

Northern Arizona University Report on the Freshman Year

Executive Summary

In September 2003, NAU President John Haeger established a Task Force on the Freshman Year with a two-year charge to review, assess and recommend changes to the experience of first-year freshmen with the intent to assure a high-quality first-year academic and college life experience, and to improve the retention rates of first-time, full-time freshmen on the Mountain Campus. This report summarizes the information gathered by the task force during its first six months and includes initial recommendations for action. The task force limited its study to the experience of first-time, full-time (FTFT) freshmen on the Mountain Campus.

Key information garnered regarding NAU freshmen includes:

- Freshmen are predominantly full-time, residential, traditionally aged college students attending classes at the mountain campus. Most are in state, Caucasian, and have at least one parent with a college degree. Approximately 30% of freshmen fail to meet one or more criteria for regular admission (GPA, class rank, or high school coursework.) Attitudinally, male freshmen are more confident in math and science than the national norm yet have a lower desire to complete their college degree than the norm.
- First-time, full-time freshmen experience relatively small classes and educational experiences that are equal to or better than that of our peers, as rated by the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE). Many of these positive educational practices are characteristic of University Colloquium (UC 101), a course taken by 73% of FTFT freshmen in the 2002-2003 academic year. The elimination of UC 101 as a requirement may alter the quality of the first year educational practices freshmen experience. After fall and spring terms, 76% of the FTFT freshmen were in good standing both terms, 14% had academic difficulty one or both terms, and 10% of freshmen left after fall term (6% in good standing, 4% on probation.) Most FTFT freshmen that leave after their first year were less academically successful than the returning students, most with GPA's below 2.5.
- 79.3% of NAU freshmen ranked NAU as their first choice for college attendance. Approximately 37% of NAU's FTFT freshmen are first generation college students. In contrast to their peers nationally, 89% of NAU's freshmen arrive in Flagstaff from homes 101 or more miles from campus (28% is the national average) and 90% of non-Flagstaff FTFT freshmen choose to live on campus. In AY03-04, the majority of freshmen (70%) expressed concerns about financing college, and over 80% of FTFT Mountain Campus freshmen were awarded some form of financial aid. NAU freshmen tend to be very independent, socially autonomous and academically confident, but less likely than their peers nationally to seek assistance. NAU FTFT freshmen face many of the same adjustment and transition issues typical to new college students, including the development of

essential self-management skills and personal/academic evaluation of their choice to attend NAU. Freshmen are involved in a variety of out of class activities. Students reported exercising 2-3 days a week and over 50% of the students reported being involved in a dating or committed relationship. An increasing segment of NAU's FTFT class (33%) classifies themselves as abstainers or non-drinkers of alcoholic beverages.

- A large number of freshman support programs are offered through Academic Affairs and Enrollment Management and Student Affairs. Programming tends to be targeted without significant overlap but without much coordination between programs. Most programs have some form of assessment, focusing on measures such as GPA, but they generally do not assess learning outcomes. Supplemental instruction, offered through a partnership between academic units and Enrollment Management and Student Affairs, is an example of an effective program for improving student academic success.
- Retention rates of FTFT freshmen over the past eight years have remained relatively steady around 67%. Entering students most likely to be retained are traditional-aged, white females. Retention rates are related to high school academic success whether measured by HS GPA, test scores or high school rank. Once at NAU, college academic performance predicts retention with an average retention rate of 79% for FTFT freshmen with an NAU GPA > 2.5. Intensive freshman programming such as that offered by Honors, Athletics and STAR, have a positive retention affect on their participants.
 - Of the 2002 FTFT freshman cohort, 31% did not return for the fall 2003. Fifty-three percent of these freshmen were in good academic standing (not on probation or suspended). The students who were in good academic standing, but still left NAU, report generally positive experiences at NAU but express dissatisfaction with local-related issues (weather, town, etc.) Most of the students who left in good academic standing transferred to a college that was in their home state, with 44% transferring to Arizona State University and 12% to the University of Arizona.
- Assessment measures were identified that look at the inputs, experiences and outcomes of our freshmen. Inputs include demographics, HS academic performance and attitudinal indicators. Experiences include pre-term experiences, coursework, and freshman programming. Outcomes include academic performance measures, student learning outcomes and student-development outcomes. This task force recommends regular coordinated collection of data which should result in annual or bi-annual assessment reports on the freshman year experience.

The Freshman Year Task Force identified actions that the institution should take in order to improve the quality of the freshman year experience for our entering students and to improve retention. Some of these actions are currently underway while others are recommendations for future action.

Evaluate and recommend changes to the recruitment and admissions process.

Efforts in progress include (immediate plan):

1. Identify those factors within the admissions criteria that are the most predictive of poor academic performance while at NAU. Assure all entering freshmen have academic preparation for university level work by gradually decreasing the number of admitted students that have these risk factors of poor academic performance.
2. Target recruiting efforts to attract students who want to enroll and persist at NAU.
3. Create a robust, multivariable, predictive model for retention.
4. Improve the accuracy and thoroughness of data records of academic preparation of entering students (high school courses, SAT/ACT profiles, and College Student Inventory [CSI] student reports) to better understand the link between academic preparation and student success at NAU.

Recommended future action (1-5 year plan):

5. Develop stronger relationships with Arizona high schools to better communicate essential learning outcomes and academic skills important for student success in college.

Improve the academic success of students who attend NAU.

Efforts in progress include (immediate plan):

6. Require and refine course (e.g., EPS 101) designed to provide academic transition assistance to less prepared entering students.
7. Provide intrusive assistance to freshmen who are identified as being at risk or potentially benefiting from academic assistance (Learning Assistance Centers), academic advising (Gateway Student Success Center), career planning (Gateway Student Success Center), residence life (Student Affairs) and personal counseling (Counseling and Testing Center).
8. Increase the partnership between the Gateway Student Success Center and all academic departments to assure strong and consistent advising across campus.
9. Strategically utilize placement and readiness testing to assure prerequisite knowledge.
10. Continue and possibly expand the use of nationally normed surveys of freshmen to understand the attitudinal aspects of entering freshmen, including identifying students at academic and emotional risk.

Recommended future action (1-5 year plan):

11. Foster superior classroom experiences for freshmen by assigning outstanding and committed instructors to teach freshman classes and providing them with strong faculty training opportunities in the pedagogy of teaching freshmen.

Coordinate and assess freshman support programming.

Future recommended actions include (1-5 year plan):

12. Establish a Freshman Programming Council for collaboration, coordination and articulation between freshman year programs.

13. Each freshman programming effort should clearly define its goals and the results it will use to assess its effectiveness. Freshman programming should avoid duplication and compliment existing programs.
14. An independent entity should assess the effectiveness of freshman support programs.

Monitor the freshman year experience at NAU.

Efforts in progress include (immediate plan):

15. Assess the freshman year in terms of the areas described in the Assessment Model*. Three major areas that still need to be addressed in order to comprehensively assess the freshman year are:
 - Measuring student-learning outcomes.
 - Setting standards for each measure on the model.
 - Obtaining representative samples and further exploring which nationally normed instruments to utilize and how often to administer.

During the 2004-2005 academic year, the President's Task Force will continue to address factors affecting the academic success of freshmen, consider other factors related to retention, and recommend an organizational structure for continued review and monitoring of the freshman year.

*Assessment Model found on pages 38-41 of the full Task Force Report.