

Rethinking Student Support Services

A collaborative vision; diversified financial support; and creative implementation to yield increased student success, satisfaction and retention.



Freshman Bryson Lempecki works with Student Success Coach Dina Reilly in the Carter Center for Academic Success in Stanley Library.

Higher education is changing. Best practices and expectations in and out of the classroom are evolving. In this environment, Ferrum College has a long history of serving students from underserved backgrounds whose transition to college life can come with additional hurdles—navigating unfamiliar academic processes, loss of social support networks, difficulty connecting with professors and classmates, and the realization of knowledge gaps in foundational areas like math and writing.

Early in 2022, these combined realities led faculty and staff across campus to see the necessity to revitalize student support services. Vice President for Academic Affairs Kevin Reilly and Vice President of Student Development & Campus Life Angie Dahl, led the development of a comprehensive student support program to improve student satisfaction and increase retention, especially among Ferrum's first-generation and low-income students. Initiatives to expand some existing services and add new programs—in areas such as academic advising, financial literacy, first-generation college student support, and mental health—were identified and implemented through the Carter Center and the Office of Student Life & Engagement.

>25% of Ferrum College students are the first in their family to attend college and over 50% come from families with substantial financial need.



Sixty percent of the 2022 incoming class met the first-generation student definition. The Michael T. Christian First-Year Experience Center in Stanley Library provides these students a variety of resources, including workshops, study sessions, social activities, as well as a dedicated study space with coffee, snacks, school supplies and support staff.

Academic Advising and Support

The Carter Center for Academic Success (CCAS) programs and services to assist and empower students throughout their educational journey begin when students arrive on campus. The CCAS staff provide regular proactive, intensive, and individualized academic support for each student based on their comprehensive academic assessment.

As part of its strategic vision, the CCAS launched the following programs in 2022:

Student Success Coaches

Each Ferrum College student is assigned a student success coach who provides a variety of individualized advising and assessment services from the day they arrive on campus until they graduate. While academic advising is still a key component to Ferrum's support services, Coaches help students navigate other possible determinants to their success such as financial literacy, career advice, and working through personal or emotional challenges.

First@Ferrum

Under the direction of Tracy Holley '96, the recently established Michael T. Christian First-Year Experience Center provides a variety of resources, including workshops, study sessions, social activities, as well as a dedicated study space with coffee, snacks, school supplies and support staff.

Gateway Seminar

The first-year college seminar was redesigned to include both large group sessions covering topics such as campus technology and financial literacy, and smaller class sessions designed to discuss and utilize the information from the large group sessions.

Foundations

Before the 2022 fall semester, incoming freshmen had the opportunity to participate in the Foundations one-week summer bridge program. This inaugural program was hosted by 7 upperclassmen mentors and included activities designed to increase academic preparedness and engagement in the campus community. To date, only one participant was not retained for spring 2023 and 81% of the participants are in good academic standing with 43% achieving Dean's List.

Financial Literacy and Support

Financial literacy and financial stability are often important predictors of student success. The First@Ferrum Financial Literacy and Scholarship Program provides students with additional sources of financial support as well as education and information regarding grants and scholarships.

Additionally, the Carter Center recently launched the Ferrum College Opportunity Fund to provide need-based mini-grants. Financial literacy will help set good habits and prepare students to make sound decisions with

their money as they advance into financial independence, but students often face unanticipated emergency expenses. The Opportunity Fund one-time mini-grants help bridge financial gaps that might otherwise present an obstacle to academic, professional, personal, or spiritual development.

To date, 16 grants have been awarded for books, computers, funeral travel expenses, and more.

Mental Health and Community Support

Ferrum College has recognized the growing demand for mental health and community support services from our students. To increase student satisfaction, retention and ensure persistence to graduation, innovations in academic support must be complemented by mental health and quality of life resources.



Lower level Roberts Hall now houses Creativity and Mindfulness Suites.

The Office of Student Life and Engagement transformed the lower level of Roberts Hall in fall 2022 to house the Creativity and Mindfulness Suites to teach stress management skills. Broader social emotional programming is also provided through residence life, counselors are also on staff to provide confidential, one-on-one therapy when needed.

Additionally, the College now uses multiple assessment instruments to equip Success Coaches with data to work proactively with College faculty, staff, Office of Student Life and Engagement, and athletic coaches to provide immediate support alerts for our students. A committee meets weekly to discuss students in

need and makes recommendations, writes an action plan, and assigns a staff member, coach or faculty member to help the students.

The Funding

Ferrum College has been successful in obtaining a combination of private and public funds to support these strategic and groundbreaking initiatives. In May 2022, Ferrum College was awarded \$143,000 in grant funding by the Jessie Ball duPont Fund to support the Carter Center for Academic Success. The grant award will support the College's academic support services to increase equity in academic achievement as well as the overall performance, persistence, and graduation of first generation students, low-income students, and students with disabilities who demonstrate a need for academic support.

The Office of Student Life and Engagement resources in Roberts Hall and other student mental health initiatives were funded through an Office of Postsecondary Education federal grant and Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund III - Supplemental Support under the American Rescue Plan for education stabilization.