

Task Force on the Freshman Year Final Report

Executive Summary

The freshman year is a critical year in the undergraduate experience: It is the time a student develops critical skills for learning and forms a connection with a university, its people, and its location. Institutional actions to enhance the freshman experience must do so by transforming the core of the student's total encounter with the university. The Task Force on the Freshman Year was charged in September 2003 to study and recommend actions to improve the quality of the freshman year experience at Northern Arizona University, and increase retention rates on the Flagstaff campus.

The task force presents thirteen recommendations to the university community to promote student success in the freshman year and progression to graduation. The recommendations address five areas of institutional practices:

- Institutional culture and leadership
- Courses and programs
- Faculty development
- Cultivating student connections
- Institutional research.

Recommendations of the Task Force on the Freshman Year

1. Establish a clear institutional priority and culture focused on student learning and success with recognition of the importance of the freshman year and the special needs of freshmen.
2. Create a Freshman Year Coordinating Council with reporting lines to Academic Affairs and Enrollment Management and Student Affairs to facilitate coordination, planning and assessment of the freshman year experience.
3. Expand Supplemental Instruction and other course-linked academic support and assess the impact of different academic support strategies on student success.
4. Focus orientation and advising during the first year to promote retention; increase advising support for first-year students with greatest needs.
5. Strengthen college-based advising.
6. Expand summer bridge programming opportunities to increase student diversity and academic preparation.
7. Provide institutional support for the Student Support Services (SSS) program to enable the program to serve more students than is currently possible with existing grant funding.
8. Increase faculty development focused on teaching and mentoring freshmen.
9. Research and expand upon promising programs that increase student engagement with the university and facilitate establishment of personal connections by the student.

10. Adopt the one-year retention and four- and six-year graduation rate goals for both the five-year and ten-year time periods
11. Fill gaps in institutional data related to high school credentials and tracking program participation to allow for further research
12. Develop a model for expected retention based on characteristics of incoming students.
13. Conduct further research.

The first priority for the university should be to build an institutional culture that is focused on student learning and success. The recommendations for institutional leadership and culture do not require resources as much as commitment and actions that will cultivate the organizational context in which programmatic efforts will be most likely to succeed. A key characteristic of colleges and universities that outperform predictions for student retention and graduation rates is the shared commitment of the entire community of faculty and staff to students and their success.

The long term strategy should be to enrich the learning experiences of freshmen in order to increase the likelihood of academic success and forge stronger connections with faculty, staff, and peers, while developing effective advising and academic support programs to assist students with educational and navigational challenges. Efforts to increase student achievement and persistence to degree must address three critical components of the first year of college: development of academic efficacy, academic engagement, and social integration, all of which contribute to institutional commitment. Institutional strategy should be adapted to institutional context, student characteristics, and what is learned about the effectiveness of policies, practices, and programs.