Task Force on New Student and Family Programs, Student Success and Retention, and Academic Advising

Executive Summary of Final Report

RADFORD UNIVERSITY
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Background

In January 2019, a Task Force on New Student and Family Programs, Student Success and Retention, and Academic Advising was convened. The Task Force was charged with examining the existing areas of New Student and Family Programs, Student Success and Retention, and Academic Advising, along with best practices from similar schools with high retention rates, and developing a set of recommendations for these three areas that are critical to student retention.

Membership

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Dr. Farrell Doss, Professor, Department of Design
Dr. Dan Farhat, Associate Professor, Department of Economics
Dr. Jake Fox, Professor, Department of Anthropological Sciences, and Faculty Senate President
Dr. Nicole Hendrix, Professor, Department of Criminal Justice, and Interim Director of Core Curriculum
Ms. Susan Hudson, Assistant Director, Student Success and Retention
Ms. Wendy Lowery, Vice President, University Advancement
Ms. Angie Mitchell, Associate Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Students
Ms. Melissa Neal, Assistant Registrar
Ms. Donna Oliver, Director of Advising, College of Visual and Performing Arts
Mr. Ed Oakes, Associate Vice President, Information Technology
Dr. Jamie Penven, Assistant Vice President, Student Success and Retention
Ms. Amber Smith, Senior Assistant Director, New Student and Family Programs
Dr. Tammy Wallace, Dean, College of Education and Human Development
Overview

The Task Force on New Student and Family Programs, Student Success and Retention, and Academic Advising met weekly during the Spring 2019 term, as well as several times throughout Summer 2019 to discuss how potential changes to these areas could enhance student success and retention. The Task Force reviewed retention statistics, looked at the strategies employed by comparable and aspirant universities, and brainstormed tactics for reaching a targeted retention rate of 85%. Responding to student retention requires challenging conversations and the consideration of hard questions. The final report in its entirety reflects the Task Force’s attempt to engage in these conversations and address these questions. This executive summary provides a broad overview of the Task Force’s final recommendations.

Values

• Aspire: Find your path and take it to excellence. Personal discovery is supported by personalized services.
• Respond: Highlanders don’t let things happen, they make things happen. Progress is monitored, tools are provided, and challenges are overcome.
• Belong: Our Highlander identity is Responsive. Resilient. Real. All students, faculty, and staff connect to, and are united by, the Highlander spirit and come together to form a community where each individual is valued.

Activities

• Reviewed Radford University retention trends provided by the Office of Institutional Research;
• Reviewed the current practices of Academic Advising, New Student and Family Programs, and the Office of Student Success and Retention;
• Reviewed the Retention Summit Final Report;
• Compiled a list of comparable and aspirant universities using lists provided by the National Center for Education Statistics with supplements from the Office of Institutional Research;
• Evaluated universities in terms of first-year practices, retention-improving strategies, notable activities and programs, common themes and practices, and innovations relevant to Radford University;
• Engaged in brainstorming activities; and
• Discussed the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of different strategies, along with their potential impacts on retention.
Summary of Recommendations

1. Develop a strong Highlander culture. Students should be able to identify what it means to be a Highlander and to be part of the Highlander family. Shared experiences, common frameworks of thinking, rituals, and symbolic gestures forge a sense of identity and belonging. Community members who are bonded to Radford University are more likely to spread Highlander culture to others, through which high-impact engagement occurs. Encouraging engagement with the Highlander community can deepen a sense of pride and belonging in the Highlander brand.

2. Establish an intentional and holistic first-year experience. Self-discovery, needs assessment, and personal connection to the Highlander identity should be key themes in this experience. Partners from across the University—with specific emphasis on Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, and Enrollment Management—should be included in the design and implementation of this experience.

3. Create a centralized first-year advising experience based on a case management model. Striving to obtain a clearer, consistent, and easy-to-navigate experience while reflecting the unique needs of colleges and disciplines. A case management model of advising should be considered to address the unique needs and interests of students.

4. Leverage data and analytics to provide enhanced student success monitoring, warnings, and alerts; and also to drive personalization of student support where needed. We should continue to enhance our ability to use analytics to identify and predict the factors contributing to student success and retention.

5. Provide professional development for faculty and staff by developing a series of training programs to better engage faculty and staff in the first-year experience and establish a better understanding of needs and challenges of freshmen and first-generation students.
Recommendation 1: Belonging and the Highlander Community

Developing a sense of belonging in students is not possible without a strong sense of community. Belonging facilitates effective engagement, which supports retention. Faculty and staff play a key role in establishing a sense of belonging amongst first-year students and developing engagement opportunities that capitalize on that belonging.

Intentional programs and activities targeted at specific populations—including students, faculty and staff, and community members—are essential to building a sense of community, identity, and spirit. These could include:

- Identify ways to connect all individuals and units at Radford University to the Highlander culture;
- Enhancements to employee and faculty orientations to acculturate new faculty and staff members to the Highlander brand; and
- Ongoing efforts should reflect the Highlander identity of Responsive. Resilient. Real.

Recommendation 2: The First-Year Experience

Many campus units already support first-year students. These efforts should be coordinated into an intentional and comprehensive first-year experience that focuses on student connection, personalization, and self-discovery to foster bonding to Radford University and to motivate success. This should include partners from across the University with specific emphasis on Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, and Enrollment Management. Additional programs and activities for students that foster a sense of connectedness between students and the Highlander identity are necessary.

New and enhanced programs should have the following characteristics:

- Convey a personal sense of empowerment and a can-do attitude;
- Allow students to interact with each other, both face-to-face and digitally;
- Are open to the general student body (non-exclusive);
- Are actively engaging;
- Enable students to be valuable in the community and show how students can make a difference;
- Increase student ownership in the Highlander identity; and
- Are recordable (for posting on social media, RUInvolved, ePortfolios, etc.).
**Recommendation 3: First-Year Student Advising**

Radford University’s current advising model uses college-based advising centers, along with faculty advisors in some departments. Each advising center has skilled professional advisors with expertise in specific curriculum, policies, and student culture for their college. In some areas, students are assigned a faculty advisor based on their major, while in other areas, first-year students rely on the advising center. Several colleges and departments with specific credentialing and accreditation requirements rely on their advisors’ knowledge to ensure that students meet these requirements. Advisors are considered the “go to” personnel regarding all of these areas.

First-year students, especially first-generation students, have a number of support needs ranging from challenges with the transition to college and being away from home to navigating the process and procedures around academic requirements. With the introduction of the new REAL general education model, students will select and identify majors and minors that may span multiple colleges. Moving to a centralized model for first-year advising would provide students an opportunity to learn more about the REAL model and the multiple flexible paths they have for developing their academic plans of study. Students will also develop a personal relationship with a specific staff member who can assist in their transitioning to college. Faculty serve an important role in mentoring and guiding students. Departmental faculty will continue to provide guidance on discipline-related needs without a detailed understanding of all University processes and procedures.

**Recommendation 4: Monitoring with Data and Analytics**

A wealth of data is available to monitor student success and identify students needing additional support. Data collection that maps student interests, activities, and opinions may provide additional insight into their decision making. This data may shed light on why students choose to leave Radford and thereby guide developing effective strategies to change this pattern. To ensure that intervention initiatives are successful, the administration should offer guidelines, monitoring, and improvement mechanisms based on gathered data. Monitoring student participation (e.g., through RUInvolved) can help to ensure students are participating in their college experience while partially predicting whether students are sufficiently engaged to retain.

**Recommendation 5: Professional Development of Faculty and Staff**

Faculty and staff are instrumental in helping students transition to campus life. Through their engagement with students, faculty both help students find the knowledge to reach their goals and also provide the key academic experience that students have with higher education. Staff also regularly interact with students and help them meet their needs and goals. Everyone at all levels, from upper administration to facilities, can help support success.

To ensure that faculty and staff are mindful of student needs as they begin their college experience, additional training focused on the special needs of freshmen and first-generation students would be beneficial.