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NAU students have rough road to graduation

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NAU students have rough road to graduation

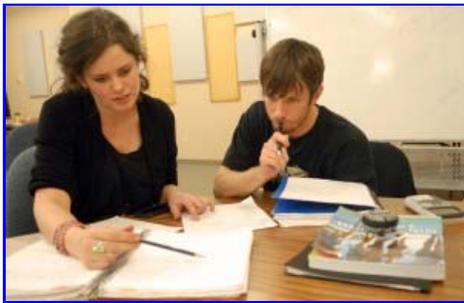
HILLARY DAVIS Sun Staff Reporter azdailysun.com | Posted: Tuesday, March 29, 2011 8:15 am | (0) Comments

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[Buy this photo](#) Josh Biggs Courtney Fey (left) gets help with math during a tutoring session from student James Brand on the campus of NAU. Supplemental instruction groups taught by peers help students keep up, and keep them enrolled. (Josh Biggs/Arizona Daily Sun)



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Emily Webster transferred from Northern Arizona University to Pima Community College in Tucson after finishing her freshman year in Flagstaff in 2009.

A cellist, Webster was a music performance major while at NAU. But she found that making music her focus was draining. In her two semesters at NAU, she struggled through one liberal arts class and had done "absolutely nothing to better myself as a person."

Added Webster: "I think the biggest reason I left was that being a music major was killing the love I had for my instrument and actually turning it into a perverse kind of resentment," she said. "'I can't, I have to practice' was all too familiar to my non-music friends, and not having the college experience I expected really killed it for me."

She is now a psychology major at Pima. She plays her cello in the University of Arizona Philharmonic, which meets twice a week. College and music are still part of her plan, just not how she envisioned them two years ago.

'WE WANT TO DO BETTER'

With thousands of students in the ever-growing incoming classes and about 16,000 students total just in Flagstaff, there is no single reason that

some freshmen don't return or that only half of them stick it out to graduate from NAU.

But the goal is ambitious: By 2020, NAU would like to retain 85 percent of its freshmen, up from about 70 percent today.

That's not so bad in a national context, but in absolute terms, "We want to do better than that," said Karen Pugliesi, vice provost for academic affairs.

There is some momentum. Four of the last five sophomore classes have posted the highest persistence rates since 1994. And this has paralleled NAU's unprecedented enrollment growth -- in raw numbers as well as percentages, NAU is not only drawing but retaining more new students than ever before.

NOT IN UNIVERSITY'S CONTROL

Pugliesi, who oversees undergraduate education, said the retention sell starts at orientation.

"We're investing on the one hand in bringing a certain number of students here each year, and about 29 percent of them leave," she said.

Many reasons for quitting NAU are not necessarily within the university's control, she said, including wanting to move back home and family finances. Some students continue their education elsewhere. The National Student Clearinghouse found that half of NAU's freshman class of 2003 had earned a bachelor's degree there by 2009, and another 14 percent had earned a bachelor's degree or were enrolled at another four-year college.

There are special courses for freshmen called the NAU 100 college transition program. There is also regular advising at the Gateway Student Success Center and a supplemental instruction option -- something like group tutoring led by peers. There's also a range of individual tutoring and study skills classes.

RECAST FRESHMAN YEAR

By extension, NAU is also hoping to increase its six-year graduation rate from about half to 65 percent.

In keeping and engaging students, the university is considering:

- Recasting the freshman year, with defined objectives that freshmen should have met by the end of their first two semesters
- More standardized courses
- Web-based, self-paced courses with the option to "test out" when objectives have been met
- Designating a cadre of faculty just for freshman courses

Pugliesi said persistence comes down to a good academic start, connections to their new home and a broader yet nuanced sense of purpose that explores how relevant their bachelor's degrees will be in the future.

QUALITY, QUANTITY OF EFFORT

The success so far, though steady, has been slow. It's also uneven by demographic groups: Whites are more likely to return for a second year than Native Americans, Hispanics and blacks. Women are also slightly more likely than men to last more than one year.

NAU's much bigger, city-centered sister institutions, Arizona State and University of Arizona, have higher freshman retention rates -- 80 percent and 79 percent, respectively. Pugliesi said that schools like NAU, which are not highly exclusive, do not commonly have retention rates as high as 85 percent.

But she said NAU does not intend to water down its curriculum to meet a higher retention quota.

"Really, the most productive way that we can pursue this is by engaging students right from the start (with) rigorous academic experience complemented by well-aligned co-curricular programming that complements their formal coursework very well, and good solid support that helps them navigate the challenges and achieve their goals to achieve academically," she said.

"We think that what's very important in student academic success and ultimately that is what leads to their persistence or their retention is that the quality and quantity of the effort that they put into their academic work."

\$2.2 MILLION IN AID

David Bousquet, senior vice president of enrollment management & student affairs, said that from one perspective, a student who does not return for a second year isn't paying in tuition or receiving services, so it's a wash.

But the freshmen who do drop out or transfer take about \$2.2 million a year in university aid (scholarships and loans) on which there will be little institutional return. That represents about 22 percent of freshman aid and about 4.7 percent of overall aid.

Retained students do, of course, continue to pay tuition. And as they persist, they help the graduation bottom line.

SO MUCH FREE TUTORING

Inside the math building earlier this week, a classroom buzzed with supplemental tutoring sessions. At one table, James Brand, an exercise science major, helped political science major Courtney Fey figure out how many surfboards a company would have to sell to turn a profit.

Fey, a senior, was working through homework for her quantitative reasoning class, which is required for her degree. She acknowledged that the math class is more freshman-level, but as challenging as it is for her, she wasn't going to let it keep her from graduation.

"To drop out because you don't get it is just not a good excuse," she said. "There's so much free tutoring."

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NAU GRADUATION RATES*

Group 1-yr retention 4-yr grad 6-yr grad

Whites 72.4% 31.1% 50.3%

Hispanics 64.4% 20.7% 46.4%

Blacks 67.9% 7.5% 41.4%

Native Americans 58.7% 5.7% 22.4%

Men: 68.8% 20.6% 41.7%

Women: 70.6% 33.1% 52.3%

OVERALL

NAU 69.8% 28% 48%

ASU 80% NA 56%

UofA 79% NA 58%

* Most recent data

Source: NAU Office of Planning and Institutional Research

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