

# Retention and Student Success Newsletter



April 2009

## Freshman Academic Success Tracking (FAST) Initiative

During the Fall 2008 Semester we initiated a new program to improve student retention and engagement for first time freshmen. With the cooperation of the English Department, the Advisement Office, and Student Housing we're piloting the initiative this academic year.



Universities, especially public four-year universities, are increasingly faced with the challenge of retaining students who enroll as first-time freshmen but do not

stay to graduate. Some attrition is to be expected, but not at the rate UTC is experiencing. Only 60% of freshmen who enrolled in UTC in the Fall of 2007 returned for Fall 2008. Following the model successfully implemented at other schools, UTC is trying to encourage student attendance in classes.

Data show that class attendance is important for most students, but particularly so for first-time freshmen. Thus, this past fall and spring we've been tracking attendance of first-time freshmen in their 100 level English composition and Western Humanities courses. Faculty members report to a secure website when students miss class. Once the students miss two classes, their names are entered into the website, where the names are automatically sent to Student Housing and the Advisement and Retention Office. Ryan Hall, Area Director for

North Campus, compiles the list of those living in campus housing and gives names to Resident Assistants (RAs) who try to make personal contact with the students. The RAs speak briefly with these students to tell them the importance of class attendance and encourage them to attend and to touch base with their instructors. The students also receive a card displaying the various academic support services offered to ALL students free of charge. Blake Pierce of the Advisement and Retention Office calls the students who live off-campus also to encourage class attendance.

We won't know for sure the impact of this effort until next fall, but we think this initiative may be one reason that our retention from Fall 2008 to Spring 2009 was up 6% to 90.8%. Other factors, including the Admissions Office's work on enrollment management and the Freshmen Success Seminars in January, also may have impacted this increase. The Chancellor's Task Force on Retention has also raised campus awareness of our retention problems. We strongly encourage all faculty teaching 100 level courses to first-time freshman to participate in the FAST program in the Fall 2009 semester.

## UTC Retention Facts

UTC's Freshmen Retention Rate:

Fall 1997 to Fall 1998 was 74 %

Fall 2007 to Fall 2008 was 60.8%

### Topics Courses

During the Fall faculty were asked to submit ideas for topics courses to be offered in the Fall 2009 term. These courses, to be offered as one-hour satisfactory/no credit courses, are designed to engage freshmen in a topic that holds mutual interest for faculty and students. Twenty-one courses are scheduled for Fall 2009; see the following website for course descriptions: <http://www.utc.edu/Academic/FirstYearStudies/Fall2009Seminars.php>. Please encourage freshmen to take these courses as they will provide a wonderful opportunity for engagement of our students as they begin UTC.

### Learning Communities

During the Fall 2009 UTC is offering seven learning communities for freshmen. Students who join the learning communities will take two courses together: a topics course of their choice which has been paired with a section of English 121. These instructors, who have already been meeting this semester, will be scheduling out-of-class activities in addition to the regular class sessions. See the learning community offerings at this website: <http://www.utc.edu/Academic/FirstYearStudies/Communities.php>.

### Advisement Update

A few weeks ago we began advertising for four new professional advisors to be employed in May. These new advisors will join Amy Davis, Director of the Advisement Center, and Blake Pierce, a professional advisor who joined UTC in August, in the Advisement Center. We are hoping in the next year or two to have a full complement of professional advisors to advise all freshmen during orientation and during their entire freshman year at UTC until the time when these students will be handed over to the departments of their intended majors. Once the Advisement Center is fully staffed, freshmen will visit with their advisors twice during both the fall and spring semesters.

An Advisement Committee, composed of faculty and professional advisors has been meeting to discuss ways to improve advising at UTC. The most recent focus is summer Freshman Orientation. Soon you will be hearing more about ways faculty can help with advising during orientation sessions.

### First Year Studies

A new course, First Year Studies: The UTC Experience, will be offered in Fall 2009. The one-hour graded course for freshmen is designed to help students successfully transition from high school to college. The course will introduce students to the idea of a university, ways to achieve academic success, academic resources and opportunities at UTC, advisement and career exploration, and learning beyond the classroom. This course replaces the previous three-hour freshman seminar.