

Twenty Years of First-Year Student Success: An Inventory of Strategies and Programs That Work

Abstract

Over the past 20 years, first-year student retention rates at the University of Central Florida have increased steadily from 70% in 1994 to 87.5% in 2014. During the same time period, overall enrollment has more than doubled from 25,000 to almost 61,000. This paper describes strategies and programs that have been crucial drivers for the increase in retention as well as contributors to overall academic achievement in first-year students. Tutoring, academic advising, coaching, career readiness, and student engagement are among the strategies and programs that will be examined in this paper. Additionally, specific programs offered through offices such as the Office of Student Involvement, the Recreation and Wellness Center, and Housing and Residence Life will be described. Both established as well as newly implemented programs, such as the Knight Watch initiative (“Murky Middle”), will be the foci of this paper.

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“The Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (CSRDE) is a champion for post-secondary student success, persistence and completion. CSRDE provides retention data reports, informative webinars, opportunities for networking, sharing of research, and an enriching annual conference. As a committed partner institution, we have found tremendous value in the relationship and numerous resources that CSRDE provides.”

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Introduction

The University of Central Florida (UCF) is a public multi-campus, metropolitan research university that stands for opportunity. The university anchors the Central Florida city-state by providing high-quality, broad-based education and experience-based learning, impactful research, and enriched student development and leadership growth, all of which address pressing local, state, national, and international issues. The university is one of the fastest growing higher education institutions in the nation. Overall, enrollment increased from 25,000 in 1994 to almost 61,000 in 2014. During the same time span, the First Time in College (FTIC) retention rate has increased steadily from 70% to 87.5%. The University of Central Florida defines FTIC freshmen as students who have earned a standard high school diploma from a Florida public or regionally accredited high school, or its equivalent, and who have earned fewer than 12 semester hours of transferable college credit since receiving a high school diploma or its equivalent.

The division of Student Development and Enrollment Services (SDES) is comprised of a wide-ranging array of programs and services dedicated to providing students with opportunities for learning and a broad collegiate experience. The office is structured under Academic Affairs and strongly believes that “the student who comes to UCF should not be the same student who leaves UCF.” Student Development and Enrollment Services has focused on high-impact practices as well as the implementation of various interventions that have been crucial drivers for the increase in retention over the past two decades. The office embraces the tenets of the UCF Creed - Integrity, Scholarship, Community, Creativity, and Excellence - as a foundation for facilitating transformational learning.

Historical Framework

In his inaugural speech in 1992, University of Central Florida (UCF) President John C. Hitt revealed five key goals that have served as the anchor guiding the university for over 20 years. Dr. Hitt’s vision for the university fosters creativity and innovation and continues to center on: (1) offering the best undergraduate education in Florida; (2) achieving international prominence in key programs of graduate study and research; (3) providing international focus to our curricula and research programs; (4) becoming more inclusive and diverse; and (5) being America’s leading partnership university. These goals created the roadmap for UCF’s future, and the steady pursuit of them has fueled UCF’s rise to prominence in the last decade.

Shortly after Dr. Hitt’s arrival at UCF, an analysis of student attrition rates at UCF was conducted. Several factors were identified that adversely impacted retention and student success. These factors included: inadequate organizational structures, insufficient course offerings, limited academic and advising support services, academically under-prepared students, policies and procedures that created barriers, and insufficient on-campus housing. As a result of these findings, a university-wide retention plan was developed, an Academic Development and Retention (ADR) unit was established, and a university retention board was created.

The University Retention Board later became the Academic Advising Council (AAC). Discussions evolved around a university-wide definition of advising, the role of the professional advisor, and an acceptable description of quality advising for student success. Local and state funding sources paved the way for a significant expansion of student and academic support programs. Additionally, a partnership with the Student Government Association (SGA) generated funding to develop learner support programs.

A significant point in UCF's history occurred when Enrollment and Academic Services and Student Affairs joined forces to form SDES in 1998. Partnerships were established with the colleges to evaluate course offerings for first-year students. Planning commenced to increase the number of beds on campus for freshmen students, and to develop an enrollment management team. Realizing that student transition was a key component of student success and retention, orientation programs were re-designed to include campus-wide involvement in creating a welcoming and supportive environment for new students, parents, and family members. The University of Central Florida is a dynamic institution that is data and assessment driven and adopts a philosophy that retention and student success is everyone's responsibility.

Retention Data Development

Student Development and Enrollment Services understands the importance of data to drive decision making. As part of the effort to improve retention rates, it was determined early on that it was critical to form a partnership with the office of Institutional Knowledge Management (IKM) to receive accurate, readily available student data. The identification of student populations, such as at-risk or underserved students, is a main driver of this collaboration. A class profile is created for each freshmen class to identify students that are in most need of assistance or are at-risk. Students can then be directed to appropriate interventions and programs.

In collaboration with IKM, an online portal was created that provides systematic information on graduation, retention, targeted student populations, and other data relevant to the UCF community. The information on the portal is updated on a regular basis. Most data is updated on a term basis; however, some information, such as predicted retention rates, is updated daily. This allows portal user to receive the most up-to-date information.

Another focus has been on identifying "barrier courses" in progression and success of undergraduate students. The three main objectives are to identify courses with a high number of D, F or W grades, to find discrepancy and trends in high failure rate courses between traditional FTIC students and community/state college transfers, and to identify how high DFW courses affect student retention and graduation. Success or failure in critical first-year courses taken by entering students can have a significant impact on retention (Hieb, Lyle, Ralston, & Chariker, 2014).

Above-mentioned efforts have been significant contributors to the increase in retention over the past two decades. Between 1995 and 2015, UCF's first-year retention rates increased steadily from 72% in 1994 to nearly 88% in 2014 (see Figure 1). During the same time period, overall enrollment has more than doubled from 25,000 to almost 61,000. The national average retention rate for public four-year institutions was 64.2% in 2014 (ACT, 2014), making UCF's retention rate almost 25% higher. However, improvements can still be made. The university has not yet reached the goal of a 90% retention rate that was set by President Hitt.

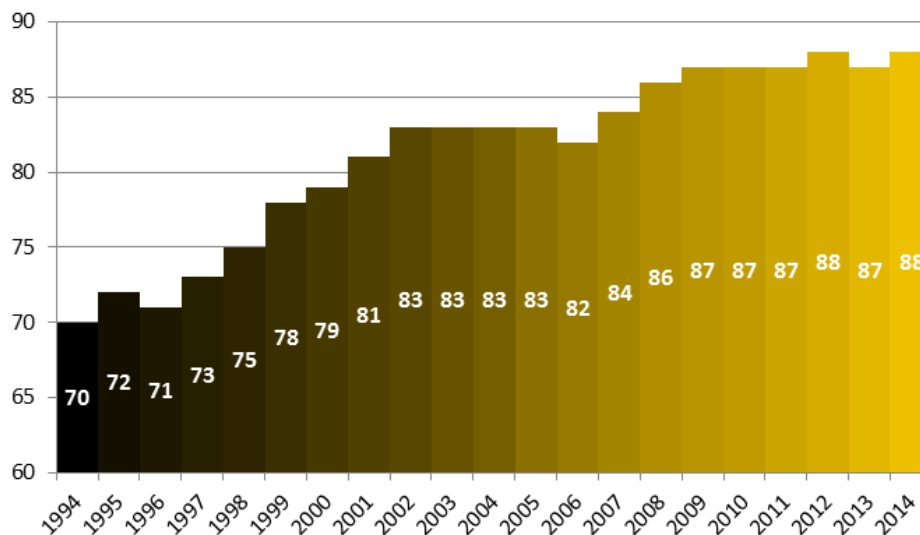


Figure 1: UCF retention rates between 1994 and 2014.

Focus on Diverse Student Populations

To address the needs of a diverse student population, UCF has been intentional in identifying and developing programs, interventions, and strategies that meet the needs of our first-year students. Reallocation of resources and staff, strategic planning, as well as investment in key retention programs, such as supplemental instruction, have significantly increased UCF retention rates. Program development has centered on approaches that connect students to curricular and co-curricular experiences. A data driven approach has been utilized to targeted student populations over the last two decades that include out-of-state students, first generation students, undeclared students, probation students, low income students, underrepresented students, male students, and students living off campus.

Over the past 20 years, SDES has strived to create a welcoming and inclusive environment for all UCF students. Various programs and services have been developed to increase the persistence, retention, graduation, and success of diverse populations. The Multicultural Academic and Support Services (MASS) office primarily assists multicultural and first generation students, focusing on maximizing student success by facilitating mentoring, leadership opportunities, and academic support services and programs. Recently, the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Questioning/Queer (LGBTQ+) Services unit was established to provide resources related to sexual orientation or gender identity. In 2014, the Social Justice and Advocacy (SJA) department was created to promote an equitable campus environment where diversity is valued by supporting efforts to increase equal access to resources and opportunities. Campus Faiths and Ministries (CFM) is a network of faith-based organizations that focus on meeting the personal, religious, and social needs of students, faculty, and staff. With a strong commitment to safety for all UCF students, the Just Knights Response Team (JKRT) has been established to provide assistance to students who have experienced or witnessed a hate or bias related incident.

Moreover, the university houses multiple federally funded TRiO programs: the Purpose + Reach = Individuals Measured for Excellence (PRIME) STEM Project, the McNair Scholars Program, and the Research and Mentoring Program (RAMP). The PRIME STEM Project was founded in 2010 as part of the federal TRiO Student Support Services (SSS) Grant. The goal of the SSS grant is to increase the college retention and graduation rates of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) students and help them make the transition from one level of higher education to the next. The PRIME STEM Project addresses the academic and social needs of eligible students enrolled at UCF who are first generation in college, have a documented disability, or demonstrate financial need and that are pursuing STEM majors. First Time in College students in the PRIME STEM Project had a 100% retention rate in 2013-14.

The McNair Scholars Program is designed to prepare students from low income, first generation and traditionally underrepresented groups for graduate studies. McNair Scholars participate in courses, seminars, and workshops on topics related to graduate school preparation. Additionally, they complete a paid research project under the guidance of a faculty mentor, and have the opportunity to present their research at local, regional, and national conferences. The program has been highly successful in preparing students for graduate school, with at least 70% of McNair scholars enrolling in a post-baccalaureate program by the fall term of the academic year immediately following completion of their bachelor degree.

Program Development

The university endorses the high-impact practices of the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U). Over the past two decades, the following practices have been integrated to promote student success and retention: First-Year Experiences, Common Intellectual Experiences, Learning Communities, Writing-Intensive Courses, Collaborative Assignments and Projects, Undergraduate Research, Diversity/Global Learning Service Learning, Community-Based Learning, Internships, and Capstone Courses and projects (Kuh, 2008).

Numerous programs and strategies have been developed over the past 20 years that promote student success. The following programs or strategies will be highlighted as interventions that were created and/or restructured, and that significantly impacted the UCF experience (see Figure 2): (1) transition strategies, (2) summer bridge programs, (3) academic advising, (4) academic and learning support services, (5) LEAD Scholars Academy, (6) student engagement, (7) recreation and wellness, (8) Housing and Residence Life, and (9) the Knight Watch Initiative.

Effective transition from high school to post-secondary institutions of higher education is vital to a student's success (Johnston, 2010). To ease the transition of students to UCF, orientation was restructured, and a comprehensive office was developed: First-year Experience (FYE). This office focuses on the transition needs of our UCF Knights through programs such as UCF's official Welcome Week (Pegasus Palooza), Learning and Interacting with New Knights (LINK), the Parent Program, and the freshman seminar. The freshman seminar, Strategies for Success (SLS), is a three credit hour, non-mandatory course taught during the summer, fall, and spring terms. The course is an excellent approach for students to learn about what it takes to be successful at UCF and beyond. Annually, over 1,000 FTIC students enroll in the course. The university transitions over 6,500 FTIC students annually, which include approximately 1,400 accelerated students (FTIC students who enter the university with over 30 hours of credit – dual enrollment, advanced placement (AP), or International Baccalaureate (IB)). Moreover, 8,000-10,000 transfer students enter the university annually. Thus, adding a structure to the transition of first-year students was a key strategy to improving UCF's retention.



Figure 2: The UCF experience: Steps to success

Summer bridge programs have a strong history at UCF. The Pegasus Success Program and Seizing Opportunities for Achievement and Retention (SOAR) are six-week academic, conditional on-campus summer programs for selected groups of freshmen who receive additional academic preparation. The programs have served over 5,000 students since their inception 25 years ago. A total of 203 students participated in summer bridge programs in 2014, and 99% of those students were eligible to return to UCF for the fall semester. In 2013-14, 63 students participated in SOAR, and the students had a retention rate of 93.7%. A total of 131 students participated in the Pegasus Success Program in 2013-14, with a retention rate of 91.5%.

Academic advising can be the only opportunity for students to develop a personal, consistent relationship with someone in the institution who cares about them (Drake, 2011). To best serve our students, UCF prescribes to a shared advising structure. FTIC students are advised by one of three offices within the division of SDES: First-year Advising and Exploration (FYAE), the Sophomore and Second Year Center (SSYC) or the office of Academic Services for Student Athletes (ASSA). Services offered by these offices include the review of degree requirements, assistance with career exploration, referrals to campus offices or programs, mentoring programs, and the Freshman Scholars Program which recognizes FTIC students who achieve a 3.0 GPA at the end of their first semester in college.

The Major Exploration Program (MEP) provides undeclared students with opportunities to participate in a variety of activities in which they learn how to evaluate and use the results of academic and occupational assessment in selecting majors and possible careers. After the first-year, a decentralized model of advising is employed. Students receive advising exclusively through the advising office within their college or by a faculty member within their major. Undecided students receive advising through the SSYC. The university understands

that the quality of interaction between an advisor and a student is one of the key contributors to retention (Habley, 1981). Another focus of retention that has realized significant improvement is FTIC probation rates. In 1997-98, the probation rate was 22%. Over the last 17 years, the probation rate has steadily declined. The 2013-14 FTIC probation rate was 8%. Factors that have contributed to this success metric are the creation of a Probation Committee and development of a structured probation intervention program.

While advising is an important tool that has been an integral component of SDES program development, career readiness also plays a critical role in promoting student success and often informs and supports major degree selections. A new facility for Career Services and Experiential Learning was constructed and a strong emphasis has been placed on early intervention and experiential learning opportunities.

Academic and learning support services are designed to support students in excelling academically. The university has been very intentional in offering resources that meet students' academic needs. Support services have been enhanced over the years through library services, the creation of a writing center, and the establishment of a Math Mall. An additional resource for students is supplemental instruction, which is crucial for supporting student retention, especially for barrier courses (Bronstein, 2008). At UCF, supplemental instruction and tutoring are offered through the Student Academic Resource Center (SARC). The office provides free tutoring to students enrolled in UCF courses.

Moreover, SARC offers tutoring for the College of Engineering, the College of Computer Science (CECS) and the Veteran's Academic Resource Center (VARC) within their lab facilities. Between the three tutoring facilities, SARC offers peer tutoring for over 300 hours per week in over 30 subjects. Tutoring is provided by peer tutors that are College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA) certified. Additionally, SARC provides personalized coaching on learning skills. These one-on-one sessions are designed to develop the study skills necessary to meet the demands of college level learning. Working collaboratively with the Student Union, SARC hosts the Study Union during final exams, offering tutoring and supplemental instruction to over 18,000 students through extended study sessions.

The Leadership, Enrichment, and Academic Development (LEAD) Scholars Academy was created in 1995 as a selective, two-year leadership program for incoming students committed to academic excellence and making a difference in the world around them. This FTIC academic program is intended for students with a strong academic, leadership, and service background. Since its inception, this development program has evolved into a four-year academy. The LEAD Scholars Academy now includes the original two-year academic program along with multiple third and fourth year tracks intended for specific student populations. These third and fourth year tracks are available to transfer students and native upperclassmen at UCF. The program has been highly successful since it started. The current retention rate of students in the program is 94.9% and the six-year graduation rate is 83.1%.

Students' engagement experiences during the first few months of university have a lasting impact on student success. Engaged students are more committed to finishing their degree (Tuffley & Antonio, 2013). Created in 2003, the Learning and Interacting with New Knights (LINK) program is an innovative education and involvement-based incentive program to help first-year students become engaged with the campus and UCF community. The events offered by the program range from academic and learning programs to interaction and community-building events. On average, 13,000 FTIC students participate in LINK every year (duplicated headcount).

Additionally, the Office of Student Involvement (OSI) offers a variety of engagement programs, services, and student leadership opportunities that aim to increase student engagement and enrich students' academic life. With a cadre of over 600 clubs and organizations, students and staff collaborate to develop programs and services that encourage students' personal growth, promote civic responsibility, embrace differences, and connect students to the campus and the community.

Student Development and Enrollment Services creates opportunities for personal development in numerous ways. For example, the Recreation and Wellness Center (RWC) opened in 2002 and entails a variety of programs such as sport clubs, intramural sports, outdoor adventure, aquatics, and a state of the art fitness center. One of the core missions of the RWC is to hire and develop diverse and culturally competent student staff that reflects the diversity of the UCF community. There is a positive link between the use of campus recreation facilities and first-year retention (Huesman, Brown, Lee, Kellogg, & Radcliffe, 2009). For the 2013-14 cohort, the retention rate of RWC users was 86.5% compared to 83.6% for non-users. The retention rate for students that both used the RWC and lived in UCF housing was 90.4%.

Housing and Residence Life offers 10 housing communities and approximately 70% of first-year students live on-campus. Partnerships with other departments within and beyond the division provide opportunities for students to connect with faculty and staff. The impact of living on campus on retention is quite high, with students living on campus having a 3.3% higher retention rate on average (Schudde, 2011). At UCF, retention rates for students living in housing have been consistently higher than for students living off-campus. For the 2013-14 cohort, the first-year retention rate for students living on-campus was 88.7% compared to the UCF total of 87.5%. Students who resided in Living Learning Communities (LLC) had an even higher retention rate of 92.1%. There are a total of 13 LLCs on campus that are tailored to students' needs and interests. Future endeavors include the further development of comprehensive, successful, and distinctive LLCs that support personal and academic growth.

The Knight Watch Initiative was established in 2012 to proactively connect with FTIC students who have a UCF cumulative GPA ranging between 2.00 and 2.59 at the end of their first term. The program was developed to build awareness for those students who were not officially on academic probation but could face a change in academic standing or ineligibility of financial aid. These students are also referred to colloquially as the "Murky Middle", and they have been identified as a population with a great risk of attrition after the first-year (Venit, 2014). An analysis of the program's effectiveness in collaboration with Predictive Analytics Reporting (PAR) has revealed that students participating in the program have a higher predicted retention rate compared to students that did not participate. Although the results were non-significant at $p < .05$, they did approach significance.

Working with the Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning, Undergraduate Studies, and the UCF Faculty Senate, SDES has been very intentional to engage faculty as partners. The Vice President of SDES has also developed a faculty advisory board to enhance retention and student success at UCF.

Awards & Recognitions

The Student Development and Enrollment Services departments have received numerous awards and recognitions over the past 20 years. Additionally, programs have been cited as best practices for accomplishments in first-year student success. Selected recognitions are listed below:

FYE

- 2013 – NASPA Gold Award for Orientation Programs

Housing & Residence Life

- 2013 – Florida Association of Residence Halls Building Block Award
- 2014 – Florida Association of Residence Halls Advisor of the Year Award
- 2014 – Florida Association of Residence Halls Conference Host Award

LEAD Scholars

- 2012 – NASPA Florida Mid-Manager of the Year
- 2012 – UCF Gabor Excellence Award

LINK

- 2005 – NASPA Excellence Bronze Award – Housing and Residence Life category

MASS

- 2010 – NACADA Outstanding Advising Program Certificate of Merit

Pegasus Success Program

- 1999 – NASPA Bridges to Success Exemplary Student Programs National Award
- 2002 – NACADA Outstanding Institutional Advising Program Award
- 2006 – Lee Noel and Randi Levitz Retention Excellence Award

SARC

- 2005 – SARC volunteer tutor selected as Tutor of the Year by the National Tutoring Association
- 2005 – SARC's website received national recognition as the most exemplary website for Learning Centers in the nation with the receipt of the Web Site Excellence Award presented by the National College Learning Center Association (NCLCA)
- 2012 – NASPA Gold Award for Learning Support Centers

Assessment has and continues to be a strong catalyst for program development. Assessment is facilitated at multiple levels including the unit level, divisional level, and university level to help inform when programs are successful and when restructuring or termination of programs should occur. In 2006, SDES moved to development of learning outcomes for programs and services to focus on what students are learning. Over the years, the division has encountered numerous challenges. Some of those challenges have included a growing population, limited resources, addressing staff and personnel needs, new technology and systems, and new delivery modalities. Student Development and Enrollment Services has embraced these challenges by seeking opportunities for collaborations and partnerships, development and implementation of strategic planning, and utilizing creative and innovative strategies to provide programs and services that are impactful and contribute to retention and student success.

Current and Future Initiatives

Two decades later, UCF continues with a vision and commitment to student success and retention. This commitment is demonstrated by the university's strong visionary leadership and development of local, region, and national partnerships that foster student success.

In 2013, the Provost commissioned that a cross functional team be established to address barriers that might be impeding student success. The Progress Team was developed and consisted of over 60 faculty, staff, and students. Quick fixes and long-term issues were identified and solutions have been implemented. Locally, UCF has partnered with Valencia College and the City of Orlando, and will create a dynamic innovative new Downtown Campus in the Parramore community. This campus will eventually be home to more than 10,000 students and will enhance UCF's reputation for meeting the needs of students.

On a regional level, UCF is a member of the Florida Consortium of Metropolitan Research Universities that emerged from a common commitment by the University of Central Florida, University of South Florida, and Florida International University to transforming students' lives and the metropolitan areas that are being served. The Consortium institutions share common values of serving students and promoting success in and beyond the classroom, strengths as public research universities, and a preference for collaborative work to improve the lives and livelihoods of Florida's next-generation workforce and leaders. Together, the institutions are committed to achieve the following objectives: (1) fuel the state economy; (2) increase the number of graduates in high-demand areas; (3) increase the number of under-represented and limited-income students graduating with the skills required by Florida's employers; and (4) develop, refine or apply the shared best practices, policies, and programs.

At the national level, the university joined the University Innovation Alliance (UIA), a consortium of 11 large public research universities across the nation committed to making quality degrees accessible to a diverse student body, particularly low income and first generation students. The goal of the consortium is to improve student success outcomes regardless of students' backgrounds.

Over the past years, UCF has been intentional to utilize information that is available for each student to direct student success strategies. With the use of dedicated software such as PeopleSoft and the Student Success Collaborative (SSC), students can be directed towards the appropriate resources based on their academic and personal needs. The SSC is a tool that offers institutions specific predictive models that are based on a variety of data sources within the institution. The software is provided by the Education Advisory Board (EAB), as part of our big data initiative. Currently, UCF is in the process of moving the audit system from DARS to PeopleSoft in order to enhance our student audit capabilities. The university's model for student success can be located in the attached Appendix.

UCF transitions over 10,000 transfer students annually and partners with five state colleges through the DirectConnect program. The program offers guaranteed entrance and accelerated admission to the university for all students who complete an associate degree. To address the needs of our transfer students and enhance the transfer student experience, UCF has partnered with the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education to engage in the Foundations of Excellence (FoE) Transfer Focus self-study. The self-study is a two-year, intensive examination designed to help institutions evaluate the ways in which they facilitate the transfer experience for students. The purpose of this study is to evaluate current practices of transfer excellence within UCF, and to produce a strategic action plan for continued strengthening and improvement of transfer student success.

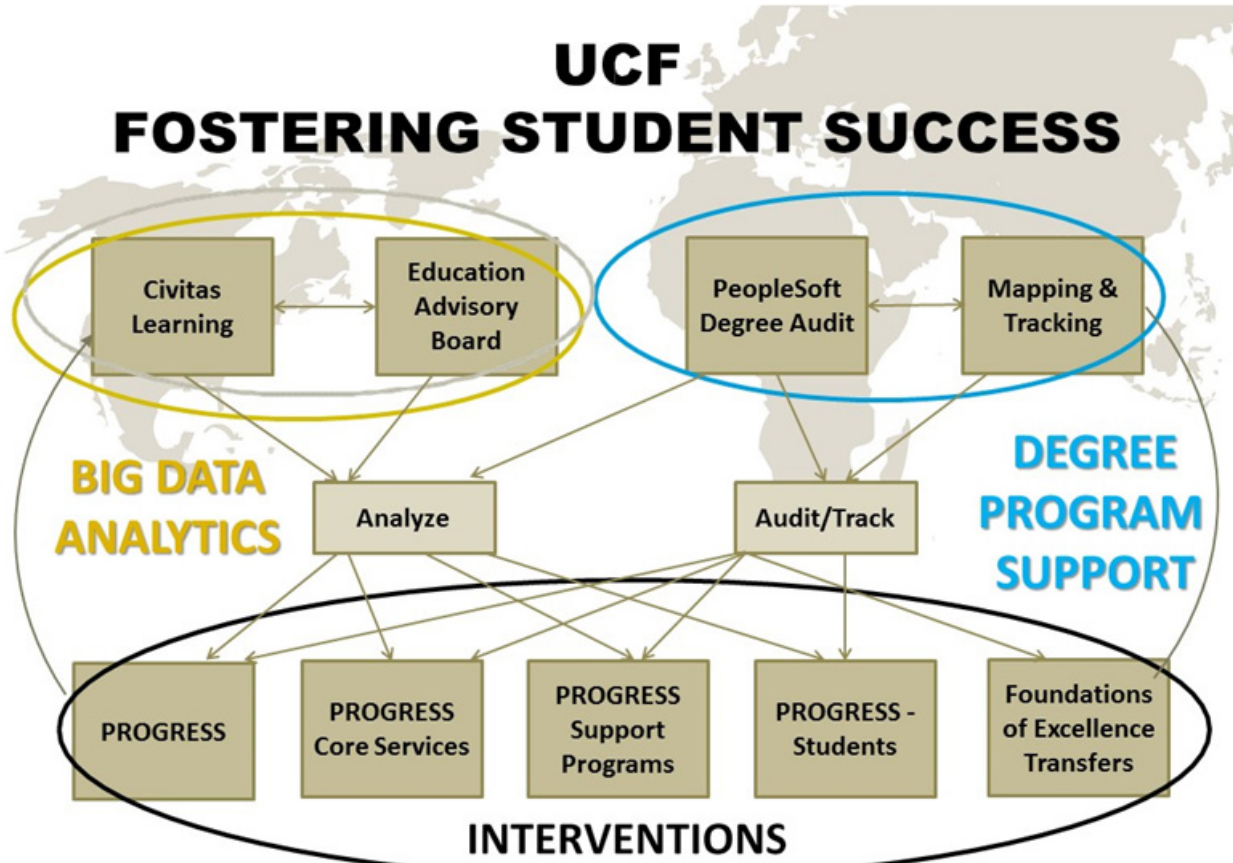
Conclusion

As we reflect on the past and look to the future, UCF will continue to proactively seek opportunities and partnership that focus on persistence, retention, graduation, and student success. Many of the retention strategies and programs highlighted in this paper are transitional to other institutions. Opportunities that will drive future UCF retention strategies will include technology, big data, online academic programs, and enrollment, changes in organizational structures, off-site locations, the ability to create and expand partnerships, state and federal funding, changing demographics, excess hours, and performance metrics. Student Development and Enrollment Services will continue to champion innovative and creative strategies that impact student completion, reduced time to degree, and reduced excess hours.

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Appendix



- Project Goals
- Increase number of students attaining a degree or certificate
 - Reduce time to degree
 - Minimize number of student credit hours per student



About the Consortium

The Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (CSRDE) is an association of two-year and four-year institutions with the common goal of achieving the highest possible levels of student success through collaboratively sharing data, knowledge and innovation. Founded in 1994 by a small group of Institutional Research directors as a data exchange of college retention and graduation data, our first report was published in May of 1995.

The Consortium has broadened its mission to include sharing not only data, but knowledge and innovation. We now have a diverse membership of about 400 colleges and universities and compile four retention reports each year. As well as hosting the annual [National Symposium on Student Success and Retention](#), we host a [webinar series](#) and have created a dynamic electronic book called [Building Bridges for Student Success: A Sourcebook for Colleges and Universities](#).

CSRDE is coordinated by the Center for Institutional Data Exchange and Analysis (C-IDEA) at the University of Oklahoma. C-IDEA is also the program evaluator for the Oklahoma Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation (OK-LSAMP) program, which is funded by the National Science Foundation.



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