

## An Achievable Plan for Student Success

**Leslie Webb**, Ph.D., Vice President for Student Affairs & Enrollment Management  
Boise State University

Almost three years ago, I stepped into this role and delivered a simple statement of clarity to the division. We are focused on the recruitment, retention and employability of our students. At a new staff orientation, I said, “Everyone should be able to see their work contributing to these three objectives.” One staff member raised their hand and said “No, I don’t think I contribute to any of those...” She and I spent a few minutes in conversation about her role on campus – a front line staff member- and I asked her a few questions about her interactions with students. Her face lit up at one point, and she said “You know, I had a student come up to me and tell me thank you. I asked him why he was thanking me, and he said ‘because you’re the one person who says hello to me each day.’” What a heartwarming story to share with new staff in the division. I thanked her and suggested that she had a positive impact on that student and likely contributed to their desire to come back to campus the next year. It’s common to hear staff wondering about their direct correlation to student success – helping them to understand the indirect contributions is key.

About a year into my new role, I started to think more deeply about our work and how we could strengthen and become more purposeful in our efforts toward retaining our students. Although I had a general idea of who we weren’t retaining, it felt too big to tackle. Over the past decade we had experienced significant strides in both retention and graduation through interventions in math, English and the creation of peer learning assistants. So now what – what is the work we need to do in the next 5 years?

In addition to appointing an Assistant to the VP for Retention (a special assignment role, not a fulltime position), I invited a small research team together and gave them a charge: Using EXISTING resources, examine data and strategic plans related to persistence and retention and make recommendations on where to focus divisional efforts moving forward.

The team based their recommendations on four assumptions:

1. We can impact the sense of belonging, mattering, support, and connection for students who are underperforming and at risk for dropping out.
2. Students who identify primarily as students take more credits, connect to campus, and ultimately end up performing better and coming back.
3. We have the ability to communicate and influence how students seek out advising, choose and plan their degrees, and how many credits they enroll in.
4. Focusing divisional retention efforts on students living off-campus (especially in the first year) will allow our division to gain empathy and effect change for a population of students that are at-risk and include in-state, Pell eligible, low-income, first-generation, underrepresented minority students, and underprepared students.

Their recommendations were categorized into three categories: division specific initiatives, partnerships/collaborations and further research desired. While I'm not going to list out all the recommendations (send me an email if you're interested), I'll summarize:

- Create a communication strategy to align staff understanding of Boise State retention challenges and engage all staff in the work as a division-wide effort.
- Deploy a research design team to understand the experience and needs of at-risk students, primarily off-campus (that will also include, Idaho residents, Pell eligible, low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented minority students).
- Develop simple ways staff Congratulate, Alert, and Nudge - "CAN" - all students, with a focus on "at-risk" students, defined above.
- Develop and implement messaging strategies to increase credit loads (15 to finish, 30 a year, etc.).
- Implement robust first-year and second-year transition programming/initiatives.
- Look for inspiration and ideas from athletics as they have high retention rates with student athletes.

Ok, this is good stuff. While my initial thought was to focus on what was in our control, I desired to do this work institutionally. I wasn't sure the timing was right but as we were reviewing the recommendations, a colleague from academic affairs approached me as he'd learned about our preliminary efforts. We joined forces with academic affairs, unpacked the findings, and set out to institutionalize this work.

In the spring of 2018 I, along with Interim Vice Provost for Undergraduate Studies, Dr. Andrew Finstuen, charged the Student Success and Retention Committee with identifying three realistic, achievable, and sustainable recommendations for improving academic outcomes (focusing on retention, early and continued academic success, and graduation) for Boise State's approximately 900+ First Time In College "commuter students." The initial research team identified first-time, first-term students who live off-campus as being particularly at risk of dropping out and/or experiencing academic difficulties at a higher rate than other student groups. Their retention rates were lower. Their GPA's were lower. Many were first generation students. All those at risk variables were found in this sub-population – the 900+ students who live off campus their first year in college.

As this committee was forming in the spring of 2018, a sub group was being deployed to gather additional qualitative data on commuter students. They interviewed and collected stories from over 30 students. Their primary goal was to learn from students about what makes them feel like they matter and belong, then design interventions with student FOR students.

Over the summer, faculty and staff came together for two days to design interventions and test them out with student input. This collaborative IDEATION event was designed to build empathy, understand our student's experiences and inform what's next.

Fall 2018 the SSRC delivered a set of four recommendations, honing in on goals that were realistic and achievable. These recommendations were: communicate directly with students each semester who are eligible to enroll but haven't enrolled; create faculty learning communities focused on how to positively impact student success in the classroom; tackle administrative obstacles (ie: unnecessary holds on student accounts); and explore interventions that help students feel like they matter and belong here. We implemented a pilot intervention program Fall 2019 focused on first year commuter students.

We're off and running with increased knowledge and a hyper focus on where we might be able to make a difference. No, we don't have more money. No, we don't have additional staffing (at the time of this writing, I was able to find some monies to hire a student success coordinator for Idaho first generation and underrepresented minority students not being served by our TRIO programs). No, we don't have all the technological systems in place. But, we're getting closer to university wide coordination. We have the buy-in and the belief that we can shift the culture.

Buy-in can be tricky but we had a few internal forces that helped garner buy in. A new budget model incentivized academic college and department leadership to be strategic about enrollment. We deployed a team to support academic departments explore student success efforts. Cross divisional relationships were healthy and strong and we were in lock step about the work we needed to accomplish together. We delivered clear messages about our end goals. We restructured an executive meeting to be more purposeful and action oriented. We encouraged a sense of urgency. I created a "road show" presentation and shared the research with internal constituents.

Three external forces support this work. First, we are part of a five-year initiative with the Association of Public and Land Grant Universities (APLU). This massive new student success effort, Powered by Publics: Scaling Student Success, was launched at the APLU Fall 2018 meeting in New Orleans. The initiative convenes 130 public universities and systems in clusters of four to 12 institutions, and aims to increase college access, close the achievement gap, and significantly produce more degrees by 2025. Our western cluster is comprised of institutions facing similar challenges and dedicated to increasing our graduation rates by honing in on institutional barriers, academic learning communities, and rural student success. Second, our recent accreditation review included a recommendation referencing our need to decrease the achievement gaps for both retention and graduation rates. Third, the Idaho State Board of Education believes strongly in increasing both the "go on" rate of high school students, and has a commitment that 60% of Idahoans will have a college degree or certificate.

But the most important force is at the local level. This is our work - THE work. This is the moral and ethical imperative that President Ramaswamy spoke about in the last issue of The Beacon. Without a dedicated staff member (or team) to facilitate campus wide efforts, we're doing our best to create capacity in existing staff. Folks don't need convincing - their energy is palpable and sincere. We owe our students every opportunity to succeed, follow their dreams and ultimately to make a lasting impact in their communities. Ask them what's important to them and they will tell you they are here to dramatically change the trajectory of their lives.