***For Immediate Release***

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# Solving the Retention Puzzle

Cedar City, Utah —Colleges and universities around the country are struggling to keep first-year students engaged and enrolled year after year. Only 61% of first-year students who started in 2015 returned to the same institution in 2016, according to a [report from the National Student Clearinghouse](https://www.eab.com/daily-briefing/2016/05/11/persistence-rates-rise-especially-for-some-nontraditional-students).

However, Southern Utah University has not only found a way to increase its first-year student retention, but continues to build momentum and excitement across campus. In just two years, from 2015-2017, the University went from a stagnant 64% retention rate to 71%, a record high for the institution.

The change didn’t happen overnight and took a team of dedicated professionals countless hours to figure out how to stop the declining numbers that dropped from 69% to 64% from 2008-2015.

So where did the change begin?

“We started calling students to figure out why they left SUU,” said [Dr. Jared Tippets, vice president for student affairs at SUU](https://www.suu.edu/experts/profile/?expert=jared.tippets). “We found that they were struggling with finances, sense of belonging, schedules, stress, roommates, employment - the list goes on and on. After years of trying everything outlined in literature, and still experiencing stagnant and declining retention rates, it was clear we had to try something different.”

Tippets enlisted the help of [Dr. Eric Kirby, assistant vice president for student affairs at SUU](https://www.suu.edu/experts/profile/?expert=eric.kirby), and the two went back to the drawing board. They threw everything out that had been done before and started fresh.

“The feedback we received fueled a complete overhaul of our onboarding process, first-year experience, advising model, financial assistance, and peer-mentoring program,” said Kirby. “We shifted our thinking, adjusted our approach, and adopted a new paradigm.”

The pair distilled their retention strategy into their ASCEND model: Affordability, Support, Culture, Engagement, Nudges, and Data. This strategy was used to rethink and restructure the orientation program, campus engagement, and academic advising.

**Orientation**

Traditional orientation programs tend to lump together all new students for a crash course on campus life and resources. At SUU, students are separated into groups based on their personal interests. Students also complete the T-Bird Takeoff Questionnaire and an in-depth personality test before arriving on campus to better group them with similar students who can make the transition to college life easier.

Over the summer, incoming students are contacted by campus staff and peer mentors numerous times to ensure all their needs are taken care of and all questions are answered.

“Our previous ‘one-size fits all’ summer orientations have been replaced with unique, personalized visits designed for Generation Z,” said Kirby. “During the summer, our students are paired in groups based on interests and find many friends with similar hobbies through our specialized Facebook pages.”

Kirby’s team also pairs incoming students with upperclass students and faculty with similar hobbies, creating a sense of belonging before the semester even begins.

**Campus Engagement**

Connection to SUU is extremely important in helping students feel at home on campus.

“Our desire is for every single student to get involved, make friends, and feel supported,” said Tippets. “To accomplish this task, our entire campus is working hard to create experiences and opportunities for our students.”

The [SUU Center for Diversity & Inclusion](https://www.suu.edu/diversity/), [Student Involvement & Leadership office](https://www.suu.edu/stil/), [Veterans Center](https://www.suu.edu/veteransaffairs/), [Non-Traditional Student Services](https://www.suu.edu/nontraditional/), and [ACES program](https://www.suu.edu/fye/aces/) have all worked tirelessly to build connections with students and help them engage with the university.

Each incoming student has different interests and needs, which is something Kirby’s team focused on and tailored their programs to.

Kirby shared how his in-depth work with Native American students helped him identify hidden causes of their disengagement from the university at the year's [CONNECTED Student Success Collaborative Summit in 2017](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zwyxERcMms4). He realized that Paiute students were not using university resources intended for all Native American students because those resources were located in a "chapter house"—and "chapter house" is a Navajo term, not a Paiute term, so the Paiute students didn’t feel like the resources were intended for them.

“The ACES are the closest thing we have to a secret sauce or silver bullet,” said Tippets. “These student peer mentors care so deeply about the students they are assigned to help. They make countless phone calls, send thousands of text messages, and meet individually with as many students as they can with the goal of helping students connect with SUU and feel at home.”

**Academic Advising**

SUU recognized that in order to improve retention, the Academic Advisors would play a key role and must take on a more holistic approach to advising students. To facilitate this new approach to advising, the academic advisors were renamed Student Success Advisors (SSA). The SSAs now approach students from an academic, social, and emotional level.

“Weaving connection, experience, academics, and career aspirations, our SSAs lead the way in caring for our students in a holistic manner, which has significantly increased persistence and retention percentages,” said Kirby. “Our advisors have been key!”

The students also seem to recognize and appreciate the change, as feedback on satisfaction surveys has dramatically increased over the past few years.

The Student Affairs team has also put early warning systems in place using data analytics to ensure the support of those students who need help most, when they need it most.

“It’s not hand-holding, it’s building resilience through a support of connections not just within Student Affairs but inside the classroom and the community,” said Tippets.

This combined strategy innovating orientation, campus engagement and academic advising has proven successful. In the past two years, first-to-second year retention has increased seven percentage points and is on track to set a new record fall of 2018.

“We support the state’s goal to lead 66% of our adults to a post-high school certificate or degree by the year 2020,” said SUU President Scott L Wyatt. “We help our students here at Southern Utah University prepare for the global economy. We currently have the highest graduation rate among all public regional universities in the eight Intermountain West states, and we’re going to do better. We intentionally create connections between students, faculty, staff, with the community, with the state, with our economy. Our goal is to leave no one behind.”

SUU has pinpointed the key connections required for students to be successful in school. The university’s commitment to enhancing the undergraduate experience sets students on an upward trajectory, leading to personal growth, civic responsibility, and professional excellence.

**About Southern Utah University**  
Southern Utah University (1897) evolved from a teacher training institution to Utah's designated masters university, offering more than 140 undergraduate and 17 graduate programs. With world class project based learning, unique undergraduate research opportunities, and a personalized learning environment (19:1) students lead projects mentored by professors. True to the University's core vision, SUU faculty, staff and administrators enable students to honor thought in all its finest forms, achieve excellence in their chosen field, and create positive change in the world.

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