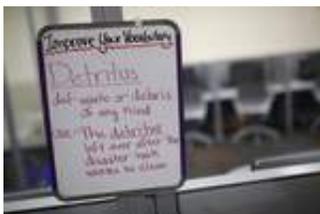


USF St. Pete makes push to retain students



Tutor Brandon Phillip, 22, left, and student Rachel Reid, 22, study inside the student success center at USF St. Petersburg. LUKE JOHNSON/STAFF



Published: June 9, 2014

Updated: June 9, 2014 at 10:14 PM

ST. PETERSBURG — She was struggling with derivative equations in her business calculus class – “fun stuff,” Rachel Reid deadpanned – so she headed over to the student success center on the University of South Florida St. Petersburg campus.

“This is my first time doing this,” said Reid, a senior business management major. “So far, so good.”

The tutoring center has been in place for some time, but it's been revamped, relocated and made a priority at the downtown campus. And while seniors like Reid are welcome, the center is also part of a strategy to keep first-year students from quitting school or dragging out their education, something USF St. Petersburg has been struggling with.

Sometimes, fresh high school graduates aren't aware of how much work it takes to succeed at the university level, said Cynthia Edwards, assistant director of the student success center.

“The movies that they grew up on never showed them the studying part,” she said. “So often, this is not what they expected, and they either adjust to it, or they don't.”

Just 40 percent of students at USF St. Petersburg graduate within six years. And the school's academic progress rate, the percentage of students that return for their second year with a grade-point average greater than 2.0, is 74 percent.

That compares with the Tampa campus' six-year graduation rate of 62 percent, and its academic progress rate of 88 percent as of the 2012-13 school year, the latest figures available.

The disparity didn't go unnoticed at a state university system Board of Governors meeting last year, when board member Mori Hossein accused USF officials of treating the St. Petersburg and Sarasota-Manatee campuses like “stepchildren.”

The trend toward performance-based funding is a key motivator behind USF St. Petersburg's push. The two figures are among 10 metrics the state Board of Governors are now using as they judge university performance going forward – and dole out bonus money to those schools doing the best.

“In the old days, finances were based on head counts,” said Sophia Wisniewska, regional chancellor at USF St. Petersburg. “No more. The metrics are real, and there's a lot of resources at stake with performance metrics.”

The student success center was a no-brainer, campus officials said. The school had a tutoring center, but it was on the edge of campus and few knew about it.

“This year, we brought it right in the middle of campus,” said Vivian Fueyo, interim regional vice chancellor of academic affairs. “It's much more inviting to students. We want it to be much more central to campus life.”

But that was only the first step. The university is initiating four-week academic progress checks with follow-up by advisers, and analyzing schedules and course offerings to encourage progression.

During orientation, each student will participate in a student success session that will include a survey of student engagement. That survey “will ask those questions that will help us be able to hone in on their study behaviors, and expectations about how high school and university behaviors will be different,” said Fueyo.

Developing and implementing a focused initiative for improvement in retention and graduation is now one of USF St. Petersburg's key initiatives in its 2014-15 work plan, a guiding document that is approved by USF trustees and the state Board of Governors.

Last year, the university hired the firm of Scannell and Kurz, a leading national authority in the area, to perform a retention study. The findings will be reported this week, and will lead to further strategies.

While the performance-based funding model was a strong motivator, it wasn't the only reason USF St. Petersburg has jumped on the issue of retention and graduation.

“What's the point of enrolling students if we don't see them through to graduation, and position them for that first job or that promotion?” Wisniewska. said “It's the right thing to do, and it's the smart thing to do.”

jstockfisch@tampatrib.com

(813) 259-7834