

**SoBA CENTRAL:
AN INTEGRATED PROGRAMMATIC APPROACH
DESIGNED TO ENHANCE STUDENT SUCCESS**

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ABSTRACT

Numerous studies have shown that effective career advising for business students beginning with the freshman year is crucial. Student career advising and career development needs in professional schools are best met by the school itself rather than a central campus-wide resource unfamiliar with the specific needs of business students.

This paper outlines an integrated programmatic approach, developed by the University of Montana (UM) School of Business Administration (SoBA). SoBA created SoBA Central, which is a one-stop center for academic advising and assessment, career development and internship coordination within the school. SoBA Central is part of UM's effort to address student success, retention and promote experiential opportunities and career development. This cohesive, multi-tiered approach will also enable SoBA to better meet the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business - International (AACSB) accreditation recommendations and requirements and to respond to UM's administrative initiative aimed at increasing student retention effectively, efficiently and with minimal expense. Initial data were gathered from business students to establish benchmarks to measure program success. SoBA Central will engage students at the freshman through senior levels in developmental coursework and programs that address student transitions into college, tying them with successful exits from college, productive careers and meaningful alumni relationships.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Census Bureau, the gap between the earnings of people with differing educational levels has widened in the last 30 years. Over an adult's working life, high school graduates earn an average of \$1.3 million; holders of associate degrees earn approximately \$1.5 million; and bachelor's degree holders earn an average of \$2.1 million (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2012). College graduates also enjoy benefits beyond increased income, including higher levels of saving, increased personal/professional mobility, improved quality of life for their offspring, better consumer decision making and more hobbies and leisure activities. Additionally, college graduates have greater workplace productivity, increased consumption, increased workforce flexibility, decreased reliance on government financial support, increased charitable giving and community service and increased appreciation for diversity (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2005).

Unfortunately, in the past 50 years, "The institutional graduation rate has held at a constant 50 percent" (Swail, 2004). It is crucial that universities help enrolled students successfully complete their academic program, gain related experience while in school and launch their careers after graduation so that they can earn an estimated \$1 million more in their lifetimes than those who only complete a high school education. Several initiatives to increase the proportion of Montanans with college degrees are in place to enhance Montana's competitiveness as a state, such as UM's *Partnering for Student Success: A Collaborative Action Plan for Student Retention 2009-2013* and *UM 2020: Building a University for the Global Century*.

This paper examines factors affecting student retention, characteristics of business students in general, characteristics of SoBA students (as demonstrated by data collected through surveys) and the SoBA's creation of SoBA Central – which is part of SoBA's efforts to support and address student success, retention, experiential opportunities and career development through an integrated programmatic approach. The overarching goal of SoBA Central is to engage students from freshman through senior levels in developmental coursework and programs that address student transitions into college, aiding them in successful exits from college, productive careers and mean-

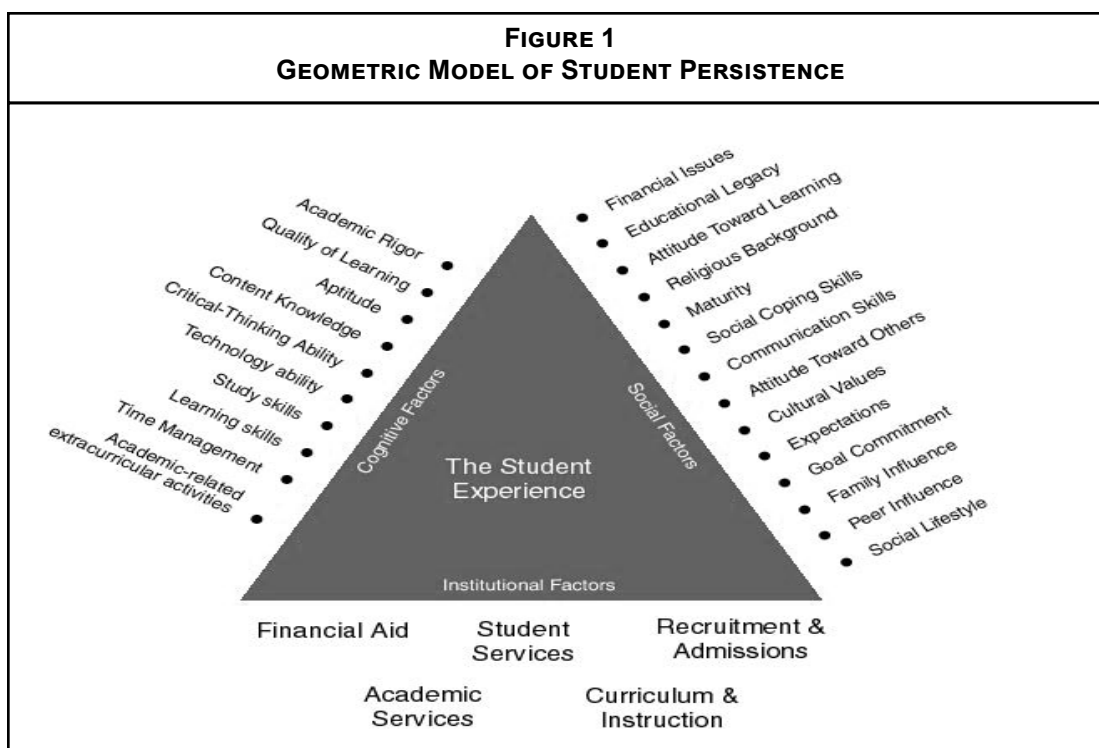
ingful alumni relationships with the University of Montana.

FACTORS AFFECTING STUDENT RETENTION

Many factors are associated with retention, including academic preparedness, commitment to educational goals and the institution, campus climate, social and academic integration and financial aid. Vincent Tinto's 1975 work, "Student Integration Theory," provides the theoretical foundation for retention research and is the most influential explanatory model of persistence in postsecondary education. At the conceptual core of his model is the importance of person-environment fit to freshmen retention. Tinto suggests that students well-integrated into the social and academic community of the college are less likely to disengage or drop out. Swail's (2004) Geometric Model of Student Persistence and Achievement specifies three main factors: cognitive, social and institutional (figure 1). All the factors in the model can positively, negatively or not affect student retention. The dynamic relationship among these factors determines the student's experience and persistence. In other words, both the student and the institution are responsible for student success.

Cognitive factors refer to students' academic abilities and skills, including academic preparedness, critical thinking ability and study and time management skills. Social factors involve students' maturity, ability to form relationships, commitment to goals, coping skills and attitude toward learning. Institutional factors address how the college helps students achieve the students' educational goals, including curriculum and instruction, academic and student services, recruitment and admission and financial aid.

According to the model, students bring their cognitive and social abilities and skills to the institution they attend. It is the institution's responsibility to get to know its students and provide these students with support according to their needs in an effort to balance these three main factors and help students succeed. Institutions must not only recruit qualified students, but also commit themselves to providing the resources necessary for students to succeed. Seidman (2005) calls for institutional models committed to student success to set high expectations for their students, provide necessary support and



feedback and significantly involve students with other students and faculty.

Academic Advising

Academic advising is much more than simply helping students schedule classes. Effective advising helps students clarify goals and plan their academic experiences to best support those goals. Lowe and Cook (2003) suggest that academic and support services implement proactive strategies to reach freshmen “before they have an opportunity to experience negative feelings of fear, failure, disappointment and confusion.” UM implements an early alert program, designed to identify and provide assistance to students having academic difficulty. Instructors of lower-division courses identify students who are performing poorly in their classes, and the system notifies advisors of those advisees who are deficient and in need of assistance.

As of fall semester 2011, 10.6% of UM’s undergraduate population and 12.3% of freshmen had not declared a major. The rate of students who switch majors (often multiple times) during their college years is much higher. On average, 22.7% of UM’s undergraduate population changes majors each fall (UM Summary of Migration, 2010). Some of this indecisiveness about an intended major is healthy, perhaps reflecting initial

exploration and eventual crystallization of educational goals that naturally accompany personal maturation and increased experience with the college curriculum. However, some of the indecisiveness and vacillation may reflect confusion, or premature decision-making, due to students’ lack of knowledge about themselves or the relationship between college majors and future careers.

Delay in degree completion, due to student confusion and vacillation regarding academic major, may contribute to the extended length of time it takes many students to complete graduation requirements. It now takes, on average, 5.6 years to complete a bachelor’s degree and 4.6 years to complete an associate’s degree (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2012). Many institutions, UM included, now measure six-year graduation rates.

Experiential Learning Opportunities

An important step in providing supportive services to ensure student success is to furnish related experiential learning through internships and service learning opportunities. Internships offer mutually beneficial opportunities for students and employers. For the student, they provide rich, hands-on learning, industry exposure and resume building experiences. Additionally, internships assist students in their transition from the classroom to the work environment,

helping them build upon classroom theory to make real decisions, solve relevant problems, develop connections and learn new skills. A study of the SoBA graduating class of 2009 found that 26% of scholarship awardees and 67% of Mortar Board recipients completed internships during their academic careers. It is clear that internships and scholarship go hand-in-hand.

The Internships and Co-ops 2012 Talent Development Outlook: CERI Research Brief 2012.3 found that more than 70% of organizations recruited interns during the 2011-2012 academic year. The job market is competitive, and experiential learning continues to be a strong recruiting venue for employers and an important career development means for students. Internships rank as the top recruiting strategy employed by organizations (Recruiting Trends, 2011-2012). Rosemary Haefner, Vice President of Human Resources at CareerBuilder.com stated, "Internships not only help build skill sets and establish a successful track record, they offer great networking opportunities to land a position after graduation." (CareerBuilder.com, 2008). Recognizing that more than 70% of students who completed internships receive job offers, it would behoove SoBA to have a clear and thorough "unity of effort, based on a consistent set of objectives and values" (AACSB, 2002) between academics, internships, advising and career development.

Career Development

Career development has been shown to increase student satisfaction with the institution (AACSB, 2002). A secondary gain from career development programs is the creation of a stronger connection between students and the institution's key educational agents, as well as to illustrate to students how these educational agents act as a bridge to the students' future careers.

Millennial students require clear direction, especially in terms of orienting them to the school-to-career process. InternBridge, Inc. surveyed more than 12,000 college students in 2008 and found that the students want more help understanding employer expectations, learning to network and earning internship and job offers (Cox and Neidert, 2008).

Research shows that students' sense of purpose (career goal) increases retention (Gerdes and Mallinckrodt, 1994). Knowing why one does

something is important to the relevance and commitment to any endeavor, including college. In 2005, as a result of employer, alumni, student and faculty urging and start-up funding donated by those same employers and alumni, SoBA created a Career Development program for its students. One of the most often stated overall goals for the program, as indicated by these stakeholders, was to create a "total student culture change." Serious issues preventing student success were due, in part, to a lack of student preparation, low-to-no involvement in recruiting activities and frustration with lack of career development support.

The specific focus of this highly visible, successful program has been to create a bridge between college and career by ensuring that students focus early and often on the following: nurturing their career aspirations throughout their years at SoBA (beginning the freshman year); developing a strategic career plan; actively engaging in career discovery; learning how to job search effectively; and having access to and regular interactions with alumni, employers and career professionals.

Through faculty support and collaboration, the program integrated career development through curriculum development. Employers now report being overwhelmingly impressed with SoBA student preparation and engagement in the recruiting process, as a direct result of the career development programs, and enjoy participating in student progress. Students report a heightened sense of confidence in, understanding of and experience with the job search and interview process, as well as increased success. Faculty and administrators report that this has helped contribute to a more engaged student who exhibits a heightened level of professional behavior, both in and out of the classroom. Career development (Who am I? Where am I going? How do I get there?) and integrating what students learn in the classroom into real world applications are key to helping students transfer this knowledge into a professional career.

CHARACTERISTICS OF BUSINESS STUDENTS IN GENERAL

AACSB published the results of an extensive study as part of its International Effective Practices Series entitled, *Effective Practices: Undergraduate Career Services and Placement Offices*. This report shares the results of a quantitative

analysis of student satisfaction and qualitative research to identify the practices responsible for the success of the high performing schools. The data consisted of nearly 40,000 responses, on 184 campuses, to the Undergraduate Student Benchmarking Study.

According to the AACSB Effective Practices Report, students' expectations include desired help in identifying appropriate professions and career paths; conducting their job searches and preparing for interviews; securing more job interviews; and scheduling classes and workshops that are substantive, pleasant and delivered with personal attention. A key finding in this report is that Career Services and Placement Offices (CSOs) play a crucial role in creating student satisfaction, a key metric of educational success. In fact, student satisfaction with a CSO is the second strongest predictor of overall satisfaction with an undergraduate business program; only the quality of faculty and instruction for required courses in a student's major surpassed student satisfaction with CSO performance as a measure of success. According to the AACSB study, the quality of CSO infrastructure, such as successfully integrated technology and facilities housed within the business school, is critically important. Schools that view the CSO as integral to achieving their mission tend to have higher levels of student satisfaction. An important feature of the leading CSOs featured in the AACSB Report is that their schools view these CSOs as integral parts of the college that serve to help fulfill the overall mission.

Other factors are associated with student satisfaction. Some of the more important are the following: CSO programs and activities that help students select a major or career in which they are confident and one that supports them in the transition from school to work; long-standing relationships with employers and recruiters; and strong alumni involvement, including mentoring programs.

The report profiles the top three rated CSOs: University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW-Madison), Indiana University (IU) and BYU's Marriott School. All three have CSOs focused exclusively on business students, and UW-Madison states, "Our business students cannot be adequately served by a campus-wide center." The report also states that having a dedicated CSO

appears to provide a competitive advantage for undergraduate business schools.

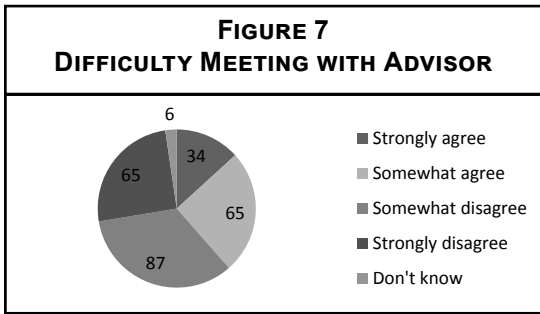
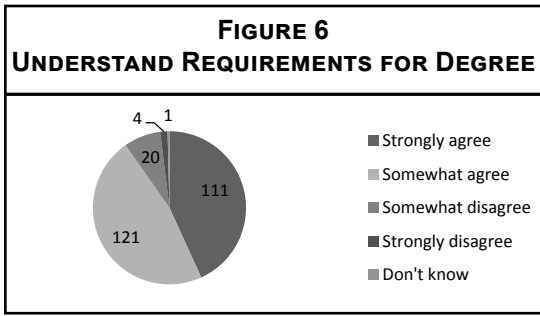
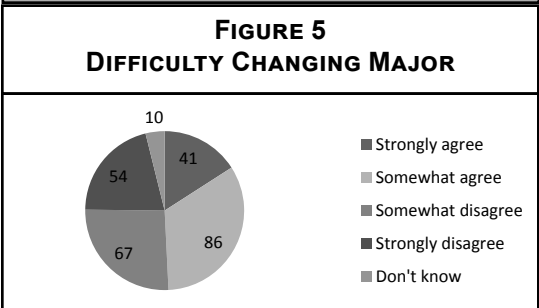
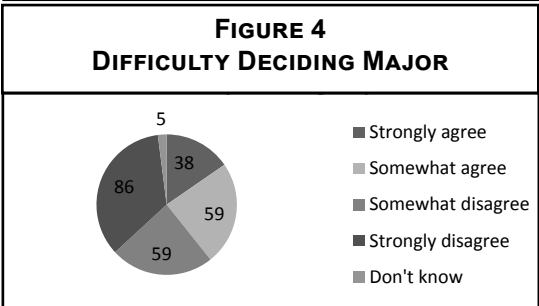
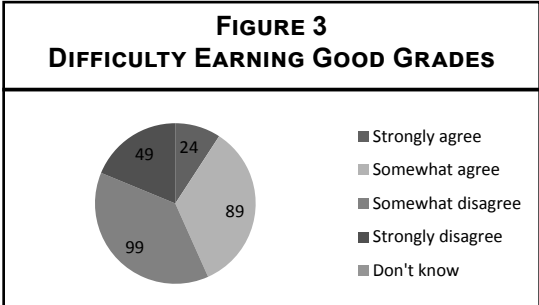
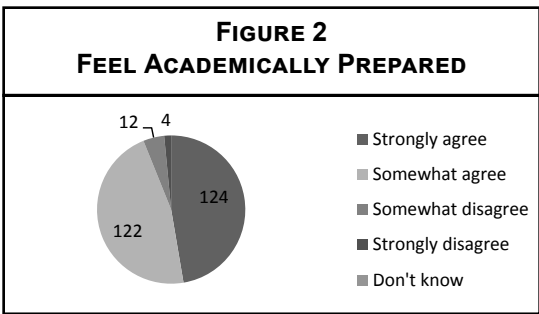
UW-Madison describes how its CSO is a top priority for the school and how it has fully integrated it into all parts of the business school. It also states that student career development and employer development are school-wide responsibilities – "structure supports strategy."

IU credits its success in this arena to a number of elements, including information technology that enables students and recruiters to work easily with each other and staff as well as two semester-length career planning courses, one each at the sophomore and senior levels. IU views students and recruiters as its clients and states, "This is a professional school, and students want to get jobs. Supporting their efforts to do so is part of our responsibility as faculty." All business students take Career Perspectives, Business in the second semester of their freshmen year or first semester of their sophomore year. It is a two-credit course designed to introduce students to the process of career planning through a comprehensive and hands-on coverage of the topic as a vehicle for discovery and preparation. It requires students to make several tentative academic and career decisions based on self-assessments and career interests. In the junior or senior year, IU students take Career Planning and Placement. This is also a required course, first offered in 1938, that helps upper-division students "transition from an academic environment to a career setting." This course focuses on seeking and landing a good job at an attractive salary. Guest lecturers support the class through professional opportunity orientation sessions to help students explore industry groups and organizations, and they offer recruiter presentations about job searching, interviewing, and other key job search skills.

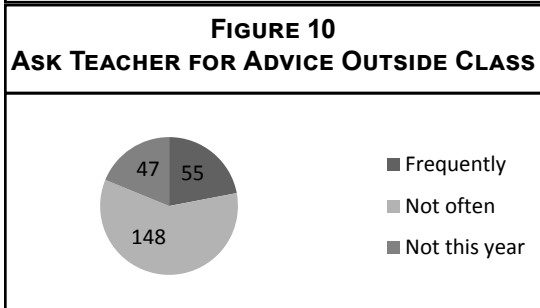
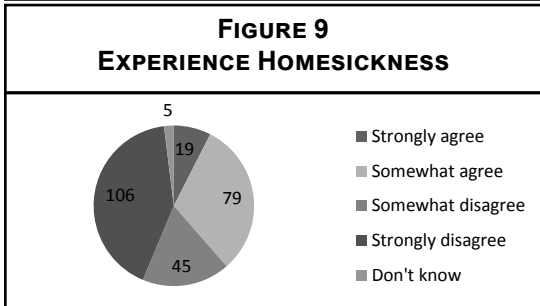
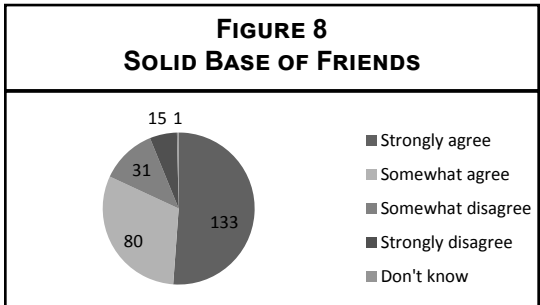
CHARACTERISTICS OF SoBA STUDENTS

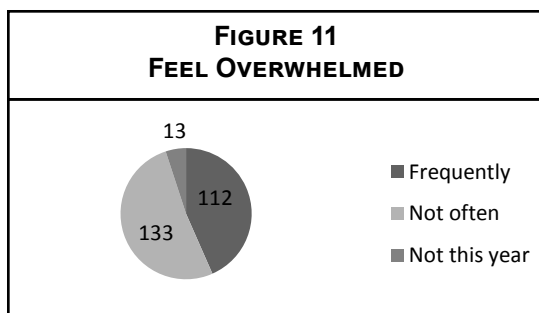
UM faces a 28% attrition rate from first to second year, with a significantly higher attrition rate for students without a declared a major, according to *Partnering for Student Success: A Collaborative Action Plan for Student Retention 2009-2013*. UM has a targeted goal of increasing the overall first-to-second year retention rate to 80% for the Mountain Campus by AY 2012-2013.

The authors administered a survey during spring 2012 semester to 265 SoBA freshmen and sophomore students. The purpose of the survey was to evaluate SoBA students' academic preparedness, commitment to educational goals and the institution, social and academic integration and financial status. While 94% feel they were academically prepared for college (figure 2), 43% think it will be difficult to earn good grades (figure 3). Additionally, large percentages of students feel it is difficult to decide on a major and to change their major (figures 4 and 5). Ninety percent of students understand the requirements to earn a degree (figure 6), but 39% find it difficult to meet with an advisor (figure 7).



While the above numbers are a good foundation, more can be done. Mixed results were reported in the area of social and academic integration.





While 82% of students report they have a solid base of friends (figure 8) and 39% report experiencing homesickness (figure 9), only 22% of students regularly seek advice from teachers outside of class (figure 10) and 43% frequently feel overwhelmed by all they have to do (figure 11). Very small percentages reported regularly participating in activities such as politics, student elections, community service and religion. Students who feel they are a part of their institution and community work harder to succeed. SoBA Central encourages students to regularly talk to teachers outside of class and participate in school and community activities. While 100% participation is not a realistic goal, SoBA is hopeful that it will see a 25% improvement in SoBA student social and academic integration by 2015.

SoBA CENTRAL: ONE-STOP SOLUTION

As a specialized professional school, SoBA prepares students for business careers. Across the country, it has been shown that student career advising and career development needs in professional schools are best met by the school itself rather than a central campus-wide resource unfamiliar with the curriculum and career options for its students (AACSB, 2002).

Through a collaborative reconfiguration of SoBA student support services, SoBA Central aligns three existing in-house departments: academic advising, career development and internship services. By physically creating a centrally located student services office, all three programs can function as an integrated one-stop student services facility, which is strongly recommended by AACSB. One of the six key action strategies to address UM's nearly 30% attrition rate includes the establishment of a central 'Center for Academic Enrichment' to promote and coordinate opportunities for students in and beyond the

classroom. Additionally, this action strategy will purportedly strengthen student support through developmental career coursework and targeted programs for first-year and at-risk students. A single change, re-aligning departments and services in-house, addresses the request for action by all campus departments, including SoBA.

By collaborating with alumni and the SoBA Advisory Boards and developing a centralized student center, SoBA can continue to expand and foster new relationships with alumni and employers to develop professional internships, mentoring arrangements and employment opportunities, which are other ways to assure business students achieve their goals of earning a solid education. The documented impact of attendance on student retention, coupled with the greater cost effectiveness of managing enrollment via retention, strongly suggest that investment in retention efforts is an educationally enhancing and cost-effective intervention.

Goals of SoBA Central

SoBA Central will assist students in:

- Transitioning effectively into college and from pre-business majors to declared business majors;
- Selecting a business major and complementary minor or focus area;
- Locating appropriate resources to solve a wide range of student problems;
- Gaining experience through internships, service learning, and related opportunities;
- Identifying resources for enriching their academic experiences;
- Exploring opportunities to further graduate and professional education;
- Completing a degree; and
- Learning how to strategically manage career and job search efforts for life.

Key Initiatives

The following research-based initiatives summarize the detailed action items and related tasks that will be executed by SoBA Central in collaboration with SoBA's Student Retention and

Engagement Committee and with UM Administration:

- *Collaborative Student Retention and Success Management Approach*—Restructure present areas within the SoBA—Advising, Internships and Career Development—allowing SoBA a consistent focus on student retention and success.
- *Seniors Mentoring Freshmen Program*—Develop a “Seniors Mentoring Freshmen” program as part of the SoBA careers course and/or a portfolio-building option/requirement for senior business majors.
- *Pre-Business Support and Advising Initiative*—Collaborate with UM’s Office of Student Success to interact with and engage freshmen and sophomores displaying an interest in business. This support ranges from deploying freshmen advising resources physically within the SoBA; creating a *Business Interest Group (BIG)* to hold social events and informational meetings (such as a fall SoBA-wide social event to bring students together with business leaders, seniors, graduates, professors and staff) for freshmen and sophomores interested in business; collaborating with the campus community on use of appropriate messages at key times (identifying pivotal points in a student’s decision making); and using technology to enhance student success, satisfaction and retention.
- *Provide a Consistent Advising Home for SoBA Students*—In addition to the previously mentioned Pre-Business Support and Advising Initiative, SoBA Central also will play a significant role in group and individual advising for upper-division and graduate students. Students will find experts housed in one area and experience consistency in information, advice and direction.
- *Freshmen Interest Groups (FIGs)-Business*—Play a more significant role in supporting, collaborating with and assisting the established FIG program.
- *Early Alert*—Work with UM resources to more fully implement the Early Alert program into the SoBA. Develop internal processes to identify at risk students to intervene and direct available campus resources to those students.
- *SoBA Careers Courses*—Offer a structured opportunity for students to assess their personality, interests and values and to connect their findings with appropriate academic and career paths to assist them in making major/minor and career choices, and to enhance freshman-year persistence and degree completion.
- *Freshmen and Sophomore Course Enhancements*—Work collaboratively with faculty and learning theory and technology experts to enhance delivery techniques and content critical to retention and satisfaction of the new generation of students.
- *Excellence in Business Communication*—Further develop and coordinate SoBA’s assessment initiative to provide detailed feedback on student writing assignments in key business courses (designed to allow SoBA to engage in assessment activities and identify at-risk students so that referrals can be made to UM’s Writing Center).
- *Internships and other service learning*—Support SoBA students in experiential learning and service learning activities by coordinating internships and working collaboratively with faculty who apply for and receive service learning designation for their courses.
- *Undergraduate Research/Project Assistantship/Practicum Program*—Develop a number of competitive undergraduate research/project opportunities that will engage students, enhance student skills development and increase student satisfaction and retention.

Timeline

The initial phase of SoBA Central began spring 2012 semester. The focus of this phase was improving customer service in the central information office through employee training and customer surveys. Several management information systems students were retained to evaluate and flowchart processes that impacted students and discover ways to automate and make the processes more efficient and effective. A new website was created tying together the three student

services areas of advising, internships and career development.

Over the course of the 2012-2013 academic year, physical remodeling changes occurred in addition to new, improved wayfinding signage so students know exactly where to find answers to their questions and direction to the appropriate resources. Evaluation of the initiative to date will occur during summer and fall 2013. If the foundation is solid and data indicate that students are benefitting from SoBA Central, additional initiatives outlined above will commence.

CONCLUSION

Consistent student feedback supports the recommendations from AACSB's peer-review team that the SoBA should provide, locate and coordinate student support services within SoBA to better meet students' specific academic needs and provide a bridge for the transition from college to career. Data show that retention is improved and student success is enhanced if a professional school, such as the SoBA, can engage students in advising, career development and internship opportunities early – and often.

SoBA Central is a work in progress. SoBA Central's mission to integrate programmatic experiences critical for student success is expected to contribute to an enriched academic environment for students, enhanced student retention rates and benefits for other stakeholders – including recruiters and employers. Following spring 2012 Advisory Board meetings, members were so energized about the conceptual model for SoBA Central that they immediately contributed funding to complete the first phase of physical remodeling to better serve students.

The SoBA plans to conduct additional surveys during the 2013-2014 academic year to measure indicators of success and longitudinal progress. If the SoBA Central initiative is demonstrated – through surveys and informal, anecdotal data-gathering techniques – to be as successful as expected, SoBA is confident that it will secure permanent funding to ensure future students benefit from academic opportunities and career collaborations afforded by SoBA Central.

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