

The Implementation of an Academic Excellence Society as a targeted retention strategy

Natalie Oostergo

Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia
n.oostergo@griffith.edu.au

This showcase presentation reports on the implementation and evaluation of a co-curricular retention strategy, the Academic Excellence Society (ACES). The ACES strategy is designed to provide an integrated social and academic experience which targets commencing students at risk of early departure through transfer to other universities, termed “flight risk” students. ACES was initially established in the School of Humanities and then adopted as an institutional strategy. The findings provide support for the value of a complementary School based honours program that socially integrates peer-to-peer and peer-to-faculty relationships and provides a vehicle for intrinsic motivation in fields of study. The process of implementation across the School of Humanities and into the institution highlights key success factors that are transportable across tertiary institutions. Firstly, entry criteria must be developed that maintain academic standards, but are not so high that they exclude non-traditional or at risk students. Secondly, invitations must be sent just after the publication of semester results to maximise ACES as a flight risk retention strategy. Finally, ACES must be contextualised for students in their relative disciplines through social media and face-to-face activities to maintain their interest in the society and in their faculty.

Student feedback (246 students- 24% response rate) affirms the perceived effectiveness of this ACES process in terms of motivation, academic confidence, and social integration, which can also be seen in the stable pattern of GPA/academic achievement between commencing semesters and between years. Retention from year one to year two is strong across commencement groups and across ACES programs (82%-97%) and is well above that of the overall cohort. However, these results should be interpreted with caution as the causal link between ACES membership and retention is also impacted by other strong causal factors such as high retention amongst students who experience early success at university and high retention amongst students with strong GPAs. Nevertheless, the large numbers of early engager, flight risk, and at risk of attrition students participating in ACES mitigate many of these factors, and point to the success of ACES with these groups. Overall, the positive effects of ACES on the performance and retention of at risk student groups not just within their commencing year, but across the student life cycle is substantive, and can be replicated across a range of disciplinary contexts.