UL's Student Engagement and Success Unit (SESU)

This institutional approach...

...is based in the University of Limerick.

...was developed collaboratively by the Director of Student Affairs, Director of UL Library and the Dean of Teaching and Learning.

...involved the establishment of a shared unit for supporting student engagement and success

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Identified Need

Recognising the impact of attrition on students, UL tracked the rates for first years over a seven-year period (2005-2013) and identified an increase in attrition averaging 13%. In addition to the costs and missed opportunities incurred by students that leave college early, this pattern also represented a significant loss of revenue to the University. In order to fully understand the issues impacting on first year UL students, the University sought to identify best practices to support first year engagement both inside and outside the classroom, to leverage the value of learner data as a resource, to identify students at risk of withdrawing prematurely and to develop an effective and meaningful Student Engagement Policy.

Solution

Based on an analysis of University retention data and the 'What Works? Student Retention and Success' study, that highlighted the need to ensure that new students feel they belong to their institution, the Director of Student Affairs, Director of UL Library and the Dean of Teaching and Learning together agreed to set up a virtual Student Engagement and Success Unit. The unit is staffed by a First Year Support Coordinator, Educational Developer and Librarian for Student Engagement and Success. The focus of these roles is to work directly and collaboratively, informed by student data, on supporting first year students, from an academic, social and pastoral perspective. A Student Engagement and Success Working Group was also formed to feed into ongoing transition activities, technology-enhanced communication, peer-to-peer activities, academic advising and cross–institutional collaborations.

Enablers and Challenges

The success of this initiative has been enabled by the creation of cross-functional, dedicated roles. This has ensured a focused, integrated approach and has made it easier for students to know where to go with issues. The buy-in of academic Departments, Course Leaders and the Learner Centre has also been crucial. A final enabler has been the availability of accurate, fit-for-purpose reporting that enables an informed, evidence-based approach and allows for continuous quality enhancement. Changing institutional culture and priorities has been a key challenge, as have ensuring GDPR compliance and the lack of a dedicated budget.

Advice

The project team highlight that inter-personal and collaborative skills are essential for staff tasked with supporting student engagement. It is also crucial to clearly understand the relevant issues and hurdles and to have well-defined objectives (institutional and personal) for optimising the student experience and improving the learning outcomes for students.

Securing high level support and advocacy from Senior Academic leaders in the institution is vital for ensuring an effective, whole-of institution approach to student engagement and retention. Having access to relevant, accurate and up-to-date data is also necessary for establishing objectives, monitoring progress and getting institutional stakeholders on board.

Further Information

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