

## Focusing on Student Success: College-Based Student Success Teams and Student Compacts



The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) has identified several areas that we would like to address simultaneously to take a quantum leap in student success including year to year retention, credit accumulation year to year, time to degree, graduation rates, and student waitlists in high demand areas. We recognize that this range of areas of concern can not be addressed through a single strategy; instead it will require a new intentional approach that engages the entire campus in a community of care surrounding our students to both improve their academic experience at UTRGV and their progress to degree. With UTRGV still in its first years of existence, this is the right time to build both an enduring structure and immediate action-oriented initiatives that will best support our predominantly minority, low-income, and first-generation students achieve at unprecedented levels.

We propose to construct this comprehensive approach through an on-campus student success network that consists of a University-level Student Success Support and Steering Council (S4C or Steering Council) and college-level Student Success Teams (SSTs). This network will design, implement, and assess interventions that are enacted through Student Compacts, which will serve as a mechanism to encourage persistent student engagement, as well as other SST-led initiatives.

**The Steering Council** will serve as the umbrella and University-level steering committee and advocacy group for the network. It will be composed of the SST Chairs and institutional leadership tasked with overseeing the student experience. The responsibilities of the Steering Council are to exchange promising practices between SST chairs, direct resources towards student success and remove institutional policy/practice barriers where identified, champion student success as a strategic part of the ongoing development of the institution, promote more inclusive engagement across the institution in student success, ensure commitment to the student success goals in the UTRGV Strategic Plan, and document and review the work of the SSTs. The Steering Council will meet at least monthly and will regularly share updates with the University Provost and President.

**A Student Success Team (SST)** will be composed for each academic college. This approach is adapted from a promising model at California State University, Fullerton where it has shown early “quantum-worthy” impact. (For more details, see [The Power of Intentionality](#), CSU Fullerton document, retrieved 2017). Though each SST will be composed slightly differently influenced by variations between colleges, the model structure will include a college Associate Dean as the SST chair, membership from selected college staff and faculty, and specialists from the Academic Advising Center, the Career Center, and Student Life as regular members.

These teams will bring together specialized knowledge with student success data to identify opportunities to move the needle for populations within the college. With the support of the Steering Council, each SST is responsible for identifying populations of concern within the college, designing and implementing outreach and support for those populations, and assessing the effectiveness of these initiatives. Given current institutional data, it is anticipated that early SST work will include a focus on retention of populations of concern, graduation deferrals (students who have applied for graduation but are missing credits), course waitlists, and DFW rates, among other topics. In addition, each SST is responsible for the design, implementation, and assessment of a Student Compact. Each SST will be supported by institution-, college-, and

department-level student data as well as a dashboard that will be designed specifically with the needs of the academic colleges and departments in mind.

**Student Compacts** will be instituted for each college, designed and evaluated by the SSTs, with the support of the Steering Council. Each Compact will include student requirements for: 1) benchmarks for maintaining academic progress (e.g. earning 30 hours per year, maintaining a 2.5 GPA, following pre-approved degree plan), 2) behaviors for connecting with important support structures or activities at the institution (e.g. visiting Academic Advising, visiting the Learning Center, joining a student organization), and 3) high-impact practices that, wherever possible, are contextualized within the student's discipline (e.g. engaging in service learning in the first year, completing an internship in the fourth year). Each compact will also include an institutional promise of: 1) timely advising and support; 2) cohort-based tracking, outreach, and encouragement for students in the Compact; and 3) timely graduation, if the student achieves all benchmarks, OR the institution will cover the remaining tuition and fee costs for the students. Flat tuition and fees for four years for undergraduate students is already universally applied at UTRGV and will complement the four year design of the compacts. Each Compact will be designed in the first year of the SST, piloted in the second year of the SST, and expanded to a larger population (with the goal of broad impact) in the third year of the SST.

We are excited about the potential of the Compacts. We expect that they will provide a clear pathway to students, not limited only to what courses they should take, but including the experiences they can have to achieve success as an undergraduate student. We believe this level of detail will be particularly helpful for our first-generation college students who may have limited family models of college success. We are also excited about the potential of the Compacts to create college-based cohorts of students that we can work with to create an identity and peer-support structure within the cohort and that we can track and more efficiently intervene with. Finally, we are excited about the opportunity that creating a Compact will provide to the college in that it will stimulate development of high-impact practices that are embedded within the discipline. These high-impact practices may have a lasting impact on retention and graduation, but will also hopefully have a lasting impact on students' success within their chosen discipline/career. They will also engage the discipline faculty more directly in student success work.

**If we are successful in this work**, by the end of this 3 year project, we expect to see a vibrant student success network. Using data provided in the dashboard, SSTs in each college will be leading meaningful initiatives each semester that build student engagement with the college and academic achievement and engage faculty in student success work. The Steering Council will be consistently bringing together best practices from the SSTs, sharing their work with the institution and with the nation as best practices, and identifying and removing institutional student roadblocks. Student Compacts in every college will also be bringing students together in a college-based community, engaging them in high-impact practices, and providing concrete guidance at every step. In terms of concrete outcomes, we expect to see impacts on retention and graduation rates, increased completed hours for students reflecting more effective advising and higher course pass rates, and more evidence of integration of co-curricular life and career preparation with college curriculum and programming.