

# Focus Group Results

Retention Focus Groups Conducted Fall Semester 2001

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## I. The Problem

Arkansas Tech University has a recognized problem with student attrition. The first-time, full-time entering student cohorts have been tracked since the fall of 1993. The results indicate a loss varying from 15% to 19% from the fall to spring semester for each of those years. From the fall 2000 entering freshman cohort of 1124 students, only 910 returned in the spring of 2001. This represents a loss of 19% from the fall to spring semester.

## II. Focus Groups

The reasons for the loss of students are numerous, as are the opinions about the causes and solutions to the recognized retention problem. Because of the strong feelings associated with various approaches to addressing the local retention problem, the Office of Academic Affairs conducted a series of focus groups with various ATU constituencies. The focus groups consisted of the following:

Students	4 groups
Faculty	4 groups
Dept. Heads	3 groups
Deans	1 group
Admission/Advising	1 group

All together 77 students, faculty and staff participated in the focus groups. In each case, the participants were asked to respond to one question “What should Arkansas Tech University do to improve student retention?” The participants were asked to make a list of their ideas. Once they had time to make the list, each participant in turn was asked to share one idea. A secretary recorded the idea as it was being projected on a wall for all participants to see, and attempts were made to obtain clarification before moving on to the next participant. This process was repeated until all ideas were exhausted. The list was then printed, copies were made and a copy was provided to each participant. The participants were then given instructions to rate the top five items with a 5 representing the idea the participant believed would have the most impact on retention, a 4 representing the idea with the next most impact and so forth down to a 1. The results were then tallied with a possible maximum score for any idea being five times the number of participants in the group.

A copy of all ideas generated and rated by each of the groups is provided as Attachment I.

## III. Results

Taking the two highest scoring ideas from each of the 13 groups resulted in a list of 21 ideas (five of the ideas were duplicates from other groups). The two highest scoring items across groups were a freshman orientation class and a freshman web page containing all relevant information to assist freshmen. The 21 items are not truly discreet but seem to fall into a few broad categories: Orientation classes/programs, improving/expanding advising, creating a more

student-service/student-friendly attitude among faculty and staff, improved/expanded student support/tutoring, and a miscellaneous assortment ranging from improving food in the cafeteria to finding out why students are leaving.

A summary of the top items and their ratings is provided as Attachment II.

#### IV. Comparison with Research on Retention

It is interesting to note how accurately the recommendations of these focus groups reflect the current state-of-the-art in retention. Time Magazine (September 10, 2001) says “Backed by 30 years of experimentation and data, [John] Gardner and other academics have established that colleges can boost freshman retention [a necessary step to achieve graduation] by: training faculty to mentor and support new students; creating first-year seminars, orientation courses and intimate ‘learning communities’; teaching students organizational and study skills; and arranging dorms so that freshmen live among students with similar academic interests.”

The same September 10, 2001 issue of Time continues to say “First-year seminars have entered the higher-education mainstream, with 71% of the more than 4,000 accredited U.S. campuses offering such courses. About 85% of freshmen take them, and the survival rate of students who take the courses is 3% to 10% better than that of students who do not.”

Looking through the ideas generated by the focus groups is rewarding, because a lot of very good ideas were suggested as pieces of a retention program, it is also confirming of the elusive nature of a “quick fix” to the retention problem. Our efforts generated numerous ideas, but no single idea is in itself a solution to the problem that exists here and throughout the state of Arkansas. Instead, the efforts of the focus group members primarily confirm the complexity of the problem and serve to document the wisdom of a broad-based approach to a solution through a cultural change at ATU. There are several excellent ideas that we can begin implementing as early as next semester. However, we, administrators, faculty and staff, must also be part of the solution by refocusing our everyday efforts on student learning and student service.

The problem of student attrition is not new and neither are the solutions. Vincent Tinto, in his classic text *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* has the following cautions regarding attempts to improve retention rates:

There are no quick or easy solutions to the issue of student retention. Nor is there any ready substitute for the institutional commitment to students that is the foundation of student commitment to the institution. Such commitment springs not from brochures or formal presentations, but from the enduring commitment on the part of faculty and staff to the education of their students. It arises from and is demonstrated in the everyday interaction among students, faculty, and staff in the formal and informal domains of institutional life. In a very important sense, institutional commitment to students and students' commitment to the institution are mirror images of one another. Students are more likely to become committed to the institution, and therefore stay, when they come to understand that the institution is committed to them.

There is no ready programmatic substitute for this sort of commitment. Programs cannot replace the absence of a high quality, caring, and concerned faculty and staff. Nor can they take the place of the everyday attention faculty and staff give to students beyond the formalities of institutional life. As often noted, effective retention programs arise as much (if not more) from meetings outside the classroom as from those which occur within them. No

special program can replace that attention.

Institutions should therefore not be misled by the appeals of modern technology and marketing strategies. Nor should they be overly captivated by the sophisticated programs of high cost retention consultant firms. The road to institutional commitment and thus to student commitment does not require very elaborate or high-cost interventions. Nor does it call for computers or special programs with long titles and extensive resources. These are merely the tools of retention, not the substance of retention. Rather, effective retention calls for the sustained effort on the part of all institutional members to give to each and every student serious and honest attention on a daily basis. It requires, if you will, a continuing commitment to the education of students. No technology, however sophisticated, can replace that sort of commitment.

### Attachment I

#### What should Arkansas Tech University do to improve retention?

<b>Student Group 1</b>		
<b>No.</b>	<b>Item Statement</b>	<b>Rank</b>
10	Create freshman web page containing all relevant information to assist freshmen	25
5	More variety and better quality foods in cafeteria	13
3	Earlier social opportunities in residence halls	9
9	Encourage faculty to be clear about expectations of students	9
12	Improve advising and scheduling of freshmen	9
11	Improved parking near Brown Hall and Rousch	6
1	Offer more on-line courses	4
8	Increased faculty sensitivity to students (esp. at beginning of semester)	4
4	Extended library hours	3
6	Better attempt to match roommate compatibility	3
2	Make more financial aid available to students	2
15	Provide information on campus clubs and greek life	2
14	Provide sessions dealing with study skills	1
16	More chemistry help sessions	1
17	More Big Money Bingo	1
7	Opportunity to move into residence halls earlier	
13	Provide special parking areas for motorcycles	

<b>Student Group 2</b>		
<b>No.</b>	<b>Item Statement</b>	<b>Rank</b>
4	Freshman orientation course (study skills, time mgt, information about the campus and town,	23
1	Freshman web page with contact information	22
2	Better information concerning scholarships and financial aid (stacking)	8
11	More information about the academic programs	7
14	Extended library hours	7
3	Form study groups	6
8	Better maintenance in residence halls (Jones, Turner..)	6
18	Better campus lighting (some areas too dark)	6
5	Provide incentives for good grades	5
20	Provide information on Nuclear One emergency sirens	3

12	Improve distribution of ID cards	2
19	Evaluation of residence assistants	2
9	More social activities in the residence halls at the beginning of the semester	1
6	Casino Nights	
7	More compatible roommates in residence halls	
10	More variety and better quality food in the cafeteria and Doc's Place	
13	Provide option for students to paint residence hall rooms	
15	Provide better information on campus to residence halls	
16	Do not schedule other events to conflict with activity fair	
17	More payphones/emergency phones on campus	

### Student Group 3

No.	Item Statement	Rank
6	Advise 12 hour course load for entering freshmen	19
11	Establish a mentoring program primarily to help freshmen adjust	12
19	Emphasize career counseling services on campus	11
3	Encourage faculty to be more supportive of student academic needs	10
2	Provide more information about the value of a college education	9
14	Do not overload residence halls and classrooms	9
8	Provide more parking	7
1	More faculty office hours to help students	4
5	Provide housing for married students	4
20	More courses in major field freshman year	4
4	Better publicity of accredited programs	3
10	Schedule freshmen to have breaks between classes	3
16	Better system of finding compatible roommates	3
13	Make residence hall more like apartments	2
15	Investigate possibility of adopting less expensive books	2
17	Provide meal tickets for smaller amounts	2
18	Provide better child care opportunities	1
7	More opportunity for social activities on campus	
9	Publicize availability of professional counseling services	
12	Require students to build an electronic portfolio beginning freshman year	

### Student Group 4

No.	Item Statement	Rank
1	Better publicize tutoring opportunities and provide more tutoring	10
13	Better advising and course selection for freshmen (make students aware of options)	10
4	Provide mentoring program for freshman students	9
6	Extend library hours	9
3	Better publicize financial aid opportunities	8
9	Flat tuition rate for 4 years	5
14	Continue improvements of residence hall facilities	5
16	More variety and better quality foods in cafeteria	4
18	Allow roll-over for DCBs (or refund money)	3
20	Provide fountain on campus and outdoor recreational facilities	3
8	Provide financial counseling for freshmen	2
11	Better publicize campus events (social events)	2
17	Provide meal plan with fewer meals option	2
7	More social opportunities on campus (SNL skits)	1
10	Provide lap top computers	1

12	More opportunities for 'mixers' involving international students	1
2	Encourage freshman students to discuss grades with faculty	
5	Look to 4 Day Class Week	
15	Provide more counseling and better publicize counseling services	
19	Separate DCBs and meal plan	
21	Provide better on campus lighting for safety purposes	

#### Faculty Group 1

No.	Item Statement	Rank
3	Freshmen orientation class (non-program specific)	18
11	Greater utilization of advising center	10
14	Make campus life more attractive	10
1	Implement a placement test for more accurate placement	7
4	Help improve student study habits	7
9	Hold faculty more accountable for interaction with students	6
5	Assist students in financial issues	5
6	Find ways to 'get to know' students	5
7	Reduce class sizes	5
16	More financial assistance and support for non-traditional students	5
8	Freshmen Retreat (week before classes begin)	4
10	Assist students in time management	4
12	Place students in 'learning cohorts' or 'learning communities'	4
18	Improve housing facilities	4
13	Raise admission standards	1
2	Implement a course on technology assistance	0
15	Departmental activities for their freshmen	0
17	Track freshmen scholarship students	0

#### Faculty Group 2

No.	Item Statement	Rank
6	Peer support groups (social and academic)	12
3	Cultivate a student service attitude among faculty and staff	9
5	Provide students with a mentoring system	9
1	Implement freshman orientation course (time management skills, study skills, research skills, money management)	5
2	Assign to major advisor as soon as possible	4
4	Provide opportunity for academic and social meetings with academic advisor before school begins	2
9	More emphasis on campus traditions	2
11	Faculty development to improve instruction	1
10	Campus wide emphasis on class attendance	1
7	Greater awareness of diversity	0
8	More on campus social activity opportunities	0

#### Faculty Group 3

No.	Item Statement	Rank
23	Find out 'why' we are losing students	20
3	Raise admission standards	16
14	Pay more heed to smaller classes for beginning courses	11
7	Adopt a proven retention program (SI Program)	10
2	Delay matriculation by one year for students with ACTs less than 20	7
18	Require study skills class for students with lower ACT scores	6

4	Give students specific study skill 'hints' to better prepare for individual courses	5
9	Evaluate students frequently (weekly for freshmen)	5
1	Remove academic probation and suspension standards	4
10	Provide counseling (both academic and personal)	4
12	Institute block scheduling program (learning communities)	4
13	Provide tutors for all freshmen courses	4
8	Provide an on-campus day care center	3
20	Give incentive to challenge students	2
24	Establish guidelines for faculty syllabi to include specific objectives (including time mgt, impact of outside work)	2
11	More interaction with local high schools to better prepare students to come to TECH	1
21	Provide guidelines for time mgt. (especially regarding outside work and time require to prepare for class)	1
5	Establish university college for freshmen students (to include advising center)	
6	Identify at-risk students by mid-semester and enroll them in 'crash course' for study skills	
15	Establish specific goals for students first week of classes	
16	Use provisional enrollment for students with lower ACT scores	
17	Have writing intensive courses across disciplines	
19	Limit enrollment to a specific list of courses for students remediating in Reading	
22	Give students employment within the departments	
25	Increase scholarships for 3.0 students and departmental performance scholarships	
26	Provide more weekend, on-campus social activities	
27	Improve parking situation	

#### Faculty Group 4

No.	Item Statement	Rank
3	Pass/fail course on college 'survival skills' (or teach those skills as part of a class) include time mgt, the reality of college life, critical thinking, student responsibility (possibility mandatory)	15
8	Smaller sizes of introductory classes	10
9	Higher enrollment standards	9
10	Improve initial placement of students	8
1	Continue emphasis on advising center	4
5	Emphasize the time required to be a successful student	4
6	Advisors need to spend more time focused on students	4
7	Implement a peer mentoring program	2
11	Emphasize early warning system	2
12	Emphasize reading	2
2	Extend course length for remedial courses (focus on mastery)	

#### Department Head Group 1

No.	Item Statement	Rank
1	Better academic advising at all levels	13
8	Encourage faculty to take greater interest in students	13
9	Freshmen orientation session prior to beginning of school	9
33	Help improve student study skills	9

2	Encourage faculty to consult with students who make low grades on exams	7
7	Cultivate a more student-friendly attitude among staff on campus (Student Accounts, Library, departmental secretaries)	6
13	Help students improve time and budget mgmt skills	6
4	Block scheduling of courses (learning communities)	5
10	Identify characteristics of students most likely to drop out	5
29	Establish more comprehensive tutoring system	5
28	Establish a counseling center (academic and personal)	4
18	Active major clubs with time reserved for club meetings	3
31	Develop profile of student success/failure, link to admission?	2
17	Closer communication with parents (monthly mailing from Advising Center and Student Services)	1
27	Buddy system between upper classmen and freshmen students	1
32	On-campus daycare	1
3	Make better use of introductory courses for retention purposes	
5	More intense advising/counseling at crucial semester times	
6	Telephone follow-up with advisors and advisees	
11	Orientation information repeated throughout school year	
12	More comprehensive health services for students	
14	Help build sense of community for non-resident students	
15	Encourage students to declare major as soon as possible	
16	Consider changing fee structure for courses (no flat tuition rate)	
19	Guest relation training program	
20	Financial assistance for upper division students	
21	Establish fall semester break	
22	Encourage the challenge of learning vs the 'feel-good' curricula	
23	Teach students how to set goals	
24	Provide more academic/cultural programs	
25	Reward students for passing all courses with a tuition rebate	
26	Provide grace period for scholarship students	
30	Build more residence halls	
34	Schedule an 'Advising Day' for faculty and students	

#### Department Head Group 2

No.	Item Statement	Rank
10	Have training session on departmental or school level to improve quality of advising	17
4	Create culture that fosters sense of belonging for students and connection with faculty	10
1	Pre-semester orientation meeting for freshmen	7
2	Orientation class in each discipline	7
21	Create a teaching excellence center on campus for assistance in teaching skills, advice, etc..	7
15	Provide support staff with training and awareness of their role in working with students for support	6
6	Have at least one meeting each semester with majors to solicit feedback	5
3	Stress note taking and writing skills	5
11	Require all remedial students to take course to improve academic skills	3
13	Require freshmen to meet with academic advisor certain number of times per semester	2



14	Schedule social activity for major within departments (at least once a semester)	2
22	Work closely with public schools in college prep and transition issues	2
9	Raise admission standards	1
16	Promote more on-campus, after hours activities	1
5	Establish and better publicize tutoring services	0
7	Let Student Services deal with general information freshmen need to know	
8	Consider faculty development in teaching methodologies that engage students in their own learning	
12	Don't throw money at a 'quick fix' solution	
17	Enforce office hours for faculty	
18	Hold all members of learning community accountable for student success	
19	Schedule study skills programming on TV 6	
20	Form study cohorts within the majors	

### Department Head Group 3

No.	Item Statement	Rank
13	Encourage faculty to be more student friendly	14
2	Designate Comp I as the campus orientation course	9
22	Identify high failure rate classes and provide a regular tutoring session	8
8	Require students to complete remedial courses before enrollment in other college level courses	7
4	Faculty mentoring for students	5
11	Reduce teaching loads to allow more time for interaction with students	5
6	Raise admissions standards	5
19	Encourage degree programs to have orientation component to atleast one of their classes	5
14	Communiante the benefits of an education to students	5
1	Record actions taken to improve retention	4
24	Provide freshmen campus orientation	4
7	More office space for adjunct instructors	3
12	Identify student target groups	3
15	Encourage mid term evaluation in classes (what to start, what to stop, and what to continue doing)	3
17	Designate a Director of Retention	3
23	Student mentoring program (student organizations)	3
18	Announce bold plan to improve retention	2
5	Required consultations with students who fail exams (by professors)	1
9	Freshmen cohort groups	1
3	Incorporate learning tools into curriculum explicitly	1
10	Provide tutoring sessions at night	
16	Get to know students better	
20	Encourage students to declare major as soon as possible	
21	Where possible, evaluate effectiveness of retention actions taken	

### Deans

No.	Item Statement	Rank
1	Orientation course for freshmen	15
10	Develop faculty development center (focus on professional development of faculty)	12
8	Encourage faculty to stress class attendance/Look at mandatory attendance policy for university	10

3	Focus efforts on student learning	9
13	Reduce size of 1000 level and developmental courses	9
20	Raise admission requirements	8
2	Encourage one on one relationship between faculty and students	6
4	Develop cohort concept with entering freshmen (learning communities)	5
5	Mandatory pre-school orientation (both academic and social)	5
15	Improve classroom and equipment situations	5
12	Block scheduling for major focus and learning communities for undecided	4
11	Mentoring program (upper classmen/freshmen)	3
18	Evaluate dorm policies for mandatory study halls and library study groups for off campus students	3
24	Well defined and organized system of tracking student progress during first semester	3
7	More carefully select general ed instructors (more sensitivity concerning transition from hs to college)	2
21	Be selective in academic advisors for freshmen	2
6	Have math faculty do math placement of freshmen	1
16	Professional development for classified staff	1
19	Have significant social event honoring freshmen	1
22	New faculty orientation (focus on areas of retention)	1
9	Support students groups that are organized for profession development	
14	Require more frequent exams for freshmen level courses	
17	Separate focus for non-traditional students and special needs students	
23	Develop new student handbook	
25	Follow up on developmental students to determine if success rate is dependent on their particular instructor	
26	Encourage students to declare majors as soon as possible	

#### Admissions/Advising

No.	Item Statement	Rank
6	Help with study skills, time management, financial management in the form of a mandatory orientation course	25
8	Est. academic center for tutoring to improve tutoring programs	24
10	Faculty sensitivity to the transition from high school to college	13
4	Target first generation college students for special orientation and tutoring	12
2	Better counseling services for students (academic and personal)	9
5	More feedback and graded exercises for freshmen by professors	9
7	Better utilization of 'early warning system'	6
9	More opportunities for on-campus social events	4
3	Residence hall study programs	3
11	Mentoring for prospective students	0

Line #	Suggestion	Student Groups				Faculty Groups				Dept Heads			Deans	Adm	Total
		S1	S2	S3	S4	F1	F2	F3	F4	DH1	DH2	DH3	DN1	AD1	
	<b>Orientation</b>														
1	Freshmen orientation class (non-program specific)		5			5			5				5	5	25
2	Create freshmen web page containing all relevant information to assist freshmen	5	4												9
3	Designate Comp I as the campus orientation course											4			4
	<b>Academic Advising</b>														
4	Better academic advising and course selection for freshmen (make students aware of options)				5										5
5	Better academic advising at all levels									5					5
6	Have training session on departmental or school level to improve quality of advising										5				5
7	Advise 12 hour course load for entering freshmen			5											5
8	Greater utilization of advising center					4									4
	<b>Faculty/Staff Interaction with Students</b>														
9	Encourage faculty to take a greater interest in their students									5					5
10	Encourage faculty to be more student friendly											5			5
11	Cultivate a student service attitude among faculty and staff						4								4
12	Create culture that fosters sense of belonging for students and connection with faculty										4				4
13	Establish faculty development center (focus of professional development of faculty)												4		4
	<b>Student Support / Tutoring</b>														
14	Peer support groups (social and academic)						5								5
15	Better publicize tutoring opportunities and provide more tutoring				5										5
16	Establish academic center for tutoring												4		4
17	Establish a mentoring program primarily to help freshmen adjust			4											4
	<b>Miscellaneous</b>														
18	Find out WHY we are losing students							5							5
19	Raise admission standards							4							4
20	More variety and better quality food in cafeteria	4													4
21	Smaller sizes of introductory courses								4						4