

NevadaFIT

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The University of Nevada, Reno is on the leading edge of a growing number of universities that offer a program to help students successfully transition from high school to college. NevadaFIT (Freshman Intensive Transition) takes place the week before the start of the fall semester, and is designed to increase success for all students in every major. NevadaFIT is based on the “BIOS” program that was established at Louisiana State University for biology majors more than a decade ago. The University of Nevada, Reno modified the BIOS model in several ways to make the boot camp impactful for students across all disciplines. Each college and school has its own version of NevadaFIT, which allows students to connect with faculty and students within their major. Students are organized into groups of seven called “packs,” and each pack is guided by an upperclassman mentor who attends classes with participants, organizes study sessions, and offers advice. Students attend skill sessions such as note-taking techniques, study tools, financial literacy, and mindfulness. The critical element of NevadaFIT, however, is exposure to a rigorous and realistic core class that students will take during their fall semester. For many camps, this core class is the math class in which students will be enrolled in the fall. Students attend lectures, get homework, and take exams in this class without fear of failing. Importantly, students get feedback on their homework and exams and gain important insight into what is expected of them. Students earn one-credit for participating in all elements of the NevadaFIT week.

NevadaFIT began in 2013 with 48 students in biology. NevadaFIT has grown each year since. In Fall 2019, 2,546 students participated in NevadaFIT programs that spanned all academic majors at the University. In Fall 2020, NevadaFIT will be required of all entering freshmen (approximately 3,500 students). This continued growth is a direct result of the positive impact NevadaFIT has on students.

The NevadaFIT impact is measured by following retention and graduation rates, the latter being the ultimate measure of student success. Fall-to-fall retention rates of NevadaFIT participants ranges from 83-92%, which is consistently above institutional averages of 80-81%. The retention rates of first-generation, students of color (Hispanic, black, Pacific Islander, Native American, and multi-racial), and Pell-eligible are all positively impacted and well above institutional averages.

The lowest NevadaFIT retention rate was 83% for the Fall 2014 cohort. This was the year that the University expanded NevadaFIT to non-science majors. Significant programmatic changes were made that led to significantly increased performance metrics in subsequent years.

The expansion of NevadaFIT to non-science majors was a challenging exercise. The most significant challenge was that most non-science majors do not have a difficult, high-stakes, first-semester course such as a chemistry or biology to serve as the core class during NevadaFIT. In 2014, individual colleges and schools were given the latitude to select the most appropriate course for their NevadaFIT experience. When Fall-Spring retention data was reviewed after the first semester, it was discovered that there was little evidence that NevadaFIT was having a positive impact on students in non-science majors. In-depth reviews of the various non-ScienceFIT programs revealed that courses used in the non-ScienceFIT programs lacked rigor and did not simulate real course experiences. An internal study revealed that math classes were consistently the most challenging for new freshmen, regardless of their major. Thus, beginning with the 2015 cohort, math classes were used as the anchor course for most NevadaFIT programs. Using math classes for NevadaFIT has proven to be the “secret sauce” for expanding to all majors; it significantly improves performance in the math class while also resulting in positive retention outcomes for students of all majors.

The four-year graduation rate for both the 2013 (48 students) and 2014 (333 students) cohorts of NevadaFIT students was 42% while the overall University rate was 26%. Further graduation rates for students of color (29% and 37%; 2013 and 2014, respectively), Hispanic (50% and 34%), Pell (33% and 39%), and first-generation (35% and 42%) all exceeded the University average of 26%. It was a pleasant surprise to see these positive outcomes for the 2014 cohort given the challenges faced in transitioning NevadaFIT to non-science majors.

Each year students are surveyed after NevadaFIT ends, then again after completing their first semester of classes. These surveys reveal a side of NevadaFIT that, though difficult to measure, may be just as important in contributing to student success. An intense week like NevadaFIT helps students to bond. In survey, one student noted “that the relationships I created with the students, my peers, were very important because you make friends instantly. Those friends are in the same field as you, taking generally the same classes as you, which makes it helpful to be able to work together, study together, and begin to create connections.” During NevadaFIT, students are not only introduced to the support resources like the Tutoring Center and the Writing Center, but they are expected to use them, which makes them more likely to seek support during the school year. From another survey: “I have never gone to a tutor for math help before, but I had to during NevadaFIT week and I finally understand how helpful and not embarrassing it is to go and just ask some questions to make sure I really know what’s going on in math class. Thank you!”

NevadaFIT is a self-supporting program. The program is funded by a course fee of \$250 and the tuition for the one-credit class, which counts as an elective toward graduation. Thus,

students can build the tuition for NevadaFIT into their financial aid packages, making the tuition cost much easier to absorb. Tuition and course-fee revenue covers individual camp expenses and central expenses. The University's goal is to make NevadaFIT affordable for all students, which is why we generate philanthropic support from individuals, foundations, and corporate sponsors that mitigates the cost for low-income students.

There is no reason why NevadaFIT can't be implemented at other institutions. However, large-scale implementation requires strong support from university leadership as well as buy-in and full participation by the full scope of the university. We would recommend starting the program on a relatively small scale in order to allow the institution to adjust its policies, procedures, and scheduling and to allow for an opportunity for proof of concept, which will facilitate buy-in by faculty, staff, and leadership.

We are convinced that the primary reason that NevadaFIT is successful is that it focuses on showing students how to be successful in a college class by exposing them to a realistic class experience. The class should be one that students will take in the upcoming fall semester and, where possible, should be taught by faculty who will teach the "real" course in the semester immediately following. We have found that there is a strong temptation by colleges/departments to have NevadaFIT be an opportunity to "fix" something that their majors typically lack, such as math/statistics and/or writing. There is room for addressing these competencies in NevadaFIT, but the emphasis on them should be secondary. There is also a temptation to make NevadaFIT a "fun" experience. Again, there is no reason why the program can't include enjoyable activities, but the focus needs to be on how to be successful in a college class.

The success of NevadaFIT has been the direct result of enthusiastic support by deans, faculty, academic advisors, and all aspects of student services. NevadaFIT is now an integral part of the University of Nevada, Reno recruiting literature and is featured at recruiting and orientation events. Its implementation has required the modification of procedures in residential life, the registrar's office, and Human Resources, among others. NevadaFIT is now part of the institutional fabric of the Nevada experience.