (UCAP), was the recipient of the 2009 Innovative Project Award from the Kentucky Association of Developmental Education. The Model was nominated for the SACSA Melvene Draheim Hardee Award that will be named in early November 2010.

The CIRCLE model has been selected for presentation at international, national and regional conferences including those listed below. Many institutions have expressed high levels of interest in learning more about the model and the possibility of replicating it or some of its components at their institutions.

• The Educational Policy Institute’s Retention 2010: An International Conference on Student Retention in Chicago, IL,

• Keynote address at the EMAS Pro National Conference 2010: Engagement Through Conversation in San Diego, CA,
• The 10th Annual Texas A&M University Assessment Conference 2010 in College Station, Texas, NASPA & International Center for Student Success and Institutional Accountability’s International Assessment and Retention Conference 2009 in New Orleans, LA.

• The Retention 360 Conference, Greater Cincinnati Consortium of Colleges and Universities in Cincinnati, OH, to be held November 10, 2010.

• Pre-conference full-day workshop at the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACROA) Annual Conference 2011 in Seattle, WA.

