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First Year Student Success Initiative: Academic Support Services Working Group Report

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Academic Support Services Report

Charge: “Develop a set of recommendations about ways that student academic support services can better serve first-year students.”

Recommendations

1. Academic or Student Success Center staffed by highly knowledgeable and cross trained professional staff and graduate students who triage student needs and provide assistance. We recommend the academic success center be located centrally in the core of the campus where students can readily seek and receive help from an integrated academic support model. Research provided by EAB, models from our Hanover peers and scholarly articles demonstrate that an integrated academic support service model is more effective than a decentralized and disconnected academic support services (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005).
2. Expand existing academic support services and assistance for high risk students particularly those in courses with high DWFL/First-Year rates. Additional funding for the Tutor Program will result in more students in more classes receiving tutors and more drop in sessions offered for courses with high DFWL rates. Additional funding to the Rise Center dedicated to expanding the number of courses and faculty using MLAs and support for faculty who want to integrate MLAs by utilizing active learning principles. Assess the goals, configuration and effective practices that contribute to consistently high quality recitation sections and develop a rubric that can be used by faculty and graduate students to improve recitation classes. Require all first-year students on probation to enroll in an academic recovery course.
3. University Wide Testing Center that serves all students who need proctored testing. Currently proctored testing at SAS is only available to students with disabilities. Creation of a university wide testing center would be used by: Student Athletes, Students in ROTC and National Guard, ELL Students, students with disabilities, students working with the Title IX office, students who miss an exam because of illness, students taking online courses taught by faculty who require proctored testing and proctoring placement tests including math placement test. The testing center would demonstrate the University’s commitment to our serving our students and assist faculty who want to utilize proctored testing. As a long-term investment, this could become a certified testing facility where students can take the GRE/LSAT/MCAT, or Praxis, which also has the potential to generate revenue.
4. Address the mental health crisis at UMaine. We suggest beginning with a campus task force to examine mental health needs, services, and assistance at UMaine that can make recommendations about the best ways to respond to those needs. We know that a student’s mental health has direct effects on their academic performance (Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004). This recommendation is about more than just asking for additional counselors to be hired as we see the impact of mental health as having pervasive effects on a student’s well-being. Recommendations and training initiation by this task force

could benefit all employees who work with our students, helping to create a culture of empathy and awareness as well as responsiveness.

5. Create and maintain a comprehensive website where information and links to Academic Support Services on-campus can be located. Information about the Tutor Program, Writing Center, Math Lab, Library services and much more will all coincide on one page. We envision the maintenance of this website as part of someone's position and that this person also interfaces with Navigate. We believe this recommendation is readily achievable and that could be implemented by fall 2019.

The following section on background and the rationale for our stated recommendations is grouped into sections. The first section goes into detail about the importance of integrated academic support and an academic success center. This section also explains how a comprehensive website with information about academic support services is an essential element of our overall effort to make students, parents, faculty and staff aware of the robust academic support the University provides. The second section elaborates on the value of expanding and improving on current academic support services and a rationale for the creation of a university wide testing center. The final section presents the connection between academic success and improving mental health services at the University and elaborates on how the University can begin to address the mental health crisis on campus.

Integrated academic support success center and a comprehensive academic support website

“Effective student support services can have a measurable, significant, positive impact on student retention and graduation rates across the institution” (Hanover Research, 2014, p. 3) This is only the case when students are connected to existing services and utilize those services. Factors that limit first-year students from seeking academic support include a reluctance to ask for help (Sparks, 2014), not being aware they need help, and lack of knowledge about academic support services available and how to connect with those services. Student testimony shared at the Navigate kick off breakfast provided additional evidence that students at UMaine struggle more and are less successful because there isn't a single easily accessed place where they can get academic help. Based on the most recent IPEDS data four-year institutions with high levels of collaboration and integration between academic support services have higher retention and completion rates for first-time full-time students than institutions with lower levels of collaboration and integration (Driving Toward a Degree, 2019).

Developmentally, many traditional age students entering college have not developed the executive functioning skills necessary to plan, prioritize, self-regulate, and organize tasks in college (Mann & Snover, 2015). As a result they do not manage time effectively, may not allocate sufficient time for academic work, and may come to classes under prepared. There is a patchwork quilt of help for students who need general assistance with study skills, time management, test preparation including help from faculty, advisors, mentors, and other staff on campus. An Academic Success Center will serve the important function of connecting students who need assistance to existing resources and offering general academic support to fill this gap. As is reported by the TRIO SSS program, communication with first-year students can be challenging. Many students do not check email regularly, so coordination of services with first-

year students is sometimes problematic. First-year students also often require more reminders and nudges to help them successfully employ the services they sign-up for and successfully engage academic supports. Additionally, we know from Tinto's theory on departure, that if a student is connected to campus, either academically or socially, they are more likely to persist at higher rates; creating this framework to allow for an academic connection and support to all of our students will increase retention.

The majority of academic support is course- and department-specific, such as academic support provided by the Tutor Program, the Writing Center, the Math Lab, and the Maine Learning Assistants (MLAs). More robust and individually tailored academic support is available to specific populations including low income and/or first-generation first-year students selected for the TRIO Student Support Services program and student athletes. Students with documented disabilities can receive accommodations through Student Accessibility Services (SAS). One essential service that doesn't exist on campus is a cadre of professional staff who can assist any first-year student experiencing academic challenges and needs assistance getting connected to existing services at UMaine.

An academic success center with staff who have a strong presence at new student orientation could coordinate with targeted outreach efforts to first-year students offered by programs on campus such as the TRIO SSS program summer peer coaches and advance institutional efforts to increase the preparedness of incoming students. About 40% of incoming first-year students are identified as potentially eligible for TRIO SSS. Trained SSS peer coaches call and email these students during the summer. Peer coaches pro-actively check-in with students to see what questions and concerns these students have, connect them to academic and administrative offices as appropriate, and then follow-up with the students to check that the students felt their needs were resolved. Within this, there is a broader goal to make UMaine feel like a welcoming and helpful place, and to increase the students' sense that they belong in college. As TRIO-eligible populations are less likely to seek help and more likely to experience impostor syndrome, peer coaches can provide an empathetic ear and serve a model of a successful TRIO student.

There are very few formal ways existing academic support services on campus network and coordinate. Programs such as TRIO SSS, the Writing Center, the RiSE Center MLAs, Student Accessibility Services, Academic Support for Student Athletes, and faculty and graduate students teaching recitation sections in STEM courses are organizationally disconnected and seldom share information. Coordinated collaboration through meetings, seminars, mini-conferences, and other networking opportunities focused on topics including facilitating groups, teaching and learning, listening skills, and resilience could enable programs to share knowledge and improve student interaction. In addition, collaboration will further understanding about specific populations and provide resources and support in working with students who have mental health challenges.

It is crucial to have clear comprehensive information about academic support services readily available and prominently displayed in Navigate and on the UMaine website. This is of particular importance to high-risk groups such as first-generation students and underrepresented students. Data from UMaine Institutional Studies and many other sources have identified that first-generation college students have lower persistence and retention (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). The University of Maine website had

384 searches using the term support. When filtered for terms including academic support, learning support, academic support services and student support services there were 69 unique searches. Right now all visitors, students, faculty, and staff on the umaine.edu website who search academic support or academic support services are directed to Academic Support Services for Student Athletes. Results to a Google Search for UMaine academic support or academic support services take users to websites for TRIO Student Support Services, the College of Education and the Undergraduate catalog.

Many first-year students find themselves in need of resources on campus and are unsure of where to begin looking for help, further, once they do find someone to approach about their concerns they are often faced with unclear guidance on where to go next or how to go about finding the resources they need for academic success. In addition to a centralized student success center, students, staff, faculty, and families need a resource that can provide clear direction and explanations of the services that the University offers. A comprehensive website, while seen as a simple low-tech solution for a larger problem, could provide guidance for those individuals who need help but are not certain where to start. A centralized website supports our nontraditional first-year students who may not be able to make normal daytime office hours to ask questions and delve into the resources that may be available for them to achieve academic success.

The Academic Success Services website would have information on the various academic support services offered across campus; including the Tutor Program, Writing Center, Math Lab, Library services, specific departmental support offered, college advising centers, TRIO SSS, SAS, as well as links to specific offices to send inquiries that could be answered by the faculty and staff working directly in with these programs. We suggest that additional links on this website could lead students to short instructional videos/informational handouts on academic advising, choosing a major, utilizing blackboard, professor office hours, and many other basics to academic success.

The University needs to implement this website to meet the basic need for the community members to find up to date and accurate information that is not available in one place anywhere else on the webpages of the University. In researching practices of our Hanover peers we discovered that five of the seven universities in our peer group have a website with comprehensive information about academic support that is run by an academic success center. Only the University of Maine and the University of Wyoming are lacking this critical information and critical service.

While listed as the fifth a final recommendation, a comprehensive website with information about academic success that will be used by parents, faculty, staff, and students seeking information about academic support at UMaine is not only an essential component to the University's resources it is a low cost and effective first step in creating the actual space for academic success services.

Increasing resources to existing academic support programs and a University wide testing center

The University already has robust academic support but is unable to serve all the students who seek help. With increased funding the Tutor Program could serve more students in a broader

range of courses. Data from the RiSE Center demonstrates retention is 10% higher when students have 2 courses with MLAs however faculty may be reluctant to request an MLA because of the cost that the department will incur. Additional resources will expand the number of faculty who utilize MLAs and increase the number of courses and students assisted by the MLAs.

During the 2018-19 academic year over 1000 first-year students were enrolled in courses that include a recitation section. Graduate students taught 42% of the recitation sections in 100 level STEM courses. Recitation sections are potentially an under-utilized form of academic assistance to first-year students. Anecdotal reports from students indicate that active learning and effective application of course content from lecture does not happen consistently. Increasing support and guidance to GA/TAs leading recitation sections will likely result in higher quality facilitation and instructional staff who are more invested in student learning and potentially fewer DFWL grades.

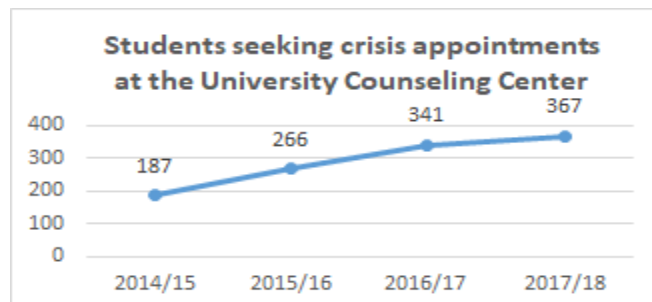
The training provided to graduate students who provide academic assistance at the Math Lab, Accounting Lab, Economics Lab and the Physics Peer Learning Center varies greatly. Formalizing training to graduate students providing academic assistance in STEM areas will improve the quality of academic assistance provided.

Data from UM Institutional Research demonstrates that first-year students with disabilities have a 5.6% higher rate of being retained to year two than the university as a whole. Between 2012 and 2017 83.5% of first-year students with disabilities were retained to year 2 while 77.9% of the first-year students enrolled at the university. While additional research needs to be done to evaluate the reasons for this difference one possible connection is that students with disabilities have frequent contact with university staff invested in their academic success. “The tailored accommodations allow me to feel heard, supported and proud of my work. Without them I know I would not be able to produce the quality of work I do and would have far less confidence,” (M. Gearhart, personal communication, May 3, 2019). One of the most wide-reaching services Student Accessibility Services provides is proctored testing.

An essential academic service that does not exist at UMaine is a university wide central testing center. Proctored testing would help many different students including those who miss an exam because of illness, military service, or athletic commitments. Proctored testing for can also be done for students taking placement tests and students taking online courses taught by faculty who require proctored testing.

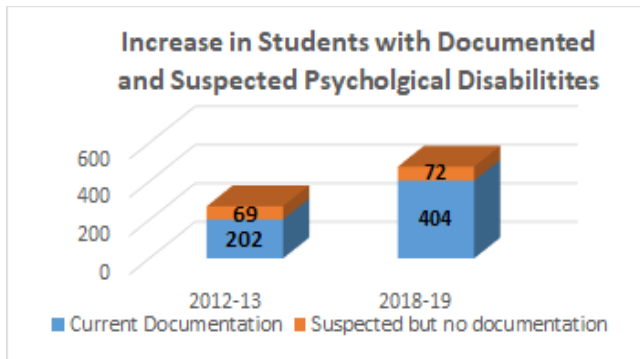
Address the Mental Health Crisis at the University

There are a large number of students struggling with anxiety and mental health challenges (Osberg, T), who need social/emotional support in order to effectively utilize academic support services. Cognitive processes impacted by mental health include attention, memory, processing speed, critical thinking and problem solving. Between spring 2013 and spring 2019 and the Counseling Center reports a nearly 100% increase in the number of



crisis appointments and Student Accessibility Services data shows a 100% increase in the number of students with documented mental health disabilities requesting accommodations.

In their systematic review of 572 scholarly reports and studies, Storrie, Ahern, and Tuckett (2010) found that 90% of United States undergraduates have not utilized counseling and three-quarters of those students who experienced significant distress did not receive counseling. The topic of whether or not mental health diagnoses are actually on the rise versus whether stigma towards mental health is decreasing, is a topic worthy of its own paper. The committee wants to clearly convey that increased numbers of first-year students are coming in with or being identified with significant mental health concerns on undergraduate campuses and we need to be prepared to help them in order to retain them.



According to the American College Health Association’s (ACHA) fall 2018 executive summary report, 62.9% of students surveyed reported feeling overwhelming anxiety in the last twelve months of their life. It should be noted that this reported consisted of 19,664 surveys over forty institutions (ACHA, 2018). Conversely, though just as important if not more so, 42.7% cited that they felt so depressed it was difficult to function (ACHA, 2018). When asked about something that had been difficult or traumatic to handle in the past twelve months, academics was cited as the number one reason for 49.7% of the students (ACHA, 2018). Clear lines can be drawn between a student’s mental health and their attitude toward their academics. UMaine needs to foster an environment that is conducive to identifying and support students in their ability to successfully cope with their mental health diagnosis (es) alongside their academics.

In an effort to increase student retention, and to support students who are currently matriculated and enrolled, it will be necessary for UMaine to address our mental health crisis, increasing students’ ability to successfully navigate the emotional stresses that will invariably occur during their undergraduate career. Specifically, it will be imperative to work towards increasing students’ levels of resilience and “emotional management competence” in order to best identify the signs of distress and that, rather than having to deal with it on their own, be able to recognize that there are services on campus to help them cope with their distress (Storrie, Ahern, & Tuckett, 2010).

Resource Information (optional)

The Hub Working Group did an excellent job of identifying resources. The Academic Support Services working group recommends that the academic success center be at a minimum a floor of a building. Ideally, a larger space such as addition to the library or the renovation of Coburn Hall. It should be led by a full-time assistant or associate dean dedicated to overseeing the center, assessing and improving academic and student support services and increasing collaboration

between academic support services. It should be staffed by three additional professional staff and 2 graduate students.

A University wide testing center will require space to seat a minimum of 30 students who can be proctored in a variety of testing rooms. The facility will require a large room where up to 14 people can test, 2 medium sized rooms where no more than 6 people sit and 4 small rooms where individuals who require an isolated low distraction testing environment can take tests. The large and medium rooms should be configured to have individual spaces separated by sound dampening room dividers. A front area where students enter and check should be staffed by a full-time staff member and equipped with a modular desk, computers, secure storage for tests and assistive technology. The testing center will require software used for scheduling and tracking tests proctored that can be accessed by students, faculty and staff online such as that offered by Destiny Solutions exam proctoring and scheduling software. The cost of the software is estimated to be between \$20,000 and \$25,000. Video monitoring equipment from the current testing facilities at Student Accessibility Services can be used but additional video cameras and a more sophisticated system will likely be needed. The testing center will need sound dampening measures in place. The testing center should be run by a full-time professional staff member and additional staff so that it is open from 7:30 a.m. through 9:00 p.m., the hours when tests are administered at the University.

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