“…no one comes into AAU without a superlative program for student success…”

~ President Judy Genshaft, October 6, 2010

The 2011-2012 Academic Year began with the news that the University of South Florida had enrolled the strongest academic freshmen class in its history. With an average SAT score of 1203 and a high school GPA of 3.92, the Class of 2015 began the fall semester fully prepared for success in higher education. But the enhanced readiness of our entering students is only one of many indicators that the Student Success movement at the University of South Florida is achieving dramatic results.

Over the last ten years, four- and six-year graduation rates have increased and first-to-second retention rates have improved. The total number of undergraduate and graduate degrees awarded has increased from 7,068 in 2004-2005 to 10,465 in 2011-2012. Additionally, more students are living and working on campus, engaging in campus life, and developing leadership skills that will lead them to greater success in graduate or professional school or the global marketplace.

These achievements are a reflection of the collaborative, university-wide movement that has taken root at the nation’s fastest growing research university. We have much more work to do, but a strong foundation has been established. By strengthening advising and counseling services, expanding tutoring and learning services, developing peer tutoring in the Career Center, installing a state-of-the-art degree audit and tracking system, redesigning gatekeeper courses, promoting learning communities, and enhancing the teaching and learning environment in and out of the classroom, we are enabling USF undergraduate and graduate students to move toward greater success at an accelerated pace.

The development of a Science Math and Research Technology laboratory (SMART Lab) and the expansion of the Learning Commons in the University Library reflect the university’s deep and continuing commitment to student success. In the years to come, we can expect further progress, coordinated by a Student Success Council that is committed to innovative teaching and research, a holistic student-centered learning environment, and a university culture dedicated to the success of every student.

Paul Dosal
Vice Provost
for Student Success

Dee Siscoe
Interim Vice President
for Student Affairs
Building a Culture of Student Success

Goal II of the University of South Florida’s 2007-2012 Strategic Plan called for the promotion of “student success through a diverse, fully-engaged, learner-centered campus environment.” Student Success will remain an institutional priority in the next strategic plan, and as a result of many efforts to date, the institutional culture of USF has changed dramatically in the last five years. Every college and administrative unit – from physical plant to the cashier’s office to academic departments and the residence halls – has embraced the Student Success movement. They have been enhancing the learning experiences and environments where students can excel and thrive, academically and socially.

Second Annual Student Success Conference November 2011

Through lecture series, conferences, accountability measures, training programs, and marketing, USF is strengthening an institutional culture that facilitates and supports student achievement. As part of that effort, students, faculty, and staff came together on November 3, 2011, for the Second Annual Student Success Conference.

Dr. Freeman A. Hrabowski, III, president of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and a national authority on student success, delivered an inspirational keynote address that focused on the role of faculty in the student success movement: “He explained, “Students can be supportive, and staff and administrators can be supportive, but unless you have some faculty – tenured faculty – who think it is an important issue, it still is peripheral. It only becomes mainstream when our prestigious faculty says this is an important issue for this university.”

Academic Profile and Academic Readiness

Academic preparedness is a strong indicator of student success. USF evaluates and admits undergraduate students based on a combination of factors including standardized test scores, high school grades, and other factors, such as success in Advanced Placement, Dual Enrollment, and International Baccalaureate courses and programs. In the last five years, the university has raised expectations in all of these areas for admissions. In the fall of 2011, USF enrolled the strongest academic class in its history. Early indications are that the Class of 2016 will begin with an academic record equal to if not stronger than the previous year’s cohort. With the appropriate academic programs and student support services in place across campus, USF has every reason to believe that these students will graduate on-time, with minimal levels of debt, and higher degrees of satisfaction.
Redesigning Gatekeeper Courses: College Algebra

USF professors and instructors have been encouraged to take ownership of student success in the classroom. Utilizing innovative teaching methods and technology is one means by which faculty can improve passing rates in so-called gatekeeper courses, typically high-enrollment courses that are required for graduation or prerequisite to upper-level work. College Algebra, for example, is a critical gatekeeper course, and low passing rates mean that students remain in the academic pipeline and delay progress toward degrees.

To boost passing rates and clear that pathway to success, the Department of Mathematics and Statistics redesigned its College Algebra course to boost passing rates and learning outcomes in a more interactive teaching and learning environment. As expected, the passing rates for the redesigned College Algebra course increased 13%.

Due to the success of the pilot, the department and the university will scale up efforts to redesign gatekeeper courses. Similarly redesigned courses at other institutions and in other disciplines have allowed universities to raise enrollment, improve passing rates and learning outcomes, and lower the costs of instruction. USF’s Academy for Teaching and Learning Excellence has therefore supported two other course redesigns in Integrative Biology and Communications.

SMART Lab

The success of the College Algebra pilot demonstrated the value and importance of utilizing cutting-edge teaching practices in the classroom to boost student success efforts. To promote redesigns in other gatekeeper courses, particularly in the sciences, technology, engineering, and math fields (STEM), USF invested in the development of a 350-computer lab on the second floor of the Library.

The vision of the SMART Lab is to promote active learning and the utilization of teaching technologies in other STEM courses. The National Center for Academic Transformation (NCAT), of which USF is an active member, has demonstrated that “interactive computer software combined with personalized, on-demand assistance and mandatory student participation are the key elements of success in redesign of courses.” Rather than just attending lectures, students learn math by practicing it in a computer lab with ready access to the professor and graduate assistants.

The SMART Lab will open for the fall 2012 semester, offering redesigned courses in College Algebra, Pre-Calculus, and Statistics. The SMART Lab will eventually house a broad array of reconfigured STEM courses, offering even greater opportunities to boost passing rates and learning outcomes while delivering courses in a cost-effective manner.
In a separate project related to the course redesign initiative, the university has focused the attention of colleges and departments on non-passing rates (grades of D, F, or a Withdrawal) in high-enrollment courses. To empower deans and chairs to take appropriate action to boost passing rates without sacrificing academic expectations or integrity, they have been provided spreadsheets with DFW rates in all courses with enrollments higher than 30 for the past five years. In-depth analyses at the departmental level revealed a number of factors that contributed to high DFW rates, including some weaknesses in student preparation for the course as well as inefficient or outdated teaching methods. The university has now placed restrictions on the number of times that students may withdraw from a particular course. With stronger advising, these students will be encouraged to pursue other majors where appropriate, thereby eliminating a backlog of student demand for gatekeeper courses. If and where appropriate, departments are also considering redesigning courses to boost passing rates through more efficient delivery methods.

The Tutoring and Learning Center and the Learning Commons in the Library have become vibrant learning hubs, where all students can utilize spaces to study together or call on certified, professional tutors for academic support. Tutoring services are available for General Education Math, Chemistry, and Calculus. Our students can walk in, set an appointment, or get services online, and more and more students are using these services every year. Students have learned that the tutoring services can boost their academic performance. Seventy-eight percent of students using the tutoring center have reported an increase in a grade level.

In the past year, the Writing Center was strengthened by the addition of eight writing consultants. Students taking English 1102 and 1103 who visited the writing center earned better grades than their peers who did not. Studies have also demonstrated that students who do well in these writing courses are more likely to succeed in their subsequent courses, particularly in the humanities.
Expanded Learning Commons

The Learning Commons is a gathering place for students to study, work in groups, and get assistance from librarians, tutors, and writing consultants to succeed academically. Beginning fall 2012 the expansion of the Learning Commons to the second floor of the Library will increase seating and include renovated study rooms and learning spaces. New, comfortable furnishings designed with student collaboration in mind will provide high-tech laptop and iPad connections, large display screens, and white boards. Working together, students easily co-create, share, and develop documents and images for their courses in this 21st century library learning environment.

On-Campus Student Employment

In the fall of 2011, 46% of entering freshmen received a need-based Pell Grant from the federal government. As the academic profile of our entering students has increased, so has their financial need. In the current economic climate, more and more of our students are compelled to work while enrolled in a full-time schedule of classes. Research has demonstrated that if students must work, they should work on campus to maximize their academic success.

In 2010, the Division of Human Resources added a Student Success Recruiter to its professional staff to assist colleges and departments in their efforts to hire more students in on-campus jobs. To date, our efforts to centralize and coordinate student employment opportunities have produced positive results. Between the fall of 2010 and the fall of 2011, USF increased its on-campus employment opportunities by 23%. By promoting on-campus job opportunities with employers such as Barnes & Noble and Aramark, as well as full utilization of Federal Work Study funds, more and more of our students are working on-campus, maximizing their opportunities for academic success.
Peer Tutoring and The Job Shop

Career exploration, advising, and ultimately placement are increasingly critical components of the USF student success initiative. The earlier students choose a career path, and a major that will guide them toward their career goals, the more likely they are to achieve academic success. In 2010-11 the Career Center hired eight student leaders to launch a new Career Peer Advisor program. Each Career Peer completes an initial 60 hours of rigorous training, which is followed with ongoing training and supervision. Career Peers provide one-on-one career planning and job search coaching with students, conduct workshops, classroom presentations and promote career services at campus-wide events.

The Career Center established a new Career Corner in the Library in the spring of 2012. The Career Corner, located in a high student traffic area, provides students convenient and expanded access to a new circulating collection of the latest career and job search books, DVDs and materials in the field. Recognizing the opportunity to expand career services even further, a new Job Shop will open in the Library for the fall 2012 semester. Adjacent to Starbucks and a renovated Circulation Desk, the Job Shop will provide easy access for students to explore, research and apply for job opportunities; obtain job search coaching with a Career Peer and learn about employers coming to campus to recruitment candidates for part-time, internship, cooperative education and full-time career opportunities.

Professional Academic Advising

Over the past five years USF has strengthened its academic advising system, with a team of professional advisors placed in the colleges and departments to help students plan a major, identify career goals, and track their progress toward graduation. Successful academic advising requires close and active engagement with individual students, so the ratio of students to advisors is a critical metric. With the addition of new academic advisors in the next two years, USF will bring its student to advisor ratio to 350:1, a level recommended by national experts.
Appreciative Advising

Academic advisors, like instructors, thrive in environments where they can continue to learn innovative practices. Undergraduate Studies and the Office of Student Success will continue to provide support for the professional development of advisors. The Council of Academic Advisors and the Office of Student Success teamed up to bring to campus Dr. Jennifer L. Bloom, a nationally recognized expert in Appreciative Advising. The Appreciative Advising method is an innovative approach to student advising, aimed at helping students optimize their educational experiences, achieve their goals and reach their full potential. 

Dr. Bloom, Clinical Professor and Director, Higher Education & Student Affairs Program at the University of South Carolina, presented a general overview of the Appreciative Advising method to over 100 USF academic advisors, leaders, faculty and staff in a workshop. Through the workshop, advisors, administrators, faculty and staff learned proven techniques to build stronger relationships with students and help students fully utilize their strengths, skills and talents. The six phases of Appreciative Advising are designed to enhance advisor-student interactions, starting with establishing relationships, uncovering hopes and dreams, and ultimately implementing a successful academic plan. The approach builds on the organizational development theory of Appreciative Inquiry to improve academic advising and increase student success rates. Attendees gained valuable insight into the new methods introduced by Dr. Bloom and had the chance to practice their new skills through interactive exercises related to each phase of the model.

Academic Tracking

DegreeWorks, a state-of-the-art degree audit system implemented in 2011, allows students and advisors to plan their academic programs more effectively, reduce excess credit hours, and accelerate their progress toward graduation. For students, it provides online advice and counsel, presents visible goals to reach graduation, provides intuitive web access and also allows direct access to related services and advice through hyperlinks to catalog information, class schedules, and transcripts. Advisors can advise over the phone and have access to the same information the student does.

With upgrades to the DegreeWorks system, USF will have the capability of tracking students’ semester-by-semester progress, utilizing a degree plan that they develop with their advisor. When the system is fully implemented, USF will be able to identify students who veer “off track” and get them back “on track” in consultation with their academic advisor.

Academic Success Advocates

Among the new professional advisors hired in 2012-13 will be two academic progression officers, Academic Success Advocates. These positions will be responsible for monitoring and reaching out to students who are approaching the completion of all their degree requirements. Their task will be to facilitate their timely graduation, by working with them to identify and remove any obstacles in their academic path. The advocates will work with colleges, departments, and student support services to ensure that these students are given every opportunity to succeed in the classroom and earn their degree in a timely fashion.
Students increasingly identify themselves as “Bulls” and their opportunities to engage with the people, offices, and organizations within the university have increased dramatically. Student engagement, a key to improving retention, occurs when students live in a residence hall and connect with roommates and other residents. Attending athletic events, joining a sorority or fraternity, or becoming involved in an honorary organization for their major are other ways students find connection. Even working on campus can help a student connect with an office or a department in a way that helps them feel supported and engaged.

Students begin their USF engagement by attending a two-day orientation program that provides for an overnight experience and insight on what to expect from life on campus. CampU, launched as a pilot in August 2012, provides an opportunity for new students to come together before school starts to connect, learn, and engage with one another in a camp-like setting. Uconnect, USF’s own social media opportunity for new students, helps educate, connect, and inform students prior to their arrival at USF. Community involvement is an important indicator of student success and allows students to connect with their peers and community while serving others. Over 150,000 hours of volunteer service is recorded annually by the Center for Leadership and Civic Engagement. Additionally, the ten living learning communities, serving 800 students on campus offer opportunities for students to connect, learn, and study with others with similar academic or lifestyle interests.

Preparing students to enter and compete successfully in the global marketplace is another critical component of the student success initiative. The geographic, cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity of USF students has contributed to a vibrant teaching and learning environment that prepares them for global citizenship. Recent emphasis on globalization both within and outside of the classroom advances students’ ability to live, work, and partner with those different from themselves, a skill cited by employers as crucial for success in today’s world of work. Efforts to help students explore, understand, and celebrate differences takes place in classrooms and activities across the campus on a daily basis.

The Department of Housing and Residential Education works closely with students to help them with the sometimes intense experience of learning to live closely with others. Programming such as the annual Tunnel of Oppression program attended by over 1100 students assists with these efforts. Bulls Service Breaks offer opportunities for students to provide service to others both domestically and internationally. New programs in the Office of Multicultural Affairs such as the Intercultural Student Leadership Conference attended by 145 students and the iBuddy program work to bring students together in dialogue.
Wellness

Instilling lifelong wellness principles and practices into the lives of our students prepares them for success at the university and in their careers. The USF community comes together to administer programs such as the Students of Concern Assistance Team (SOCAT), to identify and intervene with students that may be of danger to themselves or others. Victims of crime are provided support through the University Police Department, Victim’s Advocacy and Violence Prevention, and other support areas on campus. The USF Counseling Center sees over 2000 students for over 21,000 appointments per year. A new suicide prevention program as well as new group psychotherapy and support options continue to advance the visibility of the Counseling Center. Recreation options have been expanded with a $14 million renovation resulting in a 27% increase in usage of the Campus Recreation Center. Student Health Services recorded over 27,000 patient visits during the 2011-2012 academic year.

Student Services

USF has strengthened or expanded the programs and services that are available to support students along their USF journey. From Veteran’s Services and Students with Disability Services, which focus on specific populations of students, to the Ombudsman and Dean for Students Office, which works to provide care and support to all students, USF has the people and programs in place to assist students on their road to success.

New and expanded services include the InformaBull Facebook page, launched in Summer 2011, which has been viewed by over 750,000 people. This page allows students to get questions answered, and keep track of events and key dates. The SkyPad in the Marshall Student Center expands this “living room of the campus” by offering new space for students to connect and engage with one another. Diagnostic testing for students with disabilities has been offered to 53 students through a new partnership between Students with Disabilities Services and Student Success and Psychological Services.
President Judy Genshaft appointed a 22-member Student Success Council on August 5, 2010 with representatives from the following areas: Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, Student Government Association, Advancement, Marketing & Communications, Faculty Senate, Staff Council, Administrative Services, USF Health, and Athletics. Chaired by Dr. Dosal, the council’s mission is to coordinate and push forward the implementation of the Student Success Task Force recommendations.

Paul Dosal  
Vice Provost  
Office of Student Success

Christopher Akin  
President  
A&P Council

Kevin Banks  
Assistant Vice President and Dean for Students  
Office of Student Affairs

Christine Chefalas  
President  
Staff Senate

Bill Cummings  
Professor  
Department of History

LaToya Dowell-Wider  
Assistant Director  
Alumni Association

Ana Hernandez  
Dean  
Housing & Residential Education

Michael Hoad  
Vice President  
University Communications and Marketing

Andrew Hoff  
Associate Professor  
Department of Electrical Engineering

Drema Howard  
Director  
Career Center

Karen Liller  
Dean  
Graduate School  
Associate Vice President Research and Innovation

Sandy Lovins  
Vice President  
Administrative Services

Patricia Maher  
Director  
Tutoring & Learning Center

Tom Miller  
Associate Professor  
Department of Psychological & Social Foundations of Education

Alicia Monroe  
Vice Dean for Educational Affairs  
USF Health Morsani College of Medicine

Amy Perkins  
Associate Athletic Director  
Intercollegiate Athletics

Keri Riesler  
Director  
New Student Connections

Bob Sullins  
Dean  
Undergraduate Studies

Dee Siscoe  
Interim Vice President  
Office of Student Affairs

Diane Williams  
Senior Director  
The Academy for Teaching and Learning Excellence

Lee Williams  
Associate Vice President  
University Advancement

Matthew Diaz  
President  
Student Government

Kingsley Reeves  
Assistant Professor  
College of Engineering

Bob Spatig  
Assistant Vice President for Admissions

David Henry  
Director  
Undergraduate Admissions

Billie Jo Hamilton  
Director  
University Scholarships and Financial Aid

Nancy Cunningham  
Director of Academic Services  
USF Tampa Library

Valeria Garcia  
Director  
Office of Decision Support

Dorie Paine  
Senior Director  
Office of Student Success

Ex-Officio

Rick Polletz  
Associate Dean  
Undergraduate Studies  
and Director of Undergraduate Research

Angela DeBose  
University Registrar  
Registrar’s Office

Diane Williams  
Senior Director  
The Academy for Teaching and Learning Excellence

Lee Williams  
Associate Vice President  
University Advancement

Matthew Diaz  
President  
Student Government

Kingsley Reeves  
Assistant Professor  
College of Engineering

Bob Sullins  
Dean  
Undergraduate Studies

Dee Siscoe  
Interim Vice President  
Office of Student Affairs

Diane Williams  
Senior Director  
The Academy for Teaching and Learning Excellence

Lee Williams  
Associate Vice President  
University Advancement

Matthew Diaz  
President  
Student Government

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Assistant Professor  
College of Engineering

Bob Sullins  
Dean  
Undergraduate Studies

Dee Siscoe  
Interim Vice President  
Office of Student Affairs