Retention Matters

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Creating a Culture of Undergraduate Research

At Eastern, undergraduate research is a high-impact experience central to integrative learning and the overall undergraduate educational experience. High-impact practices have been shown nationally to have a positive impact on retention and ultimately degree completion.

Eastern is strongly dedicated to recognizing and supporting the undergraduate research initiative. During its visit to campus this past May, the Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR) praised the University for supporting undergraduate research. Eastern established the Undergraduate Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity Awards in 1990, and each year URSCA makes awards for summer, fall, and spring terms. Most recently, $500 awards were given to 5 students in FA13 and 15 students in SP14; 6 students in SU14 were awarded the $3000 summer stipend.

In addition to funding undergraduate research, Eastern also sponsors student attendance at the National Conference on Undergraduate Research (NCUR). In SP14, 43 students attended and gave 38 presentations and poster sessions at the University of Kentucky. In the last two years, Eastern has been among the top 4% of all universities in NCUR presentations and is *the* top ranked Illinois institution.

Provost Lord has convened a University-wide Task Force to help take our efforts to a new level. Several of the academic colleges have organized undergraduate research committees to explore initiatives, such as a college-wide research symposium, a research journal to disseminate student work, establishing student research awards and grants, and creating a website to showcase student research projects.

To benefit faculty, the Provost created the Undergraduate Research Faculty Mentor Award. Some deans have followed this incentive by creating a Dean's Award for Undergraduate Research Mentor. The awards provide recognition for the time it takes to mentor students, and also provide a monetary incentive for engagement in undergraduate research.

CORE Corner: The First Year of the Predictor

FA13 was the first year with the retention predictor, whose model was built on data from the FA11 and FA12 new freshmen and their retention rates the following year at census. The model uncovered 7 factors that are attributable to attrition:

1. Hispanic heritage;
2. EIU Reads non-attendance;
3. A high financial aid gap between a family's ability to pay and financial aid award;
4. The percentage of need met by the financial aid package;
5. Expected family contribution of zero;
6. A student's high school grade point average (below 2.84);
7. Undeclared or at-risk department major.

CORE along with the Academic Advising Center and University Foundation instructors worked on special interventions for freshmen who were at-risk according to this model.

The FA13 to FA14 overall retention rate was 76%, but students with these risk factors had retention rates below that. Of the students not retained, 21.7% had financial holds.

This year CORE will be working with the at-risk departments on reasons for attrition in their programs. CORE members have already visited the Academic Leadership Team and each of the administrative councils for the four

Spotlight On . . . Retention Resources

In Spring 2014 as part of the Strategic Enrollment Forum, members of Enrollment Worx and CORE collected resources for the campus' use in recruitment and retention initiatives. We would like to highlight some of these resources for use in your department or program.

The toolbox can be found on Eastern's web site at: http://castle.eiu.edu/strategicenrollment/ . In order to find the toolbox, click on "document download" and enter in your userid and password.

While there are many documents related to data for recruitment and enrollment planning, we would like to draw your attention to resources available for working with current students who might be at risk of attrition.

Several "best practices" documents are available for engaging with undergraduates overall as well as for special populations such as military veterans and the STRONG MENtoring program for minority men.

Many front-line staff may be interested in the "Where to Get Help" document, which provides information on common student questions and the offices that handle those issues. A best practice is to ascertain the appropriate office to help a student before referring them elsewhere, and this document can provide accurate information for new employees or seasoned staff.

Several resources exist for working with new students who are experiencing the transition to college for the first time, or perhaps the second time for transfer students: "Ten Transitional Stages of First-Year Students," "Common Adjustment Issues for Freshmen," and "Faculty Involvement in Transition Programs" provide helpful hints and ideas for helping students make a successful transition to Eastern.

Did you know?

From FA13 to FA14 freshmen with a high school gpa below 2.5 were retained at a 57% rate, which is below our average graduation rate of 59%,making these students extremely high risk.

Students with zero EFC were retained at a 68% retention rate, 8% below the University average. Students with a zero EFC who also had a low percentage of their need met by financial aid were retained at a rate of 52.5%.

Students with a 3.5 or higher gpa at Eastern were retained at 87.4% while those whose Eastern cumulative gpa was below good standing (2.0) after their first year were retained at 40.5%.

Students whose majors are in the College of Education and Professional Studies had the highest freshman to sophomore rate at 82%.

CORE Corner cont.

colleges. Those at-risk departments are: AFR, PSY, SOC, HST, FCS, PHY, BIO, MCS, ART, and CMN. Students in these programs were retained at 71.5% overall. CORE is especially interested in encouraging students struggling in gateway courses to get help early. Gateway courses are those that are required for particular majors and in which students may struggle or flounder.

Being a student athlete was an eighth factor that gave a rise to student retention for athletes. The table below shows the retention rate for each of the factors for the FA13 freshman cohort.

FA13 Freshmen Retention			
Variable	# FA13 Total Freshmen	% Freshman Class	% of Original Cohort Re-tained
Hispanic Ethnic Flag	93	7%	64.52%
EIU Reads Attendance	125	9%	61.60%
Financial Aid Gap	377	28%	67.11%
Percent of Need Met	255	19%	67.06%
Expected Family Contribution of Zero	436	33%	67.89%
HS GPA Below 2.84	496	37%	62.10%
At-Risk Dept. or Undeclared	719	54%	71.35%
Not an Athlete	1191	90%	75.23%
Total	**1325**		**75.25%**

Undergraduate research cont.

For example, the Lumpkin College of Business and Applied Sciences has created the Scholarship and Undergraduate Research First (SURF) Program, which also provides recognition and a monetary award for both student and mentor.

Multiple benefits exist for students engaged in undergraduate research. One such student is Kelly Inda, who completed a research project with FCS' Crystal Duncan-Lane. Inda's research was a case study examining attachments between parents and students. Inda stated, "I really liked that I had one-on-one attention and dedication from a professor. She really opened my eyes to the possibility of graduate school."

In support of EIU's undergraduate learning goals, undergraduate research helps students to think critically, apply knowledge, analyze data, and to communicate ideas in a "real-world" setting. Completion of a research project demonstrates student initiative, creativity, and organization.

Kate Hartke completed an undergraduate thesis on James Joyce's *Ulysses* with Dr. Ruth Hoberman. Hartke stated that "My research project allowed me to investigate a topic of interest more deeply than a single project in a course can allow. This is a project that I will carry with me as I go to graduate school because it allowed me to develop and refine my research skills more fully. It also gave me confidence to pursue a graduate degree after graduation."

Undergraduate research builds students' confidence, provides a sense of purpose, inspires students to be active learners and producers of new knowledge, and enhances students' marketability in both the job market and the market for graduate education.

Faculty who serve as mentors to students engaged in research derive a great sense of personal satisfaction and pride in helping to shape young professionals. It also gives faculty incentive to stay active in their field, gives them greater capability of

securing grant funds, invigorates their classroom teaching, and provides for an opportunity to build collaborations with colleagues.

Kristen Webber is working on Faulkner with Michael Leddy in English, who, she says, "expects nothing less than my best and I need that to make sure that I am constantly challenging myself. . . .I find my topic so interesting that it is necessary to reign myself in. . . .I was able to generate my own curriculum in a sense, and it has left me completely immersed and enraptured."

Danielle Rogner found her thesis project through an independent study with Randall Beebe in the English Dept. She said, "Dr. Beebe continued to give me novels to read, and eventually I found my thesis topic in *Jane Eyre*." She adds, "Completing my undergraduate thesis was by far the most fulfilling experience I have had at EIU. Not only did I learn how to manage my own deadlines and keep myself disciplined in the writing process, but the most rewarding part was being able to invest in a project that was entirely my own. Instead of just completing a paper assignment for a class, my thesis was on something that I was able to create and develop from start to finish. Also, it was really beneficial to learn how to work one-on-one with a faculty member. Professors are incredibly willing and eager to help students with their work, and all it takes is for the students to go to them and ask for their help."

Encouraging students to engage in student organizations can also lead to undergraduate research. FCS student Kayla Gardner discovered her research passion through her work as the Event

Coordinator for the African Students Association. "Researching Africa's textile industry in relation to the merchandising concentration has shown me how versatile and integrative the FCS discipline is. While researching about Africa, it has helped me with my career goals to be able to help their economy and once thriving textile industry," Gardner explained.

How does undergraduate research benefit EIU as a whole? Data from the Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR) shows that it improves retention of all student groups, helps to recruit academically strong students, improves student learning outcomes, promotes integrative learning, and enhances faculty development. In other words, it embodies our mission.

Heather Lamb is working with Randall Beebe in English as well and she notes that "a self-guided research project has more turns as time progresses, and one has more opportunities to develop more complex ideas through accumulated information."

Additionally, undergraduate research serves to develop a 'signature' feature of the University, and allows for complementary work with the Honors College and the Graduate School. It is important for us to remember that it doesn't have to be the gregarious "A" student in the front row of our classes with their hand raised in perpetuity; rather, an ideal candidate might be the quiet "B" student sitting in the back row. Let's remember to "Make Excellence Inclusive" by giving all of our students the opportunity to do research.

Number of Students Engaged in Capstone and Research Experiences				
	2011	2012	2013	2014
Total Under-graduates	2077	2079	1794	1647

Teaching On-line: Strategies for Student Success

Research surrounding online teaching and learning clearly suggests that attrition rates are higher in online than face-to-face courses. In a 2010 article published in the *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, researchers found student self-discipline, instructor engagement, instructor response time in courses, and institutional support for students are critical to retention rates.

Other studies have examined the impact of demographic variables (e.g., age, gender), family structure, grade point average, academic experience (seniors vs. freshmen) and financial aid on student retention.

While some causes are external to the classroom environment, others are clearly related to what takes place between instructors and students when they connect online.

Dr. Andrew Robinson, instructor in the Department of Communication Studies, was an early practitioner of online teaching at EIU. He taught his first online class at EIU in 2005, and currently teaches both face-to-face and online courses for the department. He has trained faculty from various colleges and universities in online course development through the Illinois Online Network.

Robinson argues that traditional and non-traditional students drop out of courses for different reasons. Traditional students (age 18-21) typically withdraw from courses for many reasons, including lack of motivation as well as the absence of face-to-face contact. Nontraditional students drop out for different reasons. According to Robinson: "Older or nontraditional students, the majority enrolled in online courses, have the highest dropout rate usually triggered by busy lifestyles with family and career. They are also better educated, more experienced, and motivated by advancing their career or finding a new career. If they perceive an online instructor is incapable or the course is disorganized, they may drop out, believing it would be a waste of their time."

Robinson argues that teacher presence is crucial to a successful online experience for both instructors and students. Indeed, he contends that "online teaching and learning are not an instructorless process." Online students expect the instructor to "show up for class" and be engaged.

Robinson also suggests that building a community of learners is crucial, especially in the online environment where face-to-face immediacy is not present: "Online students may feel isolated and disconnected due to the absence of face-to-face interaction. Online instructors should apply methods to help these individuals become part of a learning community by building an atmosphere of trust, respect, support, and a sense of shared purpose."

In order to create this cohesive learning environment, he suggests that instructors develop and use group exercises and various interactive activities in order to create a genuine connection with students.

Another Eastern faculty member also has a great deal of experience in this learning environment. Dr. Linda Simpson, Interim Chair and Professor in the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, has taught online courses and uses the course support system at EIU in her face-to-face courses. Experience has taught her that technology is useful for non-traditional students. It can support accessibility and flexibility for students who work full time and/or have families.

Students are able to participate in class through online discussion boards when meeting face-to-face is not feasible. Similarly, being able to submit assignments online allows for some flexibility for non-traditional students. On the other hand, students who are not self-motivated may not be good candidates for online learning, according to Dr. Simpson.

The experiences of Drs. Robinson and Simpson generally support the research on strategies for reducing online attrition rates. Supporting students in their online learning environments and experiences, and expecting some self-discipline and motivation on the part of students, are important pieces of the online retention puzzle.

Ten Best Practices for Teaching Online
Taken from: http://www.designingforlearning.info/services/writing/ecoach/tenbest.html

1. Be present at the course site
2. Create a supportive online course community
3. Share a set of very clear expectations for your students and for yourself as to how you will communicate and how much time students should devote to the course each week
4. Use a variety of large group, small group, and individual work experiences
5. Use both synchronous and asynchronous activities
6. Early in the term, ask for informal feedback about how the course is going and whether the students have any suggestions.
7. Prepare discussion posts that invite questions, discussion, reflection, and responses
8. Focus on content resources and applications and links to current events and examples that are easily accessed from the learners' computers
9. Combine core concept learning with customized and personalized learning
10. Plan a good closing and wrap activity for the course