



Engagement drives University's student success effort

A university's primary purpose is the successful education of students. But what are the best, research-proven methods to achieve that goal?

According to Shannon Ellis, vice president for Student Services, research shows universities that promote student engagement, offer a highly challenging curriculum and provide avenues to obtain financial aid are the most effective educators. These three components are the cornerstones of Nevada's collaborative, comprehensive approach to education.

"When I'm orienting new faculty, they often ask about our retention rates, which could be better," Ellis says. "They want to know what they can do to improve our rates. I tell them

"Teach to a higher level. Students need to be challenged. Don't teach to the low end; teach to the high end. And talk to them about yourself; students really want to know more about their teachers. Find out about them. Engage them."

President Milton Glick has focused on increasing students' chances of graduating within four years, as that, along with retention rates, is an indicator of a university's success.

The University of Nevada, Reno's six-year graduation rate in 2006 was 48.8 percent, according to The Education Trust, a Washington D.C.-based independent nonprofit organization dedicated to high academic achievement for all students and at all levels. The good news is that Nevada's six-year graduation rate has gone up almost ten percentage points from 1997, when it was 38.5 percent.

Nevada is "normal" in its graduation rate and fall-to-fall retention rates among its peers, according to Ellis. Nonetheless, Nevada wants to do better, she says.

The University of Nevada, Reno is classified by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching as a Research

Honors students Oscar Zambrano, freshman physics major; Danielle Simon, sophomore nutrition major, and Rachael Tateo, senior nutrition major, enjoy the new Honors Program lounge in the space that used to be occupied by the lower floor of the Overlook restaurant.

University/high research activity, the foundation's second highest tier.

The first few weeks of students' campus experience are key to determining whether they will stay or drop out, says Jerry Marczynski, associate vice president for Student Life Services: "Research shows engagement has to occur early in the freshman year, and the first six weeks are the most critical. That's when they decide whether college was a good decision. It's make or break."

For traditional freshmen—those coming straight from high school—which is the largest category of freshmen enrollees, the transition from a secure, familiar home environment to the unknown world of college can be daunting. The best chance of becoming fully engaged and supported is when students live

Student Success

on campus, Marczynski says. But if they don't, joining a club or organization, or even taking a campus job helps freshmen engage. "Research shows that students with any connection to campus have a higher likelihood to matriculate through and succeed."

Nevada's freshman retention rate—the number of students who stay fall-to-fall, is a little less than 76 percent, according to Marczynski. The average for similar schools is about 85 percent. "Basically, we lose about 25 percent of the freshman class."

So, beginning with orientation in the summer—which is now broken down into small groups rather than one huge meeting in order to promote socialization with other freshmen—and continuing throughout the student's college career, the University provides support services that make the campus a friendly, new "home."

Nevada's hallmark Core Curriculum program, which is required of all undergraduates, ensures that all students develop writing, oral communication and mathematics skills beyond the requirements within majors. In addition, the Core Curriculum requires undergraduates to take courses outside their majors, ensuring that they graduate with a broad education.

Beyond the Core, the University offers a dynamic Honors Program that challenges students who are the most academically talented and highly motivated among Nevada undergraduates. These include 17 National Merit Scholars who have chosen Nevada from a slate of top-notch universities nationwide. The National Merit Scholarship Program is a prestigious national competition that awards top high school scholars with distinction for academic performance. While the program awards some monetary scholarships, it is the institutions of higher learning that compete with each other for these top students.

To help Honors students form friendships and create a community of scholars, the University has created the Honors Residential Scholars Community, in which Honors stu-



Photo by David Culvert

Sophomore LinnDee Hunt, 19, and junior Jason Hoffman, 20, inside the fifth floor study room at Sierra Hall overlooking downtown Reno. Sierra Hall, the recently renovated University Inn, is now a residence facility for sophomores and above. Hunt is studying human development and family services; Hoffman is a nursing major.

"One of our professors had office hours on the floor. I would get help on my homework wearing pink princess slippers."

Danielle Simon on her experience living in Argenta Hall


dents may live on designated floors in Argenta Hall or Nye Hall. These students pursue the same curriculum of study. Danielle Simon, an Honors student, lived in Argenta Hall as a freshman. "One of our professors had office hours on the floor. I would get help on my homework wearing pink princess slippers,"

she says. In addition, all undergraduates may take advantage of the Undergraduate Research Program, initiated in 2003. The program offers motivated undergraduates in all disciplines similar opportunities to conduct real research as graduate students. Students compete for grant money from three major programs: The National Science Foundation, the

Honors Undergraduate Research Awards and the General Undergraduate Research Awards, as well as other sources open to researchers.

Students who are economically or socially disadvantaged or those who come from homes in which no one has ever attended college before have greater obstacles to overcome regardless of how bright or motivated they may be, ac-

ording to Fabienne McPhail Naples, associate vice president for Student Success Services. She should know. She comes from a low-income family of nine children whose parents did not go to college, yet she earned a doctorate in educational leadership from UCLA. Her passion is to help others do the same.

In addition, McPhail Naples promotes 150 students in the U.S. Department of Education's Upward Bound Program; the ASCENT (All Students College Educated in Nevada Today) Mentor Program, a collaboration between Hug High School and the University that pairs high school sophomores with faculty and community members to help youth attain their college dreams; the TRiO and McNair programs, which help students from low-income or minority families, as well as a host of other programs to promote cultural diversity on campus, oversee counseling, provide tutoring, connect parents to campus, and guide all students and prospective students toward achievement of their college goals. 

—Melanie Robbins '06M.A.

For more information about Student Services, call (866) 2NEVADA.