Student Affairs and Advancement Quarterly Update

Inside:
Fulbright IEA Seminar scholarship recipient Brenda Rudiger travels abroad to discover a similar-but-different education system.

For many students, the road to success is dotted with setbacks, learning curves, and steep challenges. Michigan Tech paves the way for access and attainment by helping all crazy smart Huskies.

Higher Road
Universities have two options to improve undergraduate student success metrics. Some institutions fortify retention rates by limiting admission exclusively to high achievers. Michigan Tech opts for a different route: improved resources for all students.

An internal team formed in 2011 to provide tangible recommendations for improved first-to-second-year retention, meaning the percentage of undergraduate freshmen who return the following year. Since the mid-1990s, Tech’s retention rate hovered between 76 and 84 percent. The student success team, led by Tim Schulz, developed an AQIP (Academic Quality Improvement Plan) Action Project in 2012.

Data suggested students who participated in the Honors Program, student success courses, the Pavlis Institute for Global Technology and Leadership, or residential learning communities were retained beyond their first year at a higher rate (85–90 percent compared to 80–83 percent). In addition, data from the multiliteracies, math, and chemistry learning centers showed five to 10 percent higher retention compared to those who did not.

The group set a benchmark of 85 percent retention. To reach that goal, the AQIP Action Project recommended Tech develop and expand high-impact educational programs and practices.

What are high-impact programs? They are widely tested, active teaching and learning practices proven to be beneficial for
college students from many backgrounds, especially underserved students. High-impact programming demands considerable time and effort, promotes learning outside of the classroom, requires meaningful interactions with faculty and students, encourages diverse collaboration, and provides frequent and substantive feedback. National Survey of Student Engagement founding director George Kuh recommends institutions aspire for all students to participate in at least two high-impact programs over the course of their undergraduate experience (NSSE, 2007). Participation can be life-changing (Kuh, 2008).

The University set out to secure funding for many of the programs you see today, including the Pavlis Honors College, the Waino Wahtera Center for Student Success, and the Jackson Center for Teaching and Learning.

The impact of these student success initiatives was immediately apparent. Retention grew from 82 to 85 percent from 2013 to 2014 and 85 to 87 percent from 2014 to 2015, surpassing the benchmark in less than three years.

High-impact practices demand time and effort, promote learning outside the classroom, require meaningful interactions with faculty and students, encourage collaboration, and provide frequent and substantive feedback. The outcome was perfectly timed as state and federal entities shifted to performance-based metrics.

Universities across the country grapple with retention, degree completion rates, and time to the degree. “There is no magic bullet when it comes to retention, but it’s clear we now have the tools in place—and it’s working,” says Les Cook, vice president for student affairs and advancement.

It was once the norm to assume the students who enter as freshman would not walk across the stage for commencement. Student affairs leadership at Michigan Tech believes that “Another One Bites the Dust” is no longer an acceptable outcome. “Retention is fluid. We will grow and adapt to meet the needs of our students,” Cook adds.
We would be on the train or bus by 8 a.m., and wouldn’t be back to our rooms until 8 or 10 p.m.,” she said. “One of the surprising cultural differences was that we were told where to be, and were expected to find our way there on our own. It was an adventure.”

That difference manifested itself in the education of German students. Rudiger noted there’s not as much “hand holding” of German-university students—although, most of them tend to be older.

The program was packed with behind-the-scenes visits to high schools and universities, including dining halls. The group also visited government agencies and an entrepreneurship incubator, which Rudiger said was very similar to those in the U.S.

Differences were evident in alumni relations and fundraising—Rudiger’s primary roles at Michigan Tech.

“They are in their infancy if they exist at all,” she said. “They realize the importance of alumni to career services and mentoring for their students, but they are beginning to look at engaging their alumni at a higher level. So far, it’s been very transactional, ‘You do the work, you get your degree, and you’re out the door.’”

Rudiger observed more key differences. “A big surprise to my Fulbright cohorts who were in recruitment, career services, students services, and international programs was the very low level of staffing in those areas,” she said. “A lot of those functions are centralized through their office of Studentenwerk.”

Rudiger noted that in Germany, students are making big decisions about their future at a young age, and it can be very hard for them to change tracks.

“They’re choosing a path which includes either a traditional university, a vocational school, or an applied sciences school like Michigan Tech,” she said.

Rudiger believes all Tech students should experience international study. And EU universities are making this easier by offering more English language higher-level STEM classes.

“The importance of taking that time to learn another culture, and not lose pace in your studies is critically important,” she said. “The more our students study abroad, the better prepared they will be.”

Staff interested in learning more about IEA seminar opportunities can contact Rudiger or visit www.cies.org.