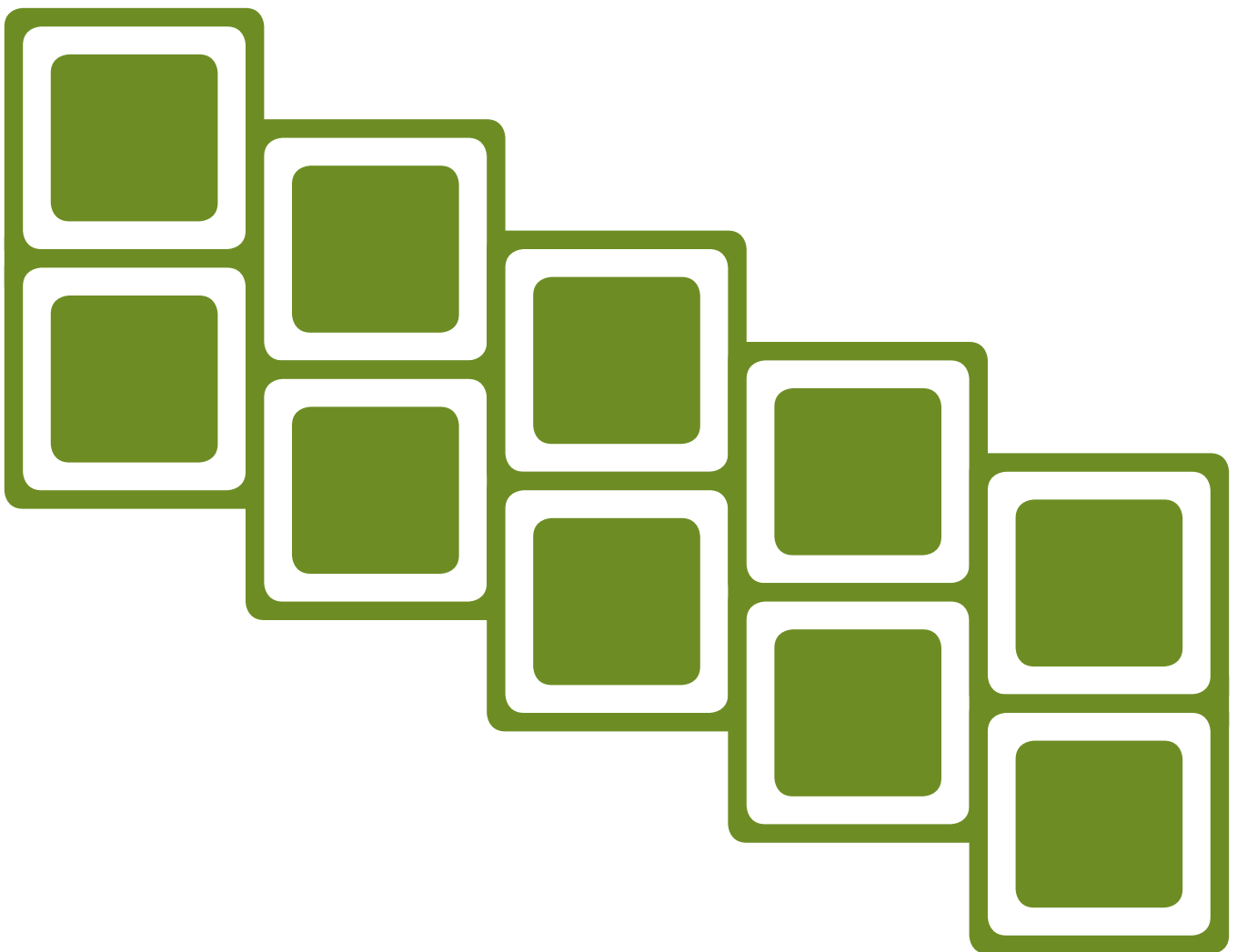


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It's Better in the Summer: Building a Successful Transition to College and Fostering Student Success

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Abstract

Beyond the concept of bridge programs and conditional admission, summer session also offers new students a tremendous opportunity to transition successfully to the rigors of college study and adjust to leaving home as they navigate new environments and people. In 2014 Western Carolina University (WCU) launched Catamount GAP, an early-start summer session for regularly admitted students. Modeling best practices from the Academic Success Program, a bridge program for conditionally admitted students, WCU expanded the horizon to promote a first-year experience summer program called FYE Summer, a Summer Learning Community program that includes both regularly admitted students and conditionally admitted students. With a pedagogy grounded in the high-impact practices as defined by AAC&U (Association of American Colleges and Universities), both programs are designed and staffed to build a solid foundation for success beyond summer. Students earn 7 credits in a 5-week session that includes support networks, mentoring, and experiential learning and engagement. Students are supported with a case-management team who assist with personal transition, supplemental instruction for academic transition, and co-curricular programming designed to build social interaction and community.

Foundations

Founded in 1889, Western Carolina University (WCU) is a regional comprehensive university in Cullowhee, North Carolina. The 600-acre campus includes 13 residence buildings that accommodate the required residency for first- and second-year students. Current enrollment is 10,340 students with 8,821 undergraduate and 1,519 graduate students. Of the total student population, 55% are female and 45% male; 99% are U.S. citizens and 91% in-state residents. The current freshman retention is 80%, with a six-year graduation rate of 58%.

The Academic Success Program

In 1975 WCU established the Academic Success Program (ASP), a summer bridge program for conditionally admitted students. In the mid-1990s, the program moved from Student Affairs to become jointly coordinated by the Advising Center and Residential Living, and in 2001 program coordination moved completely to the Advising Center. In 2011 the program was moved to First Year Experience (FYE) and in 2013, amidst a second reorganization, FYE (and ASP) moved to the newly created Division of Student Success.

ASP enrollment is determined by the Office of Admissions, creating enrollment variables beyond Summer Learning Community (SLC) program control. Student enrollments between 2007 and 2014 averaged 136, with a range between 102 and 164. In 2015, with the added emphasis on summer enrollment and new programs, ASP enrollment leaped to 170.

Funding for ASP is derived completely from summer revenue, except for professional staff. The program maintains 90% of net tuition dollars (after paying faculty salaries) and 10% is shared with participating academic colleges.

Building on Success

Designed to fulfill the university strategic plan to increase and enhance summer offerings, the SLC program launched in 2014. It includes ASP and the newly formed Catamount GAP, so named for a landmark rock face near the campus. SLC enrolls new freshmen who are accepted to WCU for the fall via regular admission criteria but who elect to get an early start. ASP continues to function as a conditional admission opportunity for selected students. Both SLC and Catamount GAP share the same administrative and structural framework, including timelines, support structures, and a liberal studies curriculum emphasis.

The SLC program provides a transition experience for students who will benefit from the added support and the smaller class size afforded by a summer program. With an average of seven credits completed before fall semester, students make room in their future schedules for opportunities such as study abroad or internships but are still able to finish in four years. The five-week summer

session is preceded by a three-day orientation. In a learning community framework, students live on campus and participate in university-sponsored programs and activities designed to help students connect with the local region and community.

Catamount GAP

Catamount GAP goals are consistent with those of many institutions, such as the Freshman Summer Start Program at University of California–Santa Barbara (UCSB) (Lytle & Gallucci, 2015), and the University of Connecticut (UConn) First Summer program (Cowan, 2015). Adopting a hybrid approach in developing a program open to any admitted student situates WCU's Catamount GAP program among institutional pioneers (UCSB), as well as those in their early stages (UConn).

The WCU summer program has three unique features:

- supplemental instruction,
- case management teams that include faculty, and
- peer academic leaders.¹

In the inaugural year, 2014, Catamount GAP enrolled 62 students who were divided into three cohorts: two cohorts for general studies and a third for future teachers. In 2015 Catamount GAP enrolled 96 students, which represented a 55% increase. Students were enrolled into six class cohorts:

- three for general studies,
- one for future teachers,
- one new cohort for students accepted to the Honors College,² and
- one new cohort for engineering majors.

The engineering cohort is designed to support students who need to improve mathematics readiness in order to be successful in the engineering program. Using placement criteria, students are placed in one of three mathematics courses. All students in the engineering cohort attend the engineering seminar and university studies courses as a single group.

The 2016 plan includes six themed groups, with the addition of two new cohorts designed for students in the health science disciplines, including one specifically for pre-nursing majors. The nursing cohort will include chemistry, a course that can often become a roadblock for students in this discipline.

¹ Additional details about the program may be accessed online at www.wcu.edu/learn/summer-school/index.aspx.

² See www.wcu.edu/learn/academic-enrichment/the-honors-college/ for Honors College information.

Teamwork to Framework

Leadership and Partners

The SLC program, under the supervision of the Division of Student Success, was charged in winter 2013 to develop new summer learning communities in Catamount GAP (to launch in 2014) and to focus attention on success measures for the ASP. Securing the support of university leadership and campus-wide buy-in, as well as partnerships across Academic and Student Affairs, was (and remains) critical.

The first objective was to garner support from upper administration units. The second objective was to recruit students and families, leading to intensive work with the marketing department and the admissions office. The creation of a robust and effective program requires dedicated attention to the details relating to planning, calendars, finance, and a myriad of other logistics. A series of conversations and strategy sessions were held with the academic colleges and departments involved, as well as with departments in Academic and Student Affairs that offer services and support to all students. These meetings resulted in the development of the architecture needed to support the programs.

Summer Curriculum

Not all courses are equal, especially in the summer. It is important to identify courses that meet liberal studies requirements and those courses less likely to have been earned via early credits, whether through advance placement or early college transfer credits. The aim is to pair courses that complement a learning-community approach to better facilitate faculty collaborative planning. Ongoing evaluations suggest the need to be vigilant in evaluating community structures, individual courses, and faculty.

Courses, Faculty, and Schedules

The SLC program works with academic departments to design a cohort model that addresses student needs and department goals. After a plan is approved by the vice chancellor for student success, negotiations ensue with department leaders to secure the desired courses and top faculty. Simply stated, hire the *best* faculty—those who love students and who love new students. In addition to course pay, SLC faculty are paid a small stipend as compensation for the added workload requisite in teaching in a learning community.

The SLC program builds all course schedules and negotiates appropriate classroom and meeting-space reservations. Courses from 11 different departments representing the colleges of Arts and Sciences, Health and Human Sciences, Education and Allied Professions, and the Department of Engineering and Technology are scheduled for summer 2016.

Total Student Experience

The summer program addresses what Tinto (1993) refers to as academic and social integration. Students experience an introduction to university life among a smaller entry cohort, affording them greater opportunities for active and experiential learning, greater contact with faculty, and more time to develop a sense of place and community, and psychological well-being. Referred to by Kinzie (2012) as thriving, the notion of student success is informed by developing a total student experience that is holistic in design and delivery.

Learning with High Impact

According to Kuh (2008), the High-Impact Educational Practices defined by AAC&U (Association of American Colleges and Universities) “have been widely tested and have been shown to be beneficial for college students from many backgrounds” (para 1). WCU intentionally strives to embed these teaching and learning practices across the curriculum, and within the summer program we use six that are accessible to a first-year student.

Learning Communities

Learning communities “involve an intentional restructuring of the curriculum to foster intellectual and social connections” (Engstrom, 2001, p. 59) and are a proven approach to a pedagogy driven by interdisciplinary goals and learning outcomes. Essentially, a learning-community design empowers the integration of other high-impact practices with ease and is the foundation for the SLC curriculum structure.

- **First-Year Seminars and Experiences:** These “provide a proven way of both challenging and supporting first-year students in their quest to make a successful transition to college and fulfill their educational goals” (Hunter & Linder, 2005, p. 291). Each cohort takes a one-credit course designed to help students transition academically, socially, and personally to college life.
- **Common Intellectual Experiences:** The freshman common-reading program is introduced to the new summer students in their classes over the summer. The program engages all new students in a common intellectual conversation about one book during summer session or other semesters.
- **Writing-Intensive Courses:** Each summer course stresses communication and writing skills, while also emphasizing the value-added benefit of course tutoring and supplemental instruction provided by the tutoring centers.
- **Collaborative Assignments and Projects:** These are easily generated by faculty teams with the added benefit of co-curricular programming and a holistic approach to case management. Freshman classes serve as gateways to a broader involvement in both the academic and social community of the university (Tinto, 1993).

- Service Learning, Community-Based Learning: According to Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot (2005), definitions of student success include the development of civic responsibility. Each class cohort for the summer program engages in at least one service-learning experience, designed by faculty and staff.

Support Structures

Case Management: Building a Case for Success

Student support measures embedded in the SLC program aim to help students accomplish academic goals, while also recognizing the personal and social-development elements that contribute to a successful transition to the university. Case management teams meet weekly to discuss student progress and potential concerns so that issues can be dealt with promptly and appropriately. Table 1 summarizes student direct points of contact with the case management team.

Table 1: Case management Summer 2014 cohort

	Academic Success Program (ASP*)	Catamount GAP	Totals combined
Number of students	172	97	269
Number of students served	73	18	91
Percentage of students	42.4	18.5	33.8
Number of contacts to students served	178	41	219
Average contacts each to served students	2.4	2.3	2.4

* Numbers exclude one ASP student who received numerous points of contact before taking a university withdrawal

Teams include a residential case manager, a representative from the SLC program, and the faculty. Each cohort meets separately to ensure sufficient attention and resource allocation. Health and counseling services teams are available if interventions are warranted. Professional staff from the offices of Disability Services and Student Support Services are also available for consultation and intervention support.

Peer Leaders: Model the Way

With the intensity of a five-week summer program, peer leaders play a key role with student success measures. These students are hired through a rigorous and competitive process, and they participate in professional training to develop the requisite knowledge, skill sets, and aptitudes. The following peer leaders model successful behaviors and practices, thereby helping new students adjust to the university:

- supplemental instruction leaders,
- writing tutors,
- peer academic leaders resident assistants, and
- Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA)³ summer interns,

Academic Intervention

Academic interventions are embedded within a daily required study hall hour. Students are encouraged to attend SI (supplemental instruction) sessions and to avail themselves of the other resources and services provided by various academic support units, including the library, Disability Services, and the advising and tutoring centers.

Supplemental Instruction

SI places a trained peer tutor in the classroom. SI leaders model good student behavior, communicate with the course professor, attend class during the five-week session, and facilitate sessions offered outside of class. SI leaders are upper-class students with a proven track record of success for the course to which they are assigned.

Summer students have demonstrated overall behaviors known to contribute to student success and persistence. Students have accessed available resources, developed strong relationships with peers, faculty, and staff, and in general, engaged with campus and regional opportunities. During the 2015 summer session, attendance records documented 228 students (82% of those enrolled) who participated in at least one SI session. Individual student attendance averaged 4.2 sessions over the five-week session. Survey responses revealed that both faculty and students valued the merit of SI:

- 100% of faculty respondents were satisfied or strongly satisfied with the SI program components, implementation, and opportunity for inclusion.
- 62% of student respondents agreed or strongly agreed that SI helped them with course content and confidence.
- 94% of student respondents agreed or strongly agreed that writing tutoring improved knowledge, skills, and confidence.

3 Formerly National Association of Student Personnel Administrators

Implications

Students who attended SI most often earned higher grades in both groups. However, what are the implications for mind-set in looking at a comparison of the two groups? (See Table 2 and 3 below.)

Table 2: Comparison of grades in Academic Success Program (ASP) and Catamount GAP programs, Summer 2014 cohort

	GPA earned					
	< 2.0	2.0–2.49	2.5–2.99	3.0–3.49	3.5–3.99	4.0
Academic Success Program (ASP), supplemental instruction (SI) available to 170 of 170 students						
No. of students	5	8	31	92	76	53
Total SI visits	6	8	82	260	330	291
Average visits / student	1.5	1.0	2.6	2.8	4.3	5.5
Catamount GAP, supplemental instruction (SI) available to 80 of 97 students						
No. of students	1	4	6	21	29	33
Total SI visits	2	1	25	81	185	221
Average visits / student	2.0	0.3	4.2	3.9	6.4	6.7

A review of data indicates an overall level of success with both operational and student learning outcomes. Students earned high GPA numbers thereby establishing a strong early start on their college career. Students in both groups earned a higher summer GPA than their entry GPA from high school, many earning a 3.5 or above. Retention for the 2014 cohort was also higher (87%) for Catamount GAP students than for all full-time first-time freshmen (80%). ASP students were retained at 77% as a conditional admission population.

Table 3: Retention and GPA, unweighted

	No. of students enrolled	Average entry GPA (unweighted)	Average summer GPA	Summer GPA above 3.5 (%)	Summer GPA of 4.0 (%)	2014–15 retention (%)
Summer 2014						
Catamount GAP	62	3.6	3.7	79	21	87
Academic Success Program (ASP)	122	3.2	3.1	25	7	77
Summer 2015						
Catamount GAP	95	3.1	3.6	69	34	NA
Academic Success Program (ASP)	170	3.0	3.3	39	12	NA

The end-of-term student-satisfaction survey (see Appendix) indicated that the overall delivery of programs and services was effective and well received. During the final week of classes, faculty focus groups from each learning community cohort convened for an in-depth discussion about and a debriefing on summer programs. Overall, discussions revealed highly positive faculty perceptions. When the data are mined a bit deeper, the entering GPA was predictive, with retention rates of those at the higher entry points comparable to all first-time-full-time freshmen. The combination of objective data, surveys, and focus groups provided the basis for evaluation and informed changes to the program design and processes, summarized below.

Conclusion

Creating the architecture to organize and support a sustainable learning environment is a complex endeavor, filled with philosophical and practical challenges. However, opportunities to meet institutional objectives, improve student retention, and achieve persistence goals, will all enhance the student experience. Implications drawn from data suggest that the overall structure and design for the program are solid, but as with all initiatives, improvements can be made.

Building on Success

As the program launches its third summer with the combined programs (ASP and Catamount GAP), enrollment is expected to increase by approximately 25%. Two new learning community cohorts have been designed to serve different academic disciplinary needs, in consultation with faculty in the College of Health and Human Sciences.

Teamwork to Framework

Many administrative adjustments will be integrated in an effort to streamline processes and enhance service to students. Based on the original ASP model, almost every function of the summer program has been micromanaged by the SLC program office. With the growth of enrollment, the complexity of the program, and the types of students served, it is evident that the summer program must as much as possible mirror standard academic-year processes. For efficiency and effectiveness, lines of responsibility and delivery mechanisms will be re-aligned and directly managed by those units that provide the service. These include advising, scheduling courses, tracking financial aid and the use of the health center, and programming on campus. Campus partners welcomed this evolution.

Learning with High Impact

New courses have been included and new faculty hired to address course evaluations, advising recommendations, and student feedback. The class schedule has been altered in response to student and faculty feedback. Service learning has grown beyond a day-of-service to include faculty in the design of service-learning projects, specific for each cohort. Most appropriately, this places decisions for this high-impact practice with the faculty, who also have the support of the Center for Service Learning.

Support Structures

The case management model will continue to be a key support structure. This will also provide a more seamless level of support for ASP students, due to a reorganization of the SLC program and the subsequent move to the Office of Student Support Services. A primary motive for the move was to create a sustainable bridge for ASP students and to improve retention and persistence. Summer case managers will continue as advisers through the first year, and beyond.

In partnership with the Writing and Learning Commons, the peer tutoring and mentoring models will merge creating a more seamless delivery of both support structures, with added emphasis on academic grit and persistence. The Peer Academic Leader (PAL) program will pilot in 2016, supported by a grant co-authored by the FYE Office, and the Writing and Learning Commons.

All these amendments are in response to constant feedback and will be subject to continued evaluation with the 2016 cohort. Additional amendments and new plans for the future have already surfaced, and early discussions have begun. Going forward, the SLC program will need to be mindful of how best to manage the push for enrollment growth and to continue to emphasize strong learning outcomes and a successful college transition as the driving priority. Thus, we circle back to where we began with conversations about “Teamwork to Framework.” The experience to date offers a number of key takeaways that may be useful to others considering the development of similar programs.

Key Takeaways

1. *Communicate* early and often. This is vital to successful learning and experiential outcomes, as well as to the planning process and implementation phases.
2. *Observe* what is working and what is not with an open mind and heart. Consider context and representation, and value diversity and inclusivity.
3. *Be vigilant*—this is critical. No detail is too small and no issue insignificant. Do not take shortcuts—follow up on everything, every time.
4. *Evaluate* progress as an ongoing formative practice and as a summative review. Be honest and willing to accept that guiding assumptions may prove to be incorrect.
5. *Be responsive and proactive* by paying attention to concerns as they arise and dealing with them immediately. Take the time to answer every email and phone call with genuine care and make sure “customer service” is a key point of pride for which the program is known.

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Biographies

Glenda Hensley is the director of First Year Experience at Western Carolina University. She maintains administrative oversight for first-year transition courses, the common reading program, and other success initiatives for freshmen and transfer students, including New Student Convocation and the Chancellor's List Awards. Ahead, she will lead new initiatives for Sophomore Student Success.

Lowell Davis is assistant vice chancellor for student success at Western Carolina University (WCU). Davis leads comprehensive programs designed to ensure student success from the first semester through graduation. He oversees eight academic support units and is also responsible for repositioning WCU's summer sessions as an integral strategy for success.

Appendix

Student Satisfaction Survey—Summer 2015¹

Questions	Percent agree/ strongly agree
Class schedule/times was good	85
I liked the class combination for my group	89
I enjoyed being part of a learning community	94
I enjoyed my class field trip	84
Advising session helpful	87
I enjoyed my service learning experiences	85
Study hall helpful	70
My professors were helpful	96
My University Studies-Interdisciplinary (USI) ² class was helpful	81
Felt supported by faculty (ASP)	83
Felt supported by USI instructors (ASP)	67
Felt supported by faculty (GAP)	97
Felt supported by USI instructors (GAP)	100
Felt supported by advisor	86
Felt supported by research assistants	93
Felt supported by peer mentor	94
Felt supported by FYE office	83
Participated in at least one weekend program	69
Liked weekend program options	77
Prefer to plan my own weekend options	56
Weekend programs helped me discover area	59
Weekend programs helped me make friends	64
I used the Campus Rec Center at least once	76
I used the Campus Rec Center regularly	52
Liked building-wide programs in residence	67
Glad I participated in summer session	91
Summer session helped me feel ready for fall	94
Summer session helped prepare me for success	96
I would recommend this program to other students	90

1 Administered on the last day of class

2 University Studies-Interdisciplinary (USI) is a first-year student success course.