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### Proactive Academic Coaching: A Study on Why Students Leave College after Their First Year and How to Support Them

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**Proactive Academic Coaching: A Study on Why Students Leave College after Their First Year and How to Support Them**

By Samantha Black, MA; Darren Ilett, PhD, MLIS; and Jake Henderson, BA

## **Project Description**

Bears First is a new program in its first year at UNC. The objective of Bears First is to work with incoming first year students with a high school GPA of less than a 3.00. Data shows that these students are at greater risk for attrition, so Bears First was created to provide additional support in their first year of college. Before the start of the semester, students in the program are paired with an academic success coach with whom they are required to have five appointments during the fall and spring semesters (10 appointments total). The purpose of this assessment is to gather qualitative data on the students' perception of the program after completing the fall semester. Students' general perceptions of UNC as well as how their first semester went overall were also assessed.

## **Research Questions**

- 1) What are common factors that cause students to struggle in their first year of college?
- 2) What types of support that students need are not currently provided by UNC?
- 3) What barriers prevent students from accessing support?
- 4) What can SOAR do that would potentially increase UNC's retention numbers for incoming students with a high school GPA less than a 3.00?

Our assessment answered three out of four of our research questions. Number two was not directly addressed in the questions that we asked, and we focused, instead, on what support systems at UNC were being utilized.

## **Method**

Our project used a mixed method approach to answer our research questions. We conducted a qualitative analysis of 100 recent suspension appeals. Data were entered into NVivo and then analyzed by three members of our assessment team to identify common themes. We divided the appeals into thirds for the first analysis and then did a second analysis as a group. We also analyzed exit surveys from the past year from students who had a high school GPA of less than a 3.00. While the data was a mix of quantitative and qualitative, we focused on the qualitative aspects which were then coded into NVivo. To answer research questions one, three, and four we surveyed 238 Bears First students. The survey consisted of four closed-ended questions and six open ended questions. Topics assessed in the survey included frequency of meetings with success coaches, level of satisfaction with the program, feedback for improvement, struggles that were experienced and how those struggles were handled, UNC support services, and barriers surrounding asking for help.

## **Findings**

### **Research Question One: What are common factors that cause students to struggle in their first year of college?**

100 of the most recent suspension appeals were analyzed through NVivo to get an idea of the most common reasons students struggle academically. Some of the most common themes were: financial issues, mental/physical health struggles, not feeling prepared, homesickness, and being in the wrong major. We also analyzed exit surveys from the past year from students who had a high school GPA of less than a 3.00. The exit surveys closely mirrored what we found in the suspension appeals. Students

cited financial issues (this was the number one most commonly cited reason), issues with advising, campus connections, preparedness, and mental health as main reasons for leaving. With both the suspension appeals and exit surveys, many students cited overlapping issues such as their finances affecting their mental health. While the suspension appeals and exit surveys were not exclusively first year students, our Bears First survey confirmed that these are the same issues our first year students are experiencing.

#### **Research Question Two (modified): What resources at UNC are students utilizing?**

Out of the 61 respondents, 52% indicated that in the fall semester they met with their coach at least three times, 20% said they went to two or less appointments, and 28% had not gone to any appointments. Outside of the Bears First program, the top five resources utilized by our students were: University Libraries (24.29%), Office of Financial Aid (17.86%), Counseling Center (15.71%), Disability Resource Center (9.29%), and Tutorial Services (8.57%).

#### **Research Question Three: What barriers prevent students from accessing support?**

A large number of survey respondents indicated that there were instances where they knew that they needed help but did not ask. The majority of these students stated that what kept them from asking was out of fear of being judged or feeling anxious. Another popular reason was feeling like they had to solve their problems on their own because they're in college now. Lastly, a number of students indicated that their pride was a barrier that prevented them from asking for help.

#### **Research Question Four: What can Soar do that would potentially increase UNC's retention numbers for incoming students with a high school GPA of less than a 3.00?**

Over half of the survey respondents (56%) indicated that they were "very satisfied" with the Bears First program and 21% indicated that they were "satisfied". When given the opportunity to provide feedback for improvement of the program, the vast majority of students stated that they would not do anything differently and that the program is working. That is not to say that there is not room for improvement, but it means that the majority of students who participated in the program found the value in it, and these services should be expanded as much as possible.

#### **Recommendations/Next Steps**

Bears First had a successful first year based on the student feedback. For the students who participated, most indicated that it was a meaningful and helpful experience. They also felt that their success coaches were people who they could go to when they needed help. However, even though they have their success coach, many students also indicated a reluctance to ask for help even when help was available. Success coaches will need to figure out ways to further build these relationships and ask the right questions to make sure students are being as open as possible about their needs. Additionally, the program will need to consider how it is talking to incoming students about the value of participating in Bears First to try to increase their number of active students in the coming years. Bears First may also consider alternate delivery methods for students who do not want to participate in the traditional 4-5 appointments per semester but would still benefit from working with a success coach. Due to the positive feedback, UNC should consider eventually expanding the program so that more students have access to success coaches even if they earned greater than a 3.00 in high school.