RETENTION SUMMIT
2019 FINAL REPORT

RADFORD UNIVERSITY
About the Retention Summit

Nearly 300 members of the Radford University family participated in the inaugural Retention Summit on January 17, 2019 by attending the opening session and related remarks, as well as the keynote address by Timothy P. Culver, Ph.D., from Ruffalo Noel Levitz, which were open to the entire campus community.

The event was held in the Davis College of Business and Economics, where students, faculty, staff and administrators gathered to thoughtfully and intentionally discuss retention data and related trends and identify areas of opportunity related to retention on Radford’s campus by brainstorming solutions and offering recommendations.

The diverse mix of 125 participants was selected by various institutional administrators and shared governance leaders to attend the day-long Summit, which was organized to support retention goals as outlined in the Fall 2017 Student Success and Retention Action Plan and the 2018-2023 Strategic Plan, *Embracing the Tradition and Envisioning the Future.*

Following the morning presentations, participants were divided into smaller groups for two-hour breakout sessions.

During that time, each group was asked to develop a presentation based on a certain topic, including: challenges related to first-generation, first-year and second-year students; early indicators that might demonstrate a student is struggling personally and academically; institutional processes and programs that have become barriers to student success; and collaboration among the Radford family to improve students’ academic and social connections to the campus and the community.

The day-long participants reconvened in the afternoon, and a representative from each group presented their findings and offered specific recommendations.

Observations about the current state of retention and recommendations about the future state of retention are outlined in this final report.

“I say that we can do better, and we must do better. And, with your help and with the people that we have in this room, I am confident that we will do better. Retention is one of the most critical issues facing our University today.”

— President Brian O. Hemphill, Ph.D.
Observations: The Current State of Retention at Radford University

Retention Summit attendees were asked to provide their observations and feedback regarding a number of areas, including: specific student groups, such as first-generation, first-year and sophomore; and other factors impacting student success and retention generally and at Radford University specifically.

Overcoming Challenges for First-Generation and First-Year Students

For first-generation students and their families, it is often difficult to navigate the interworkings of the academy from application to admission and beyond. The culture and vocabulary of postsecondary education are vastly different than that of secondary education. The transition to college is overwhelming for many first-generation and first-year students. Once enrolled in classes, these students experience a variety of competing demands, such as financial, familial, personal, health, etc. All of these demands compete with their focus on their studies and engagement in and out of the classroom.

Academically, students want to be challenged. Students must see the value and relevance of the curriculum. Challenge and relevance need to remain at the forefront of all student outreach and scholarly work. Students need to feel connected. Therefore, students must engage widely with the campus and in the community. As such, faculty and staff must connect students to our University and the New River Valley early and often. There must be continued visibility of administrators, faculty and other forms of support for students. Radford University must meet students whereby they are truly understanding, acknowledging and celebrating their differences.

Overcoming Challenges for Sophomore Students

There is not an intentional effort to engage sophomore students. As such, this is a student population that experiences less engagement and interaction with the institution and its constituents. These students often need assistance in order to find their passion and connect with their majors. Their networks are continuously changing in that they lose some peers, while gaining others. They need to engage with partners for success, such as faculty and staff. At Radford University, these partners are critical to encouraging and facilitating success.

“To be successful in our retention efforts, we cannot work in silos. We must continue our collaborations and partnerships and continue to think broadly to expand collaborative opportunities. Our interactions with students are important. A single interaction can change a student’s trajectory.”

— Vice President for Student Affairs
Susan P. Trageser, Ed.D.

Addressing Early Indicators of Struggling Students

A lack of involvement and engagement can be a sign of family issues and/or financial insecurities. Issues with class attendance and midterm grades can be a sign of homesickness or an overall lack of connection to the campus and the community. Students may struggle due to a lack of clear expectations from faculty and staff. Students may also struggle due to their own limited knowledge of expectations and requirements for success — both big and small. Certain class behaviors, such as not attending class, arriving to class late, not doing homework, not participating in class discussions or group assignments and not having books, are clear — and often early — signs of trouble for students. At Radford University, like many other institutions, these behaviors are even more troubling if they are reoccurring in a single course or across multiple courses.
Removing Barriers of Processes, Policies and Procedures

There are a number of processes, policies and procedures that impede student engagement and related success. Faculty and staff are known to work collaboratively with students to assist them in navigating the required tasks of persisting through their academic careers. At Radford University, retention is everyone’s business, and individuals from across the campus make a daily effort to enable and encourage student success.

Collaborating to Improve Students’ Academic and Social Connection

Faculty and staff are known for building bridges instead of barriers in order to assist and engage with students. Students must experience an overlap in their academic and social resilience in order to lay the groundwork for current and future success. In recent years at Radford University, student engagement and success have been enhanced due to affinity- and major-based living-learning communities.

“Radford University has a rich heritage of providing world-class academic programs. As we continue to expand programs and embrace a diverse student population, we have to evolve our approach to how we serve at every touchpoint. We must create a service-oriented culture where students, faculty and staff are empathetic and helpful.”

— Executive Director of the Center for Career and Talent Development Angela Joyner, Ph.D.

“Faculty engagement with students in and out of the classroom is the foundation of what we do well at Radford University. In my experience, students who connect with faculty on research and scholarship projects are more likely to find their passion and build the skills needed to make it a reality. From a faculty perspective, student engagement and achievement is the currency of my career. Every young mind that I turn on is a point of pride because I have helped them overcome barriers and become successful scholars and citizens.”

— Associate Professor of Geospatial Science Stockton Maxwell, Ph.D.
“It is important for Radford University to follow evidence-based assessment practices to identify the current retention strategies that have been shown to be most successful. Once identified, these best strategies can then be implemented utilizing a broad-based approach that will benefit all student populations. The Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Quality Improvement looks forward to being a critical partner in this important work.”

— Director of the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Quality Improvement Sandra Baker, Ph.D.

“The Retention Summit is a statement to current students that Radford University is making efforts to improve their experience. I felt honored as a student to have a seat at the table and share my ideas.”

— John Register ‘19

“In partnership with Enrollment Management, Student Affairs and University Advancement, Radford University has made great strides during the 2018-2019 academic year toward parent and family engagement. Communication with our parents and families has been a priority and will continue to be a priority moving forward. The Retention Summit is a great reminder that, in order for our students to be successful, we must engage with them on-campus, off-campus and at home. This continues to be a critical part of fulfilling the University’s mission on this campus and serving our students.”

— Vice President for University Advancement Wendy Lowery
Recommendations: The Future State of Retention at Radford University

From the inaugural Retention Summit, four overarching themes containing a multitude of recommendations emerged. The themes are: expanding the first-year experience; creating the sophomore experience; embracing case management through the advising experience; and capturing the student timeline.

Expanding the First-Year Experience

Radford University should expand the first-year experience to expose students to the breadth and quality of academic programming, including general education. The introduction of bridge programs and/or courses will assist in easing the transition of first-generation and first-year students. UNIV 100 should become mandatory for all freshman students in an effort to ease their transition to campus life and provide support for their success in the first year and beyond. There should be an email distribution list and a series of email announcements specifically geared toward the adjustments of first-year students and in alignment with UNIV 100 assignments and experiences. The success of UNIV 100 is dependent upon faculty instructors or peer instructors and their commitment to and engagement with their students.

Creating the Sophomore Experience

Radford University should create a comprehensive sophomore experience that includes both academic and personal connections. This experience should involve increasing interaction with major-specific faculty and maintaining communication during breaks and over the summer. This experience should also address the importance and value of prerequisites and 200-level courses. This experience should provide seamless academic advising experiences and academic and career pathways, with a deep dive into academics, internships and other engaging, real-world and valuable experiences. A UNIV 200 course approach is recommended as a customized major-focused introductory experience in the sophomore year. The sophomore year is also the ideal time to establish academic discipline groups and expand peer education initiatives.

“It was wonderful to hear faculty, staff and students from all areas of campus have an open conversation about how we can improve our efforts to work together in supporting our students in ways that would increase retention and persistence. The day was energizing, and I am excited about the possibilities and our work to come.”

— Vice President for Student Affairs
Susan P. Trageser, Ed.D.
Embracing Case Management Through the Advising Experience

In an effort to provide a customized and high-touch environment, Radford University should establish and implement a case management model for all students. Case management approaches are currently being utilized at Radford University in the College of Education and Human Development and the Department of Athletics. Additionally, midterm grades should be reported and available to all students in an effort to continually provide students with real-time information regarding their academic experience and overall success. Radford University should expand the utilization of Starfish in order to identify and monitor all students, especially those who may be exhibiting behaviors and patterns that are barriers to achieving their academic and personal goals. As part of Quest, Starfish should be utilized in order to flag potential issues for follow-up once students arrive on campus.

Furthermore, Radford University has the responsibility of providing all students with continuous and comprehensive advising throughout their academic careers. Therefore, Radford University must make increased investments in advising. The University’s advising approach should have a personal touch with the appropriate level of resources and a centralized channel of communication. Advising should be available during times in which students would utilize those services, including evening and weekend hours. Through a help desk approach, advising would be available on-demand, thereby making it more accessible and convenient for students. Radford University should identify structural challenges and implement sound practices that result in intuitive exploration for students and the faculty and staff assisting them. This could include collaborative exploration centers for both majors and minors that can serve a broad range of students simultaneously.

Capturing the Student Timeline

Radford University should create a student timeline that serves as a roadmap from the first day of class to graduation. In order for students to be successful in pursuing their educational goals, they must have access to clear expectations. Therefore, the student timeline will serve as a personalized, detailed academic calendar, outlining key requirements and milestones. Awareness, knowledge and planning are keys to success. And, at Radford University, we must provide students with information and resources for success!
“We are truly committed to all of our students. One thing we need to think about and talk about is our belief that if we admit a student, they have the ability to graduate from this institution. It requires us to increase our efforts and for students to increase their efforts in terms of working toward that degree and that success. We all know that their success is our success. We are fully committed to giving all students the opportunity to develop and grow on this campus.”

— President Brian O. Hemphill, Ph.D.