

Fitchburg State University
Strategic Planning White Paper
Student Services Working Group
November 15, 2014

Process:

The Student Services Work Group (SSWP) is comprised of Dr. Christine Shane, Chair, Drs. Rala Diakite; Megan Krell; Cheryl Goldman; Henry Parkinson, III; Ms. Karen Valeri; and Mr. Nate Gregoire

The Charge of the Student Support Word Group is a follows:

“This Working Group of the SPC is responsible for addressing the challenges and opportunities related to Fitchburg State University’s current and future patterns, priorities, and infrastructure for providing student services. Moreover this work group is charged with tackling the questions that emanate from the changing demographics of students, the increased deployment of technology in the delivery of courses for some distance education students, and the need to address support of adults returning to campus to start and/or complete a degree.”

In order to gather as much information as possible, and to insure full representation of all Student Development and Academic Life administrators, staff and students, the SSWP held large group meetings and conducted focus groups from June to October, 2014. The large group meetings allowed participants to provide an overview of the roles and responsibilities of specific offices and to offer their thoughts and suggestions regarding the most significant student issues. Focus groups offered participants the opportunity to discuss specific issues and to generate recommendations. The areas within Student and Academic Life participated in the meetings and focus groups. Students attended and provided valuable information. However other areas such as athletics, one card, registrar and financial aid, were not represented. All meetings were opened to the entire university community.

STUDENT SERVICES WORKING GROUP MEETING SCHEDULE

Thurs	6/26/2014	10:30am-noon
Thurs	7/17/2014	1:00-2:30pm
Tues	8/12/2014	11:00am-12:30pm
Mon	9/8/2014	3:30-5:00pm
Mon	9/22/2014	3:30-5:00pm
Mon	10/6/2014	3:30-5:00pm
Mon	10/20/2014	3:30-5:00pm
Mon	10/27/2014	3:30-5:00pm
Mon	11/3/2014	3:30-5:00pm
Mon	11/10/2014	3:30-5:00pm

STUDENT SERVICES FOCUS GROUP MEETING SCHEDULE

Wed	7/30/2014	11:00am-1:30pm (Diversity and Underserved Populations)
Thurs	7/31/2014	11:00am-1:30pm (Changing Needs of the Modern Student)
Wed	8/20/2014	1:00-3:30pm (Administration Organization/Coordination of Student Services)
Thurs	8/21/2014	11:00am-1:30pm (Identification/Compliance with Best Practices)

Student Support Work Group Priority: Student Retention and Success

The purpose of Student Development and Academic Life is to provide students with the tools to remain in the university and to be successful. Therefore, the first priority of the Student Support work group is student retention (perseverance) and achievement. That is, removing barriers and adding supports for a successful graduation. The student body at Fitchburg State University is changing. Half of our students are female, Caucasian, and Christian. They are typically from blue collar families and often are first generation college students. The other fifty-percent are diverse. Most are “commuter” students who live off campus. They are often nontraditional in that they have families and may work full time. Some of our students are veterans or international. Our student body also includes representatives from many ethnic and minority groups.

Currently, 53% of Fitchburg State University’s freshmen and sophomore students do not graduate. Our six year graduation rate is also approximately 50%. Although this percentage aligns closely with our sister state universities, it is not acceptable. Students who do not complete their undergraduate degree requirements leave the university without diploma and are often in debt. The lack of matriculation for minority students is of greater concern. Forty eight percent of Latino and nontraditional students do not graduate within six years of admission.

There is also recognition of the changing needs of modern students. Our student population is changing in terms of demographics and required supports. Current students, comprised mainly of the “Millennial Generation”, require attention, technology and resources. They also require more academic support, advising, and physical accommodation. Student Support Services that include housing, advising, counseling, health services, tutoring and financial aid, are struggling to meet current student need.

The needs of this cohort are unlike those of others. There are a greater number of students who require mental health counseling, disability and health services. Despite a low incidence rate, student retention is challenged by drug and alcohol abuse and campus violence. The

number of students needing academic and special supports will continue to increase. For example, national studies indicate that one in every one hundred births is on the Autism Spectrum.

Recommendation # 1. Implement Best Practices for Student Success to support an increase in the rate of student retention and graduation.

According to the Noel-Levitz report on Undergraduate Trends in Enrollment Management (2013), “Academic support programs, honors programs, and first year students programs emerged as the top ranked most effective strategies and tactics across higher education for improving student retention and college completion rates.” (p.1) Student Advising is critically important to student success. The wide variety of course offerings and stringent graduation requirements may contribute to low graduation rates. Currently, both faculty and staff provide academic advising. Faculty has little time to offer graduate or professional career advice to their students. National data indicate that “intrusive” or more “directed” academic advising may improve student success. The mission of this pro-active “assertive” advisory relationship model is to support students to increase their academic achievement and persist through sophomore year. This advisory model ensures that each student’s progress is adequately assessed and that students identify areas of concern and advisors assist students to develop an action plan for addressing these concerns. The purpose is to help students utilize a range of academic and student services that can support them to attain their goals. Professional academic advisors identify “at risk” students prior to the beginning of each semester through sophomore year and support students to implement strategies that can assist them to complete their degree requirements.

- Long term Goal: Provide First Year Experience Programs for incoming students.
- Midterm Goal: Create living and learning communities in residence halls.
- Short term Goal: Identify “at risk” students prior to the beginning of the academic year and provide professional Academic Success Advisors for all freshman students. Faculty advising by major begins sophomore year.

Recommendation #2: Examine the Administration /Organization and Resource Allocations of Student and Academic Life:

The current organizational model for Student and Academic Life is unique in that the model combines the traditional Academic Affairs and Student Affairs models into one “**Student & Academic Life**” division that includes the following 17 programs. **Student Support** includes: Counseling Services, Career Services, Disability Services, Expanding Horizons, Health Services, Student Conduct, Mediation & Education; **Student Life** includes: Recreation Services, Office of Student Development, Residence Life, Student Clubs & Organizations, Volunteer Center, Commuter Services, Greek Life, Center for Diversity & Inclusion, Fitchburg Anti-Violence & Education; **Academic Support** includes: Tutoring & Placement Test Services, Academic Advising and Upward Bound - a high school program funded through a Federal grant.

Three divisions; Student Support, Academic Support and Student Life are administered by 3 Assistant Deans and 1 Associate Dean each with their own staff and budgets. The Deans report to the Dean of Academic and Student Life. The number of personnel in many of the services is low. For example, both Career Services and the Center for Diversity and Inclusiveness have 1 FTE. In comparison, the Athletics Department (team sports) reports directly to the President with a budget (\$967,000) that greatly exceeds that of the Recreation Center (\$242,000) which serves a majority of students and reports to the Dean of Student and Academic life.

- Long Term Goal: Reorganize Student Development and Academic Life to enhance organizational efficiencies and the utilization of current resources and to obtain sufficient fiscal resources to support increased student retention needs.
- Short Term Goal: to examine and explore the current model of Student and Academic Life and to evaluate the utilization of resources and the function of each office. The purpose is to ascertain how student services are currently delivered, decrease redundancies and to better orchestrate the delivery of services.

Recommendation #3: Significantly increase the services that support a diverse student population through increased collaboration between faculty and Student Support Services.

Supporting a diverse student population includes providing a welcoming and supportive learning atmosphere by creating a culture that respects and embraces differences. Fitchburg State University, unlike many of our sister institutions, does not provide specialized supports for specific student populations, such as English Language Learners (ELL) and veterans. The support services we do have are over-extended, serving higher numbers of students with the no increase to staff. For example, Counseling Services will no longer be able to offer unlimited sessions to students requiring mental health treatment. With long wait lists for off-campus support services, students may be required to wait an extended period of time before they receive assistance.

- Long term goal: Work in concert with other campus offices (i.e. Admissions and Disability Services) to identify student needs upon admission and evaluate the areas in which we need to reallocate resources to support diverse students on campus.
- Mid-term goal: Provide specific training for faculty and staff regarding diversity, including Autism Spectrum Disorders, Universal Design for Instruction, English Language Learners, cultural awareness, and languages (e.g. Spanish).
- Short term goal: Better address the specific needs of students with disabilities, including students with mental health issues in the classroom and on campus. Develop a resource for faculty referral (hard copy handbook) detailing available Student Support Services.

Recommendation #4: Increase collaboration between faculty and Student Support Services to expand opportunities for student learning and engagement.

All members of the Fitchburg State University must possess commitment to student support services and success strategies community wide. More faculty involvement and awareness of the issues of students who need accommodations, counseling and academic support is required. One such venue to promote collaboration between faculty and student support

services is through high impact learning experiences. Examples of these experiences include: first-year seminars, learning communities, service learning projects, work with faculty on research projects, internship, cooperative education, student teaching or clinical placements, study abroad, and culminating education experiences, such as capstone or portfolio (Kuh, 2008). High impact learning experiences that contribute to student career development are increasingly important for job placement of students post-graduation (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2008). Further, providing students with opportunities for learning and engagement outside of the classroom has shown to contribute to student retention and engagement (Kuh, 2008). In the 2007 NSSE report, George Kuh recommends that students participate in at least two high impact learning experiences over the course of their undergraduate experience, specifically one during the first year and one in the context of their major. Faculty buy-in is needed to achieve this goal.

- Long term goal: Build an ongoing rapport and dialogue between all constituents of the Fitchburg State University community regarding student learning and engagement
- Mid-term goal: Increase the percentage of students participating in high impact learning experiences
- Short term goal: Engage faculty and staff (buy-in) to identify academic opportunities for students beyond the classroom, including internships and research.