



To: David Soo, Office of Postsecondary Education
From: Tracy Schuster-Matlock, PhD – Dean of University Academic Programs
Sherri Erkel – Director of First Year Experience
RE: Request for Information: Promising and Practical Strategies
Date: April 30, 2012

The following submission includes promising and practical strategies implemented at St. Ambrose University in order to enhance student success and degree obtainment. SAU is an independent, diocesan, and Catholic university grounded in the liberal arts, and located in Davenport, Iowa.

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Overview

As part of the strategic planning process, St. Ambrose University is implementing a number of retention and persistence initiatives to promote student success and ultimately degree attainment. This work includes, in part, the revision and assessment of the New Student Seminar for first-year students and administering the MAP-Works© Survey as an early outreach and intervention tool to students identified as high risk for attrition. These programs are delivered in a collaborative effort between academic and student affairs faculty and staff and support the university's mission to help students develop intellectually, spiritually, ethically, socially, artistically and physically to enrich their own lives and the lives of others.

New Student Seminar (Identifying tags: persistence, retention, career pathways, mentoring)

The American Association of Colleges and Universities and leading higher education scholar George Kuh identified first-year seminars as a high-impact practice for students from a wide range of backgrounds and abilities (AAC&U, 2008). Nearly all first-year students at SAU enroll in the one-credit course, making it a practical environment in which to implement goals and outcomes related to retention, persistence, and enhanced career pathways.

New Student Seminar is a one-credit, extended orientation course designed to help new students make a successful academic, personal, and social transition to St. Ambrose University. This course aims to instill in SAU students a sense of academic community, to effectively convey

the expectations of being a college student at an institution grounded in the liberal arts tradition, to facilitate thoughtful exploration of interests, majors, and careers, and to expose students to educationally purposeful activities in and out of the classroom. The course design also includes peer assistants who serve as mentors to the first-year students while gaining leadership experience.

SAU utilizes the following and recently revised course goals and outcomes to support the goal of increasing our first-year retention to a stable, five-year rolling average of 80%.

1. Promote Academic Success. Upon completion of NSS, students will be able to:
 - a. Explain the expectations of being a member of an academic community;
 - b. Identify effective and appropriate strategies for engaging in lectures, collaborative projects, and individual assignments;
 - c. Demonstrate an understanding of the liberal arts tradition.
2. Help students develop a social and personal connection to SAU. Upon completion of NSS, students will be able to:
 - a. Identify ways to get involved in co-curricular activities to enhance their classroom experience;
 - b. Describe what it means to be an “Ambrosian” in the context of our mission, history, traditions, and campus culture;
 - c. Recognize appropriate campus resources to support their movement from autonomy toward interdependence.
3. Facilitate Thoughtful Exploration of Interests, Majors, and Careers. Upon completion of NSS, students will be able to:
 - a. Articulate their personal and academic interests;
 - b. Connect their interests and abilities to appropriate major and/or career choices;
 - c. Plan a four-year curriculum, using Beeline, advising, and faculty input.
4. Instructors can also develop a fourth goal, based on their expertise and interests. Examples: Diversity, leadership, or the Learning Community focus/discipline, if applicable.

Instructors of the 28 sections of New Student Seminar (approximately 95% of incoming students) for fall of 2012 will pilot the revised learning outcomes in collaboration with the First Year Experience Advisory Board. Pilot data and a review of pedagogy will be used to develop a long-term evidence-informed student performance and program evaluation plan.

MAP-Works® Survey (Identifying tags: retention, data collection/use)

St. Ambrose University piloted the MAP-Works survey in 2011-2012 with the goal of gathering a rich data set on our first-year cohort and using the evidence to inform short and long-term retention strategies. MAP-Works®, Making Achievement Possible, is a student retention and success program delivered through a web-based survey four times a year to first-year students. Students are measured on a variety of research-based factors including their academic and social integration to the campus, entering skills and abilities, and expectations of their college experience. Upon completion of each survey, students receive a detailed report of their strengths and challenges related to their college experience. University faculty and staff

connected to the students also receive detailed information about their students, as well as key points to address with students in their intervention efforts.

The MAP-Works© implementation team engaged in a variety of purposeful actions including: enlisting the help of residence life staff as both direct connects and key personnel in marketing, aligning MAP-Works© surveys with academic advising appointments, providing on-going training for all direct connects (seminar instructors and support personnel in both student and academic affairs), utilizing a variety of incentives and promotional products on a small budget, and general marketing/awareness to both faculty and staff assemblies, as well as the University Board of Trustees. Consequently, SAU was awarded the 2012 MAP-Works© Excellence Award for Program Implementation and Marketing.

Findings (Identifying tags: assessment technology, data collection/use)

The collaborative effort between student and academic affairs to encourage student participation with MAP-Works© yielded survey response rates far above the national average, providing comprehensive data on the needs of our first year students, and a strong foundation of baseline data as we prepare to examine trends over time.

	Fall Transition	Fall Check-Up	Spring Transition	Spring Check-Up
SAU Sample Size (N)	513	443	384	443
SAU Response Rates (%)	92.6	78.7	76.2	65.4
National Response Rates (%)	76	45	40	25

Early findings from the MAP-Works© surveys have informed immediate responses to student needs. For example, our implementation team and key support staff on campus (ie, Financial Aid, Housing, Advising, etc.) knew at midterm of the fall semester that we were experiencing a shift in attitudes of current first year students regarding their commitment to return to the institution next year. At three weeks into the fall semester, we found approximately 80% of our surveyed students were extremely committed to returning (slightly higher than our Carnegie peers participating in the MAP-Works© program). At nine weeks we saw only 73% of surveyed students as committed (slightly lower than our Carnegie peers). Because we were able to identify who these students were, we mobilized our teams and went straight to the students to address their needs and concerns. Consequently, while SAU experienced some attrition of students in December of 2011, this number was approximately 20% less than originally predicted. Undoubtedly, had SAU not been using the MAP-Works© program, we would not have been able to mobilize and respond to student needs in an effective and efficient manner, helping them to persist in their educational goals.

Evidence gathered on levels of homesickness experienced by our students has directly shaped programming for this past academic year, and will continue to do so next year. One consistent

trend found among our students surveyed is a sense of homesickness. Initially in the fall semester, we found over 70% of students were experiencing separation anxiety from their families. Consequently, we adjusted programming in the residence hall and informed New Student Seminar instructors of the findings so they would include the issue in conversations with students. By the mid-term check-up in the fall semester, we saw the number of homesick students dropping; however levels remained higher than expected at 67% of surveyed students remained homesick during the spring semester. Continued investigation of the data and follow-up with students is planned for the future. It should be noted, however, that students who are homesick are not currently showing signs of increased attrition.

More importantly, however, SAU found a small but consistent percent of the first year students who were homesick to the point of being *distressed*. This ranged from 10-20% of first year students over the course of the academic year. These students felt a great deal of anxiety about attending college, as well as, a great sense of need to return home to their families and communities. At this time, we have found the following about the students who make up this group. First, the actual make-up of this group is not constant. Students move in and out of this category. Second, the students in the group do not fit nicely into an ACT or GPA range. Some of these students are excelling and some are not. Likewise, some of these students are engaged in activities outside of the classroom, and some are not. Finally, while a few of these students who have chosen to leave the institution (those also with high levels of general homesickness), most have not. As such, the SAU team has committed to further understanding the complex needs of these students, as well as, predictors of their distress. This information is being discussed and actions taken by the First Alert Committee on campus. Training for next year's New Student Seminar Mentors has been adjusted to raise awareness of and reach out to students who are homesick-distressed. This information has also been incorporated into the parent education portion of spring and summer orientations focused on student empowerment as well, and we have already received positive feedback from parents about the value of this important information.

Future Directions

Through its strategic plan and the work of many Ambrosians, SAU is committed to retention and persistence initiatives to promote student success and ultimately degree attainment. A New Student Seminar built around measurable goals grounded in both research and practice and the administration of the MAP-Works© program as an early outreach and intervention tool to identify students at high risk for attrition, will help ensure our success. As we continue to explore our data for this past year, we eagerly await the comparative data MAP-Works© will be sending us this summer to compare our work with those from across the country at peer and aspirational institutions. Ultimately, we look forward to the fall 2011-fall 2012 retention numbers in October when we will officially see progress towards our goal of student retention.