

## Standard 5B—2009

The heart of the Austin Peay State University Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP,) submitted for SACS reaffirmation in 2004, is student retention. This weakness was identified by university-wide committees who engaged in an intensive review and discussion of institutional data during 2002-2003. The data confirmed that [APSU's fall-to-fall retention](#) rate and six-year persistence-to-[graduation rate](#) have been consistently the lowest among the public four-year institutions in the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) and University of Tennessee (UT) systems.

The data-driven decision to improve first-year student retention was followed by a review of best practices in four areas: a required freshman course, improved academic advising, a “one-stop” approach (AP Central) for student services, and a First-Alert program. This review confirmed that retention experts Alan Seidman, John Gardner, Betsy Barefoot, Wes Habley, and others cite these areas of improvement as successful retention initiatives: The recommendations of the SACS committees resulted in [13 action items](#) that address these themes and suggest appropriate action, identify responsible parties, and establish benchmarks for success. The benchmark for improving retention was a 2 percent improvement during the following two years with a 5% increase at the end of five years. The action items are grouped as Enrollment Management initiatives and Academic Support initiatives; administratively, they are placed in one unit supervised by a dean who has the responsibility for coordinating retention strategies and who reports to the Provost and Vice President for Academic and Student Affairs.

As student retention and graduation rates in colleges and universities continue to rise in importance in state and national-level discussions, APSU seeks to achieve a proper balance between serving under-prepared students, who are limited in access to higher education by distance to a community college, and improving retention and graduation rates. [Retention efforts since 2004](#) have been most heavily focused on students entering as first-time, full-time freshmen (fewer than 12 college credits.) Efforts and results are reported each year to the APSU Assessment and Retention

Analysis Council appointed by the president; retention data is submitted to the Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (CSRDE) for analysis and comparison with peer institutions nationwide. When compared with 9 self-selected CSRDE peer institutions, APSU ranks 8 in fall-to-fall retention. When compared with 15 generated peer institutions in [College Results.org](http://CollegeResults.org), APSU ranks 11<sup>th</sup>. When the QEP was implemented in Fall 2004, the fall-to-fall retention rate (2003 freshman cohort) was 61.01%; the rate rose to 67.59 % for the Fall 2007 cohort. Thus APSU exceeded the 5<sup>th</sup> year benchmark after 4 years by 1.58%. Students who enter with no academic deficiencies are retained the following fall at 71.3% . Students entering with remedial level deficiencies are retained at 53.3%, and students entering with deficiencies at the developmental level are retained at 64.4%. Retention data for APSU can be viewed at <http://www.apsu.edu/ire/stats/APSURetentionReportSpring2009.pdf>.

First-Year Seminar. The First-Year committee, with membership from both Academic Affairs and Student Affairs offices was guided by the work of John Gardner and the Policy Center on the First Year Experience in developing a first-year seminar to be required of all freshmen. The committee designed a one-credit hour course, entitled [APSU 1000: Liberal Arts and University Life](#), which meets one day each week and assists students in making the transition to university expectations as well as enhancing the liberal arts mission that existed when the QEP was developed. The most notable changes in the course since its inception are discipline-specific sections that serve students based on their majors and sections that address the needs of under-prepared students by placing additional emphasis on time management, study skills, and test-taking skills.

During the academic years 2004-[2007, the CIRP assessment](#) was used to determine factors that could hinder freshman success in college. The availability of results well into the second semester rendered the assessment ineffective for an early response to risk factors. Therefore, the First-Year Committee selected the [TCI Index](#) (Old Dominion University,) which focuses on non-cognitive factors that impact student success, to replace the CIRP assessment. It is administered

when new freshmen report for orientation during the summer, and results are available for APSU 1000 instructors at the beginning of the semester. At the end of the semester, freshmen are asked to complete a student satisfaction survey (*Freshman Survey*) so that the First-Year Committee can determine if APSU 1000 is serving its intended purposes. Early assessments indicated a need to improve academic advising (Action Items 3, 4, and 5) by more intentionally involving APSU 1000 instructors and to modify the curriculum to minimize the liberal arts emphasis. This has been accomplished. The retention rate for the Fall 2004 cohort rose to 63.29%, an increase 2.28% over retention of the Fall 2003 cohort. This increase exceeded the 2% benchmark set by the First-Year committee by .28%.

Early Alert Warning System. *Early Alert* (now called *Academic Alert*) has been modified 3 times since a little-used paper/pencil version was piloted in Fall 2004. Faculty participation increased when student referrals could be made on line via the SIS grade book. However, the Banner student information platform does not provide this option; thus a web-based version, which proved cumbersome, was created. Faculty participation declined significantly. After an intense search to locate an effective and economic Banner-compatible format, software was secured. Now, each [faculty member](#) has an academic alert roster in Self-Service for each course being taught and is able to make referrals on line. In keeping with the focus on freshman retention, Academic Alert is used for referral of students who are failing 1000-2000 level courses; these are the courses in which most freshmen will be enrolled and these courses are those for which tutoring is available in the Academic Support Center (Action Item 11.)

Academic Alert was first managed by a graduate assistant and then by a part-time temporary employee. A full-time Academic Alert Coordinator was employed in Spring 2008 to implement the system and to encourage faculty participation. The system was fully implemented in Fall 2008 and modified in Spring 2009. An analysis of [data reported](#) by the coordinator revealed that 87 (24 %) faculty teaching lower division courses referred 929 students during the spring, 2009. Informal

conversations with faculty members suggest that this tool is especially valuable for large sections of courses. Of the 554 (61%) students who responded to the academic alert, 63.6% passed the course(s) for which they were alerted. The impact of the Academic Alert system on retention is not yet clear because of design changes which affected faculty participation.

Academic Advising. The QEP subcommittee that researched best practices in academic advising reached consensus on three benchmarks to improve academic advising: employ two professional advisors to be located in the Career, Testing, and Advising Center, implement mandatory [advisor training](#) for new faculty and refresher training every three years for current faculty, and design and implement an accountability system to include student evaluations of academic advising. Academic advising officially begins with [Summer Welcome](#) when students come to campus for a brief orientation and advisement by a faculty member in the area of their major. Students leave Summer Welcome enrolled for the upcoming fall semester. A similar process occurs in January for approximately 100 new students. Students who declare a major are assigned to a permanent academic advisor by department chairs during their first semester. APSU 1000 instructors monitor the process to assure that all students are assigned an advisor, that they meet with their advisors, and that they are on track to begin the following semester. The process assures that the benchmark of 100 percent of freshmen assigned to an academic advisor is met.

Since the beginning of the Fall 2004 semester, approximately 450 undeclared students are advised by the two professional advisors during the semester. These advisors maintain contact with their advisees through e-mail, teach APSU 1000 for the undeclared freshmen who are able to fit it into their schedule, sponsor a [career networking seminar](#) to acquaint them with real-world choices, and assist students with their career searches required in APSU 1000. Since Fall 2007, [conditionally admitted](#) students are advised as undeclared students. Before this change, [conditionally admitted students were retained](#) at 56.28%; the 2007 cohort was retained at 62.59%.

An [automated system](#) permits students to change their majors on line. Department chairs are notified when a student changes majors and requests a new advisor. When the advisor is assigned by the department chair of the new major, an e-mail is automatically sent to the new faculty advisor as well as to the previous advisor.

Advisor training is a part of the New Faculty Orientation in September and occurs approximately 6 times a year for current faculty. Since the implementation of the Banner platform in 2007, much of the training for faculty has centered on technology and particularly the tools provided in Banner to enhance advising. Faculty who advise new freshmen in the summer orientation sessions are required to participate in [refresher training](#) each May. All faculty use AP Self Service and nearly a fourth of the faculty have received training in native Banner. As new tools evolve in Banner, the Registrar holds training sessions in which faculty have the option of participating. During the 2008-09 academic year, academic advising was enhanced by the addition of a degree audit and automatic notification to students when program substitutions have been posted by the Registrar.

Full-time (9-month contract) professional advisors are assigned to the Colleges of Business and Education and to the School of Nursing. Two professional advisors work at APSU @ Fort Campbell, and two professional advisors serve students in on-line programs as well as addressing questions that arise from students in any on-line courses. Funding from a Title III grant now provides half-time professional advisors for the remaining colleges. The professional advisors meet monthly in order to be aware of changes that impact academic advising and for technology updates. All professional advisors have participated in [NACADA](#) summer institutes.

Accountability for academic advising is a responsibility of the department chairs. In response to benchmarks set for academic advising, the Deans Council and the Faculty Senate designed an [on-line assessment of academic advising](#) which each student is invited to complete after priority registration each spring. Although 2005 was the target date for implementation, the first

assessment occurred in [2006](#). The use of this assessment results for decision making continues to be limited by the low response rate (10%).

Beginning in 2006, department chairs and deans have selected 13 faculty members, representing all colleges and APSU @ Fort Campbell, to be recognized for quality advising on Academic Awards Day. A trophy is presented to each by the president of the Faculty Senate. The \$500 cash award recommended by the SACS committee has never been implemented.

Service Excellence Standards for Student Support Services. Recognizing that institutional practices have an impact on student retention, the offices of Admissions, the Registrar, Student Financial Aid and Veterans Affairs were grouped as an Enrollment Management unit in the Academic Affairs division. Each area has developed a mission statement to guide their practices and annually invite students and faculty to provide feedback. These offices, knowing that conducting business as usual most likely will result in no gains in student retention, work very closely with the Finance and Administration division to review the impact of their procedures on student success.

During the 2008-09 academic year, significant changes occurred in the use of technology to improve non-academic student support processes. Students now have access to all student information through [One-Stop](#); they regularly receive information about their Student Financial Aid, registration, and academic advising, and all students who have earned 30 or more hours may withdraw online. Non-academic [Appeal processes](#) are now online so that the student is fully informed about the process for appealing and the status of the appeal. [Student Financial Aid TV](#) has just been added as a means of providing information more readily to students and to minimize dependency on a telephone conversation.

Service to students and faculty has been the focus of staff development during the past year. Anecdotal and unsolicited positive feedback is reported to the dean who then recognizes the service of the employee.

All new employees must participate in an [Orientation for New Employees](#) conducted by the Office of Human Resources. The director of the unit into which the new employee is hired is responsible for staff development and for conducting a [performance evaluation](#) at the end of a 6-month probationary period and then annually. Promotion from within to a higher level position requires a stellar record of high quality student and faculty service.

Expanded New Student Orientation. Ten “Summer Welcome” sessions for new freshmen are conducted each summer. The first session, for students who are recipients of APSU awarded scholarships, is held each May. Throughout the summer, subsequent sessions are limited to 150 students. Three sessions are designed for conditionally admitted students. Students and parents receive a brief orientation to campus, and students meet with academic advisors to plan a schedule and register for the fall semester. Parents participate in [sessions](#) during the advisement period. Each participant is given the opportunity to [evaluate the program](#).

A required two-day orientation for freshmen precedes the beginning of classes. Students begin the orientation with a [Freshman Convocation](#). Students then meet in their APSU 1000 classes to begin preparation for their freshman year. Orientation workshops include such topics as maintaining the lottery scholarship and using D2L. The assessment of Freshman Orientation is a part of the [Freshman Survey](#).

An [on-line orientation is available for transfer students](#) who enter having earned 12 or more college credits. Transfer students may self-advise and enroll after completing the orientation if they choose to do so. Two on-site Summer Welcome sessions are hosted for those who prefer to come to campus and meet with a faculty advisor before enrolling.

One-Stop Triage Unit for Enrollment Services and Business Office Activities. All Enrollment Management offices are located in the Ellington Building. Because most students now use credit cards and on-line payment and because the Business Office is nearby, AP Central, the one-stop triage unit, was dissolved and replaced by expanding the role of the Admissions Office. A new

admissions counselor position was created; this counselor works from the newly refurbished lobby of the Ellington Building and is cross trained to be able to answer questions regarding registration, graduation, student financial aid, or other issues. She is able direct students and parents with inquiries which she cannot answer to the other offices. This plan has improved efficiency in all offices and eliminates waiting time for those who seek enrollment and business services. Student ambassadors conduct campus tours and are available to escort visitors to campus locations with which they might not be familiar.

Comprehensive Minority Retention Program. Prior to the Geier settlement, minority retention programs were limited to African American students. In 2007, the definition of minority was expanded to include all under-represented groups of students and the term diversity replaced minority. Such groups at APSU include not only African American students but Hispanic students, white males, and higher performing students. In 2008-09, state funding provided \$190,520 for [diversity scholarships](#) which was awarded to 84 students, 53 (63%) of whom were African American students.

During 2005-2006 as the university brought closure on Geier, the recommendation [of high impact, value added initiatives](#) were considered and implemented for African American students. Consideration was given to academic standing; individual contracts for academic improvement were developed through intense advising. Approximately 50% of the students who agreed to participate were successful. The success of this program suggested that structured academic support is appropriate for all students in academic jeopardy. This program was used to design [the academic strengthening program](#) now required for students who enter the university who have not met admissions requirements ([conditionally admitted students](#)).

The retention rate of the Fall 2007 cohort of African American students was 68.75% which exceeded the retention rate for all students. Currently, minority retention is under the oversight of a [Diversity Committee](#). The Admissions Office intensified recruiting initiatives in high schools from

which higher performing African American students were entering APSU and the diversity scholarships are designed to attract higher performing students, who earn an ACT score in the range of 22-27, to earn an APSU academic scholarship.

Computer Assisted Tracking System. In 2004, the Director of Institutional Research developed a [data file](#) of freshman cohort including key characteristics such as high school GPA, gender, ethnicity, first time freshmen, Pell grant recipient, and level of remedial developmental course work required. The following year the tracking system was used to analyze effect of admissions standards changes, illustrating the impact on minority students, and ultimately leading to an increase in admissions standards and the adoption of [conditional admission status](#) for students who were admissible under the old standards but not under the increased standards.

The system was enhanced in 2006 and 2007 to include remedial/developmental needs and subject matter recommendations. Finally, in 2008 the tracking system was rebuilt to incorporate Banner as the source of student data; fields were expanded to include date of registration. Data are regularly [reported to the Assessment and Retention Analysis Council](#) via a password-protected web site. An example of a recent decision that resulted from data analysis was to no longer allow conditionally admitted students to enroll late and to require that the freshman seminar for these students meet two days each week to include time to focus on study skills and time management.

Academic Support Center. In 2004 an Instructional Specialist was employed to oversee the Center, to implement needed programs, and to track the impact of the programs on retaining students. [The Center offers](#) tutoring for core courses, a writing center, and, since 2007, [Structured Learning Assistance \(SLA\)](#). Each year the requests for tutoring have increased; [recent data](#) indicate that 89% of the students who use tutoring are returning to the university the following semester. Similarly, 79% of conditionally admitted students who attended at least 5 tutoring sessions during the semester returned to the university the following semester. Weekly reports are prepared which show tutor usage by subject and [semester reports](#) show both usage and impact on retention.

An Academic Support Committee meets regularly to review data and to make recommendations for modifications in practices. Their recommendation led to dropping tutoring for upper division courses with the exception of business statistics and replacing the on-line tutoring system, Smarthinking, with a [virtual academic support center](#) developed by the Center. This new program resulted in a savings of \$20,000 for the university.

Technology Enhanced Student Collaboration. The use of technology for greater student collaboration is achieved primarily through writing center activities, on-line tutoring, and Structured Learning Assistance. In 2007 the university eliminated non-university-credit developmental mathematics and writing courses and began addressing mathematics and writing deficiencies with [Structured Learning Assistance](#) supporting appropriate core English and mathematics courses. This program is APSU's TBR requested redesign of developmental studies; the project was supported with funds received from the FIPSE grant awarded to TBR. Because of the student success which resulted during the pilot phase, the APSU redesign was selected for national recognition by the [National Council for Academic Transformation \(NCAT\)](#).

Further Research. The university continues to look for new ways to improve student retention. The Deans Council read and discussed *College Success: Creating Conditions that Matter* by George Kuh and others over a 3-month period. Key personnel regularly participate in conferences hosted by CSRDE , the Policy Center on the First Year Experience, AACRO, and Noel Levitz. The retention tracking system has provided a better [understanding of APSU freshmen](#); the relationships between student characteristics and student success have been explored by a retention specialist, a position added to Institutional Research in 2007. The university participated in [Parsing the First Year of College \(Penn State\)](#) and the [CIRP Freshman national survey](#). In short, APSU places student success at the pinnacle of strategic planning and thus continues to seek ways to improve student success which will be measured by increases in retention.

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