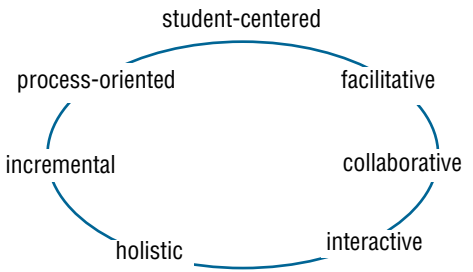


The Culture of Retention

The Culture of Retention *Key Elements*

Culture is a group’s shared values and beliefs, which in turn inform the group’s attitudes, thinking, decisions, and behavior. Culture evolves imperceptibly, going unnoticed until reflection helps us identify the characteristics of the new order. The characteristics of RIT’s emerging culture of retention began with a top-down leadership mandate, which was captured in statistics, goals, and objectives, and a non-material culture of retention has developed subliminally. Culture grows from deep within, changing the context for everything we do.

A culture of retention can be described as:



A culture of retention includes the following five elements:

- Assessment and Feedback**
- Mentoring/Advising/Coaching**
- Academic Support**
- Collaboration and Community**
- Faculty Development**

The five elements overlap and complement each other. Each element is essential to a thriving, dynamic culture that attracts and retains talented students, faculty, and staff.

Assessment and Feedback

A culture of retention is student-centered. If we can diagnostically determine students’ background knowledge and skills, we can adjust curriculum to reach more students more effectively.

Placement tests such as the math placement exam and the LAQE (Liberal Arts Qualifying Exam) support student learning by establishing the starting point for instruction according to the student’s level of preparation. Subsequently, frequent quizzing or short essays allow students to receive valuable assessment of their learning without the pressure of conferring a grade. Likewise, classroom assessment techniques at the beginning of and throughout an entire course can provide important feedback for the instructor about students’ understanding of the material. Mid-quarter and final evaluation using a portfolio approach or weighting grades to measure learning as a

After a year’s break, the *ASC Quarterly* is proud to reappear with a new format for our readers. What better time to connect the old with the new than in President Destler’s inaugural year as RIT’s ninth president! We hail the new leadership, and in this issue we take an opportunity to reflect on an important aspect of RIT’s subtly evolving culture.

President Destler invites us to imagine RIT “as the first innovation university.” The new president’s

vision is compelling, and he balances his passion for possibility with practical challenges. He understands that the fundamental issue of undergraduate retention is among our top priorities.

In his Six-Month Review Memo, President Destler challenges RIT

- to increase persistence from the first to the second year to “92% [from its current 89%] over five years,”
- to “achieve an equivalent 6-year graduation rate of 80% [from

our current 64%]...[making RIT] ...comparable with the best private colleges and universities.”

These are daunting goals. However, from our cross-college perspective and our interactions with students, faculty, and staff, the Academic Support Center has observed a substantial shift from individual and isolated retention efforts to a more unified and deeply ingrained RIT culture of retention.

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result of instruction are also good practices. By combining *diagnostic assessment and frequent feedback*, RIT can engender a more positive and constructive learning environment, which in turn helps build retention.

Another good practice is the School of Mathematical Sciences’ “C or better” policy for calculus sequences. This policy is based on the fundamental principle that demonstrated competence in one course provides the best foundation for success in the next. Requiring a minimum C grade before allowing the student to enroll in the next course in a sequence reinforces foundational knowledge, which, in turn, helps students be more successful in subsequent courses. Academically successful students tend to remain enrolled; academically unsuccessful students (those earning D, F, or W) tend to be more likely to leave.

Mentoring/Advising/Coaching

The power of guided one-on-one interaction is inherently facilitative, collaborative, interactive, and substantial. Examples include FYE coaching and meetings with advisers. Most students want personal interaction, especially with their teachers. *Knowing our students as individuals* automatically builds relationships, and relationships build retention.

FYE coaching is an integral component of the First Year Enrichment (FYE) Program, creating an early opportunity for incoming first-year students to form a meaningful connection to an academic professional. This individualized attention and collaborative partnership empowers first-year students to better realize their potential and increases

the likelihood of success in the first year at RIT. In the process of FYE coaching, the first-year student and the FYE coach partner to define and achieve success in the first year of collegiate life at RIT.

A great example of a cross-college RIT advising initiative is the Institute Advising Office. Dedicated to helping RIT students explore and identify alternative majors/programs, the Institute Advising Office provides sound, objective information about RIT’s undergraduate programs. IAO supports all phases in the internal transfer process, from preliminary information-gathering to the actual transfer process.

Academic Support

In a culture of retention, learning is recognized as an incremental process *and many students need academic support to help them master the level and amount of content being taught*. No longer the sole domain of learning centers, academic support is more frequently being built into curricula. Supplemental instruction, in-class workshops, structured study groups, learning centers within colleges, and tutoring are being used widely across RIT’s campus. Expanding contact time with students and helping them engage more actively in course content yields better learning.

The concept of integrating academic support into content is best exemplified by the current model used in the School of Mathematical Sciences. SMS has developed three different calculus course sequences to

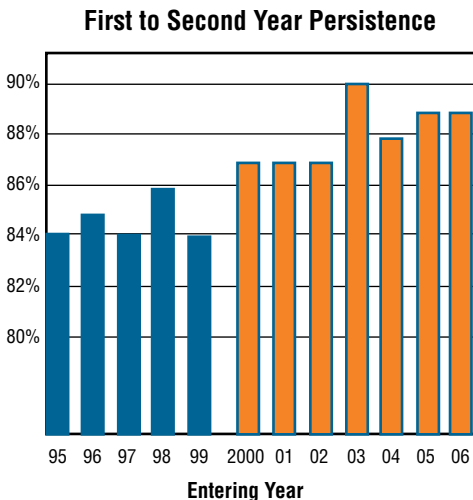
accommodate various levels of preparation. Each course devotes 25 to 33% of in-class time to problem solving and creative thinking in a “workshop” environment where teams of students practice applying the skills and ideas of calculus. Then, in addition to office hours, SMS faculty are available to help students in the Bates Study Center on a daily basis. Finally, at the end of each quarter, the SMS hosts *MathCrash!*, an event in which faculty and students gather to prepare for the final exams in an informal setting (the COS atrium) with pizza and soda.

Retention efforts within the colleges are becoming more purposeful. For example, in the winter of 2006 the mechanical engineering department instituted a probation and suspension program aimed at increasing awareness and implementation of academic success strategies by students who earned grades that caused them to be placed on probation. The program uses a combination of assessment tools (MBTI, Felder’s Learning Styles Assessment, LASSI) and subsequent follow-up to help students identify the issues that are causing them to earn low grades in their courses. Students meet with the Director of Student Services several times throughout the quarter to review their progress and make changes to their new strategies as appropriate. The final meeting of the quarter is scheduled for week 9, so that an early referral to CRP can be completed in the event that a student may not earn grades that will bring him or her above the probation level.

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FYE & Persistence: A Correlation

The FYE program was initiated with the entering class of 2000, which corresponds with a significant “bump” in the first to second year persistence rate which has been maintained or increased every year since.



The School of Mathematical Sciences takes its responsibility for student success and retention seriously.

SMS successfully instituted the Mathematics Placement Exam (MPE) in 2001. The exam is designed to assess students’ grasp of the concepts and mastery of the skills (basic algebra skills, knowledge of basic geometry and trigonometry, and a basic understanding of functions and their graphs) that are necessary for their success in calculus. The results of this assessment are communicated to students’ academic advisers, and, based on students’ performance, recommendations are made on how to place them in calculus sequences.

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Collaboration and Community

It takes a village. Learning communities for first-year students have proven to increase retention, especially in the first and second year of study. Faculty members work together as a team and encourage students to see connections among disciplines. Teaming also builds stronger emotional ties. Students who feel connected to faculty and staff feel more connected to the university and have more reason to stay at RIT.

A learning community is a “team of faculty and students...working collaboratively toward shared academic goals in environments in which competition is de-emphasized...[and] faculty and students alike have both opportunity and responsibility to learn from and help teach each other” (Angelo, Thomas, “The Campus as Learning Community,” *AAHE Bulletin*, May 1997/3).

Typically, learning communities move fixed cohorts of students through clusters of simultaneous courses. Teaching methodologies are cooperative, team-based, and practice-rich, often with shared content and assignments appearing in more than one class.

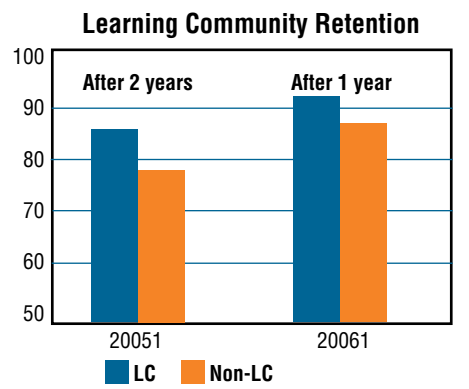
Kit Mayberry, Vice President of Academic Affairs, points out several relevant aspects of learning communities that are proven predictors of increased retention:

Students quickly connect with other students in their major, establishing friendships from the first day of class.

Year-long relationships with faculty are established in the context of small classes and the larger cooperative, collaborative community.

Teaching methods tend to be highly interactive, and create an environment that develops a deep and comprehensive understanding of integrated course content.

RIT’s learning communities, which began in 2004, are cohorts of approximately 25 to 30 first-year students from the same major who are scheduled into two to three of the same classes over two to three academic quarters. This academic year, we have over 40 learning communities. RIT’s learning communities enjoy higher first-year retention rates than the non-learning community population.



Faculty Development

A vital sign of RIT’s growing culture of retention is support for faculty development. The **Teaching and Learning Center (TLC)**, created in 2002, promotes and supports student learning through faculty development and teaching excellence. The TLC is an information clearinghouse, advocate for effective teaching, and a provider of

programs and services. The TLC hosts the annual Faculty Institute on Teaching and Learning, where faculty and instructional support staff learn about research, best practices, ideas, and strategies.

Since 2000, the RIT Faculty Learning Community has offered faculty an opportunity to enhance teaching and learning at RIT by participating in a year-long group experience in which they learn about current pedagogical practice, develop a classroom research project, and present their results to their peers, both at FITL and in a formal written report.

This year the School for Mathematical Sciences has instituted the Classroom Observation Committee. Members of the committee visit the classes of other SMS faculty and make suggestions about how the delivery of course content can be fine tuned. College instructors tend to have plenty of content knowledge but some have had little preparation in pedagogy. Peer classroom observation can be an effective way to hone teaching skills within a discipline.

FYE has started to implement peer classroom observation, which can be extremely effective if done in a structured format. Other departments in the ASC and in the colleges are exploring peer assessment for their instructors.

RIT Student Life Outside the Classroom: Bricks and Rituals

Ritual is an enormous part of any kind of culture. Several RIT events have come to define the unique RIT experience. Brick City Homecoming each October draws students, families, and alumni. The Women’s Center’s Light Up the Night walk has become an annual event. Graduation has become an event filled with new traditions, including processions, banners, and bagpipes.

President Destler’s Imagine RIT Innovation and Creativity Festival will be a key opportunity to build community both within RIT and within the larger Rochester community.

LOOKING FORWARD . . .

RIT’s culture of retention continues to evolve. Initiatives aimed at first-year students are showing results, and now attention is turning to attrition among second- and third-year students. Examples of efforts include the summer Sophomore Boot Camp, the Institute Advising Office, and policies for grade exclusion and internal transfers. Looking forward, probation programs that combine content support (within a college) and personal support (through advising, mentoring, or coaching) warrant continued attention.

The Computer Science Department has been working hard to impact student retention at RIT.

The recently completed CS Student/Tutoring Center offers free tutoring 7 days a week to all students in the programming sequence and theory courses. Recently, the department has embraced Supplemental Instruction (in addition to participation in the AIM program), which employs upperclassmen to assist students in clarifying difficult concepts taught in the CS curriculum. These additions, along with a continued focus on quality customer service and academic advising, have made a positive impact on satisfaction and retention of students in the CS program.

RIT has made great strides in cultivating a friendly, helpful, and more student-accessible environment.

- Since 2000, RIT’s Retention Initiatives have included:
- First Year Enrichment**—a cross-college first-year requirement for all entering freshmen
 - Learning Communities**—moving fixed cohorts of first-year students through clusters of simultaneous courses in which content and assignments are cross-referential
 - Professional Staff Advisers**—who work in consort with academic advisers, department heads, and program chairs to assist students
 - Institute Advising Office**—which facilitates internal transfers and provides cross-college advising to students who wish to change majors
 - Center for Multidisciplinary Studies**—which serves nontraditional students but also provides a cross-disciplinary option for traditional students
 - Systemic Initiatives** such as the Early Alert system, grade exclusions for internal transfers, unmet needs for course registration, Tiger Tracks to help students determine time-to-graduation, and Leave-of-Absence as an alternative to Institute Withdrawal.

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Academic Support Center

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Navigate Your Way

Academic Support Center

To support our mission, we offer a wide range of classes, workshops, and one-on-one instruction and consultation to promote student success and enhance retention. Services include drop-in math and writing instruction, academic assessment, study skills workshops, Learning Support Services, and the College Restoration Program. Check out our current offerings at www.rit.edu/asc.

ASC Quarterly Editorial Board

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Janet Helmuth
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Many thanks to our colleagues who have contributed to this edition of the ASC Quarterly:

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Lisa Fraser
Latty Goodwin
Sophia Maggelakis
Kit Mayberry
Lynne Mazadoorian
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Tina Sturgis
Lynn Wild

RIT’s Culture of Retention has evolved at a steady rate. Programmatically, there is a range of initiatives currently being offered. Here are descriptions and resources for some of RIT’s special programs designed to foster retention, persistence, and student success.

The **Academic Intervention and Mentoring (AIM)** initiative is a unique program that combines content support with personal one-on-one structured mentoring from a learning assistant. Research tells us that students who receive a grade of D, F, or W in the first year have a higher likelihood of not persisting to the next year in college. AIM allows invited students to immediately repeat an identified course in which the student received a D, F, or W; participate in supplemental instruction (SI) sessions offered for these identified courses; access residence hall tutoring; and meet regularly with the AIM Learning Assistant. For more information, please go to www.rit.edu/aim.

Learning Support Services (LSS), a department within the Academic Support Center, offers a fee-based Structured Monitoring Program to all students at RIT. While it is designed for students who anticipate difficulty navigating the complexities of the college environment, including students with documented learning disabilities, research tells us that a close connection with a faculty or staff member is a major factor in student success and therefore plays a role in RIT’s retention efforts. A growing number of students are being referred to LSS from all colleges on campus to assist students on probation and retain them in their current academic program. For more information, please go to www.rit.edu/asc/lss.

For students facing academic suspension, the most intense level of academic support is RIT’s unique **College Restoration Program. CRP** is a single-quarter intervention program that combines a credit equivalent curriculum in study skills and time management with up to two credit courses determined by the referring academic department. In addition, students can take credit equivalent classes in math, reading, writing, personal development, and career exploration. Each student is assigned an Academic Support Center mentor for weekly meetings. Successful completion of CRP may result in reinstatement in an RIT academic department. For more information, go to www.rit.edu/asc/crp.