

Reinvent the First-Year Experience

THE CHALLENGE

Stem a worrisome slide in first-year retention.

THE APPROACH

Start from scratch, fostering relationships and a sense of belonging on campus

THE RESULT

After just three years, the university's first-to-second-year retention is up nine percentage points.

WHEN THE FRESHMAN retention rate at Southern Utah University fell five percentage points in five years, college leaders knew they had a problem. They just weren't sure what to do about it.

The college had tried several "high impact" practices that are supposed to help with retention, but they weren't stemming the slide.

At a loss for solutions, administrators hired a chief retention officer, Jared Tippets, who had been the director of student success at Purdue University. Tippets, whose formal title is vice president for student affairs, started from scratch with his team, building

students arrive on campus, they're given a choice between boisterous welcome parties and more intimate gatherings. Peer mentors offer to take students to their first club meeting so they don't have to go alone.

New students complete a questionnaire that asks about their financial, emotional, and social well-being before the semester starts, and again three weeks in. When a student shows signs of struggle, an adviser, faculty member, or peer mentor will intervene.

As with most major overhauls, there was some initial pushback. Faculty members, Tippets says, didn't always appreciate being told how to help their students. So administrators stopped telling them to send a specific email at a specific time, and started asking them to reach out to students in their own way.

Meanwhile, the college continues to innovate, aiming for a retention rate of 75 percent. To generate new ideas, it hosts a "shark tank" competition, inviting anyone to present a proposal for improving retention to the president's council. The contest has led to the creation of a peer-mentoring program and the hiring of a "withdrawal coordinator" who looks for ways to keep would-be



KIM RAFF FOR THE CHRONICLE

Incoming freshmen and their parents can visit with current students at Southern Utah U.

a comprehensive "first-year experience" that focused on fostering a sense of belonging.

The overhaul worked. First-to-second-year retention has risen nearly nine percentage points over three years, reaching 73 percent in 2018. In the process, the college has saved over \$5 million in tuition revenue from students who stayed enrolled.

Under the new approach, advisers and peer mentors reach out to students an average of 38 times from when they pay their admission deposit to when they move in. When

dropouts enrolled.

Other changes have been driven by data. After surveys showed that students were continuing to leave for financial reasons, the college hired a financial-literacy expert. And when personality assessments revealed an uptick in introverts, it added more small-group sessions to welcome week.

"Welcome weeks are notoriously programmed for extroverts," Tippets said. "A lot of our students struggle in those environments."