



Assessment Spotlight: First Year Experience & Retention Initiatives

Spring 2019

The Office of First Year Experience and Retention Initiatives ([FYE](#)) has the challenging responsibility of helping each year's incoming cohort of freshmen and transfer students transition to The University of Alabama. New students arrive by the thousands from all over the globe, each with a unique academic, social, financial, and personal background. Their individual and collective success is central to UA's mission and [strategic plan](#).

Some of the best-known FYE programs on campus include Camp 1831 and Freshman Forum. However, FYE runs a number of other research-based, high-impact initiatives designed to support students who may be more likely than others to struggle academically and personally with their transition to college. Two programs have proven particularly impactful for at-risk students:

Legacy Scholars utilizes a cultural, social, and aspirational capital framework to identify and bridge gaps (e.g., in knowing how to navigate campus systems) for first-generation students. Historically, this population has a second-year persistence rate of 70% at UA—well below the campus average of 87%.

Tide Watch is based on an appreciative advising model. In 2017-18, it was deployed as a collaborative effort with three academic colleges (A&S, C&IS, HES). The program uses peer mentoring and academic skill-building modules to help students who have been placed on academic warning by their college. Historically, this population has a second-year persistence rate of 66% at UA—again, well below the 87% campus average.

According to FYE director Amy Bickel, assessment is an important ingredient in the success of these programs. Simply adopting a “high-impact” practice doesn't mean it will be impactful; a program should use data to evaluate the extent to which outcomes are achieved, and to determine where programmatic refinements might be made (e.g., effectiveness with different subgroups of students).

Fall 2018 data revealed that Legacy Scholars and Tide Watch were highly successful in 2017-18. Each program saw a significant increase in the rate at which participating students persisted to their second year at UA (90% and 80%, respectively). Similarly, participating students posted higher GPAs and completed more credit hours than comparison groups; both metrics are known to be strong predictors of eventual graduation. Simply put, students who participate in these FYE programs are more likely to stay at UA than similar students who do not engage with FYE.

Like other departments within the Division of Student Life, FYE tracks the financial impact of its programs. Taking into account the difference between in-state and out-of-state tuition rates, the combined fiscal impact of Legacy Scholars and Tide Watch for 2017-18 is estimated at somewhere between \$250,000 and \$680,000 (based on the number of retained at-risk students above and beyond what historical rates would have predicted). Sound assessment processes allow FYE to demonstrate the impact of their work—and make data-driven programmatic enhancements to help even more students succeed at UA.

