

Reaching Individual Success and Empowerment (RISE): A First-generation, Co-curricular, Academic, and Social Engagement Model

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The performance funding model in Florida challenges institutions in the state university system to develop effective teaching strategies for all students. Florida Atlantic University (FAU) recognized that one metric could result in increasing the number of students who exhibit risk factors that negatively affect graduation rates. Using Schlossberg's Transition Theory, FAU developed Reaching Individual Success and Empowerment (RISE); a research informed program that engages students in co-curricular, high-impact educational practices. Preliminary findings suggests that the RISE Program may be instrumental in curtailing drop-out rates of first-generation, low socio-economic students in spite of their risk factors.

INTRODUCTION

Florida Atlantic University (FAU) is a public tier two research institution within the Florida State University System (SUS). The Florida SUS is governed by a Board of Governors and each institution within the SUS is governed by a Board of Trustees. This structure allows for varied levels of oversight and accountability aimed at ensuring effectiveness and efficiency within the SUS. Located in South Florida, FAU is the most ethnically diverse institution within the SUS and home to over 30,000 undergraduate and graduate degree seeking students. The current administration has demonstrated great interest in advancing the institution as a whole, but has also made explicit commitments to diversity and inclusion, social justice and human rights, and global engagement initiatives. This is evident in the institution's foundational documents and in the budget allocations for each of these critical areas (Florida Atlantic University, 2018). Despite the increasing pressures of the state's performance funding model, FAU continues to seek ways to sustain its commitment to providing high quality education to all students.

PERFORMANCE FUNDING MODEL

State allocations for public institutions in the state of Florida are determined by a Performance Funding Model (State University System of Florida, 2018). The model provides eight metrics that are required of all institutions within the SUS and two "choice" metrics that are selected by the Board of Governors and Board of Trustees respectively. Each metric is evaluated based on "excellence or improvement" and has five benchmarks ranging from low to high. According to the state's funding model

overview, “to ensure each university is striving to excel and improve on key metrics, there must be a financial incentive” (State University System of Florida, 2018). The financial incentive includes continued, or restored, base state funding allocations and an opportunity to attain new additional funding. Institutions that do not demonstrate excellence or improvement are required to submit an improvement plan. While institutions in the bottom three of the rankings lose their state funding and the dollars are reallocated to the three highest ranking institutions.

PELL GRANT RECIPIENTS

One of Florida’s performance funding model metrics is the “University Access Rate”, which measures the number of undergraduate students with a Pell Grant who are admitted into a SUS institution (State University System of Florida, 2018). The intention of this metric is to ensure that all students, regardless of socio-economic status, are provided access to quality public education. The National Post-Secondary Student Aid Study of 2011 indicated that almost all Pell Grant recipients, 95.1%, have family incomes at or below 250% of the poverty line (p.1-2). Additionally, based on the Persistence Risk Index, almost half are considered at-risk of academic failure (Horton, J. 2015). Risk factors include coming from single parent homes, being first-generation, and enrolling half-time or less in the first year; 58%, 43%, and 35% respectively. Nonetheless, in order for institutions within the Florida SUS to do well or improve in this metric, they must take on the challenge that comes with providing access to students of such complex demographics.

THE CHALLENGE

Requiring institutions to increase the number of students receiving a Pell Grant, provides educational access to students who may otherwise be excluded. However, by increasing the number of students who receive Pell Grants, you also increase the number of students who have risk factors that negatively impact persistence, retention, and graduation rates. Hence, scoring well in the university access metric may, consequently, negatively impact two other metrics; academic progress rate and timely graduation. In addition, the mere transition from home to college, for this particular population, may make students feel as if they do not belong in college or that they do not matter (Schlossberg, 1989). Compounded by intersections of race, ethnicity, and other demographic characteristics, these students will not only have difficulties transitioning into college, but progressing through and out of transition.

SCHLOSSBERG’S TRANSITION THEORY

Nancy Schlossberg believes that whenever there is a change in one’s life, whether anticipated or unanticipated, there is an impact that takes place at the time of the change and throughout the change. According to the Schlossberg’s Transition Theory, transition may be attributed to a singular event, such as starting college, but the transition itself is a process of different stages (Schlossberg, 2011). Goodman et al. (2006) describes the stages of transition as “moving in,” “moving through,” and “moving out”. Individuals must develop coping strategies for each phase of the transition in order to successfully progress and grow from the transition. Furthermore, Schlossberg asserts that when there is a change in one’s environment, relationships, or role, the potential for feeling marginal and unimportant increases; which consequently impacts one’s ability to adapt and progress through transitional phases. Therefore, institutions of higher education should consider the types of transition students may be experiencing in order to develop and implement strategies to help students effectively cope with the different phases of transition. In particular, the types of transition experienced by vulnerable populations such as first-generation students, since their transitional experiences are often compounded by other high risk factors that affect academic progress and completion.

RISE

One solution to address risk factors associated with Pell Grant recipients and attributed to Schlossberg's Transition Theory, is the development of the Reaching Individual Success and Empowerment, or RISE, Program. RISE is a research informed strategy that is continuously assessed for impact and effectiveness. Since its development in fall 2015, the program has evolved and adapted to serve one of FAU's most vulnerable populations; first-generation, low socio-economic students. The main objective of RISE, is to help students effectively cope with transition through intentional engagement and high-impact programs. In addition, the RISE Program incentivizes students with financial resources such as grants and assistance with textbooks.

The pillars of the RISE program are designed to be intrusive, meaning every participant of the RISE program must complete requirements tied to each of the five pillars and are contacted by RISE mentors who monitor academic progress throughout the semester. The five pillars are: cultural competence development, leadership and civic engagement, mentoring, career readiness, and academic support. Each participant is provided with a list of programs that may be used to fulfill the requirement of each pillar. These programs range from awareness and self-empowerment activities to high-impact strategies. In addition, participants of RISE become part of the First and Proud registered student organization; allowing these students to gain a sense of community with other first-generation students. The First and Proud registered student organization collaborates with the Office of First-Generation Student Success to develop opportunities for first-generation students to not only interact with each other, but to interact with FAU faculty and staff who were also first-generation students.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

The RISE Program was established in the fall semester of 2015 with a total of 66 participants. Program criteria and requirements have been modified at the end of each assessment cycle in order to best meet the needs of our students and increase programmatic and individual impact. Since its inception, the RISE program has accepted a total of 298 students within five academic semesters; fall 2015 through fall 2017. The fall to fall persistence rate of RISE participants was 70% and 75% respectively for 2015-2016 and 2016-2017. In addition, RISE participants who were enrolled full-time (12 or more credits) completed 87% of attempted credit hours. These numbers are significant considering more than 25% of first-generation students drop-out in their first year and only 11% of low socioeconomic first-generation students graduate within six years (EAB, 2016, p. 10).

Our data also demonstrated that RISE participants, although initially required to complete at least one high-impact educational practice, continue to stay engaged and involved in other high-impact practices. For instance, 59% of participants participated in 2 or more high-impact educational practices and 28% went on to assume leadership positions as Student Government officials, orientation leaders, and resident assistants, to name a few.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Data collected from RISE participants from fall 2015 – fall 2017 provide insight on how to best support first-generation student success. Based on our findings and conclusions, we issue a series of recommendations. Recommendations include:

1. Establishing an office dedicated to first-generation student success, in which the director serves as a point person and advocate for first-generation students. Their role should include translating the complexities of higher education to first-generation students and helping them navigate institutional processes effectively.
2. Intentionally redesigning new student orientation. The redesign should account for the beginning phase of transition and provide an "intimate" setting for first-generation students to connect and explore unfamiliar academic and social expectations of transitioning from high

school to higher education. Care should be taken in order to avoid further marginalization of target population.

3. Empowering students to develop, and sustain, a student organization designed to serve as a peer support network for first-generation students.
4. Developing an institutional first-generation advisory committee in order to align resources, and marketing and communication efforts that are focused on first-generation student success from admittance, matriculation, graduation, and job placement.
5. Working with institutional advancement and research to identify external funding resources that holistically support first-generation student success initiatives. These initiatives should complement both the academic and social success of first-generation students, while combating risk factors such as socio-economic needs.

In order to retain and graduate first-generation students, institutions of higher education must understand their associated risk factors. In addition, programs developed for this target population should consider Schlossberg's Transition Theory, as well as Schlossberg's Theory on Marginality and Mattering. Transition, according to Schlossberg, occurs in phases (Schlossberg, 2011). Therefore, higher education professionals must assess the needs of first-generation students and track their academic progress throughout the different phases of transition. This continuous assessment begins when a first-generation student is enrolled and should continue through graduation.

CONCLUSION

Performance funding models are challenging public institutions of higher education to develop and adopt effective teaching and learning strategies for all students. However, a large percentage of freshman are transitioning to college with a number of risk-factors that may negatively impact persistence, retention, and graduation rate. Using Schlossberg's Transition Theory, FAU gained a better perspective of how transition affects first-generation and low socio-economic students. Reaching Individual Success and Empowerment (RISE) is a research informed program that intentionally engages first-generation low socio-economic students in co-curricular and high-impact educational practices. Data collected over five academic semesters demonstrates a definite impact on completion of attempted credits and fall to fall persistence. In addition, more than half of RISE participants exceeded program requirements and were involved in two or more high-impact educational practices. More than a quarter of participants assumed student leadership roles. Data suggests that FAU's RISE Program may be instrumental in increasing academic progress and timely graduation of first-generation low socio-economic students, despite of their academic risk factors.

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