

Stetson University Quality Enhancement Plan Transitions: Enhancing Student Learning and Success Through Transitional Programs

Executive Summary

Stetson University's mission is to provide an excellent education in a creative community where learning and values meet, and to foster in students the qualities of mind and heart that will prepare them to reach their full potential as informed citizens of local communities and the world. As Florida's first private university, Stetson has long practiced the art of teaching through programs solidly grounded in a tradition of liberal learning that stimulates critical thinking, imaginative inquiry, creative expression, and lively intellectual debate. The art of learning is enhanced through small interactive classes and close student-faculty alliances. For many Stetson students, affectionately known as "Hatters", these collaborative approaches provide the foundation for rewarding careers and advanced study in selective graduate and professional programs. However, too many students do not successfully complete the Stetson experience as measured by the average six-year graduation rates and first-to-second year retention rates. Improving the results on these measures is an institutional goal that will reflect an improvement in an environment supportive of student learning, and ongoing assessment of these indicators will document our success.

Stetson has developed and begun to implement a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) designed to improve student learning outcomes as well as retention and graduation rates. By enhancing students' transitions into and through Stetson, we believe they will be more successful in their studies and more successful in their lives after graduation. The plan has two major initiatives: Hatter Trek and Hatter Quest.

The first initiative, Hatter Trek, is a summer transition program that involves conducting voluntary retreats for incoming students in the summer months before they begin at Stetson in the fall semester. In the summer of 2011, a group of incoming students, along with two faculty members and two upper-class student leaders, went on a four-day retreat designed to help them form community, gain a better understanding of the academic expectations we have of them, become familiar with resources to help them achieve their goals at Stetson, and begin to create a vision of what success at Stetson would look like for them. The students who participated in the Summer 2011 trek have a better-than-average Fall GPA and 100% of them retained from Fall 2011 to Spring 2012. The goal is to increase the number of Hatter Trek experiences over the next few years.

The second initiative, Hatter Quest, is a thoroughly revised approach to fall orientation for all incoming students. Beginning with the fall of 2011, we intentionally included an academic component into our fall orientation by having students meet with their first-year seminar (FSEM) classes several times before the official start of all courses. During this time, and throughout the semester, instructors were intentional about integrating academic support services with assignments in the class to help students learn how to use resources throughout their time at Stetson. We believe using these resources on a regular basis, as part of their normal academic routines, will enhance student learning and student success from the time they arrive until the time they graduate. The first year seminar course then ended at the Thanksgiving break allowing FSEM students and faculty the ability to focus on their other final examinations.

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