

11-28-2018

## One Student at a Time

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### eCommons Citation

Spina, Eric F., "One Student at a Time" (2018). *President's Blog: From the Heart*. 139.  
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# One Student at a Time

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Wednesday November 28, 2018

By Eric F. Spina

We often talk and write about students as a collective, whether it is “UD students” or “the Class of 2022” or some other construct, but as we all know, this collective is made up of \*individual\* students, each one with hopes and dreams for their future, each one loved and encouraged by family and friends.

So it is heartbreaking to recognize that, nationally, nearly one in three college students drops out after their first year. The news is encouraging — much more encouraging — at the University of Dayton, where we just hit a new record in student retention, thanks to a strong team effort.

In all, nearly 91 percent — 90.8 percent, to be precise — of all first-year students returned for their sophomore year. That puts us above most of our peers and in the company of selective national universities.

For three years running, we've graduated a record percentage of students, too, in part due to a fixed net-price tuition plan that promises scholarships and grants will increase with any tuition increase. There is no statistic that is more important to UD than the graduation rate of our students, which has climbed five percentage points to a record 80.4 percent for those who complete their degree in five years. By next May's commencement, we expect to achieve a record six-year graduation rate that accounts for all those students who completed co-ops or simply proceeded at a different pace.

These statistics are worth celebrating in every corner of campus because, unlike some universities, we take a holistic approach to a student's success. No matter our individual roles, it's up to all of us on campus — from professors in the Common Academic Program to campus ministers in the residence halls to staff in student development — to help our students realize their full potential.

When Justin Keen, director of assessment and student centered analytics, breaks down the statistics, it becomes easy to visualize what defines success. This fall, 76 more students returned for their second year when compared to the average retention rate from 2008-2012. The first-to-second year retention rate has methodically inched up four percentage points in the last decade.

Under the leadership of Deb Bickford, associate provost for academic affairs and learning initiatives — and with the collaborative efforts of scores of staff and faculty — the campus has emphasized a student success mindset, which is very consistent with the Marianist charism.

"One student at a time," Deb notes, "adds up."

But we also know we still need to do more to share information with each other about students who are at risk. That's why we've introduced a sophisticated, centralized electronic system — an early warning system — that allows professors and advisers "to raise a flag" when they observe a student struggling in one way or another, whether inside or outside the classroom. I encourage faculty and staff to use this tool to share information because it literally can mean the difference between success and failure for individual students.

I applaud the work of the Student Success and Persistence Team who are diligently working with others across campus to improve retention on a variety of fronts — from professional advisers and more support for undecided majors to sophisticated data collection and exit interviews with students who decide to leave. Only through such concerted campus-wide effort will we reach our current goal of 93 percent retention.

While we should take a well-deserved moment to celebrate hitting a record retention rate, we must persist in our ongoing quest to help *\*all\** students earn a UD diploma.

I resonate with the words of Becki Lawhorn, director of retention research and analytics: “In our heart and soul, we want to know we did everything in our power to help a student stay and succeed.”

One student at a time.