Tutoring and Learning Center’s Retention Office:

Academic Insight Mentor Handbook

October 11, 2008
The University’s administration has designated the Tutoring and Learning Center’s Retention Office to coordinate and oversee all retention efforts occurring on our campus. Academic Insight Mentors (AIM) serve as the most crucial members of TAMUCC’s retention team.

For many students attending university for the first time, the transition can be difficult. Learning to live independently is a challenge in itself, but for many the expectations of professors who give open ended assignments and expect hours of preparation and study often proves too much for some students. Many of your colleagues attended high schools that offered honors programs and encouraged preparation for the expectations of higher education however, a large number of your fellow students never had the chance to participate in these programs.

Many of these students might have only taken a few honors courses or none at all. Their parents never attended a college or university, and as result many had to figure out how to apply for admissions and financial aid on their own. They did not get to prepare for the SAT or ACT because they worked to support their families or simply were unaware of these examination’s, importance. Many of these students attended local high schools and still live with their parents and work to help support them or to pay for their classes.

Both of the types of students described above are considered, “at-risk.” If there were two individuals who possessed these two types of traits, we would consider them to be at a higher risk of dropping out.

Please remember that each person brings his or her own unique experiences, attitudes and worldviews to our university. For example one student might find a class such as biology overwhelming and stressful, while another individual might enjoy the challenge and find the subject interesting.

Your jobs as mentors will be to help guide students who have been identified as at-risk by the Retention Office. This guide will cover how we identify at-risk students,
strategies for contacting and assisting them and any issues that might arise during this process.

You were chosen as an Academic Insight Mentor because of your exceptional performance in classes, communication and ability to guide others. Please remember that if you have any questions please speak with a Retention Specialists at any time.

**Identifying at-risk students:**

In a perfect world there would be no need to identify students as “at-risk.” In this utopian vision every student would understand their own limitations and reach out to their professors, visit the TLC and know exactly what forms to fill out and who to talk to at the round building. As you know many students are not aware of all the services on campus and might find their professors intimidating. You will use demographic, statistical data and performance metrics to identify students who might have issues at TAMUCC.

Some feel that identifying students as “at-risk,” unfairly focuses on students who might not need or want help, or will create a self-fulfilling prophecy situation where the student is set up to fail. There is no fool proof method to help students succeed so we must use professional tools and means of assessment based on years of research, data and experience that have identified a set of common traits that exist amongst students who underperform. These identifiers are used only to help and guide students, not to weed them out. The Retention Office primarily uses the results of the College Student Inventory (CSI) and the university admission codes. Other indicators such as self-identification and College Readiness are also considered in our assessments.

**College Student Inventory**

Psychologist Michael Stratil created the College Student Inventory (CSI) in 1981, in an effort to better identify “at-risk” students in higher education. The CSI is a one hundred question survey that incoming first year students must complete during
their summer orientation. Students may receive a copy of their results with specific recommendations created by the CSI program.

Based on these results the Retention Office identifies the most at-risk students and works very closely with this group. You will have access to the CSI data through the BannerTools program. Below are two examples of a student’s CSI results. The results are color coordinated allowing for quick interpretation of strengths and weaknesses. Green areas on a student’s results indicate strengths, red represents weaknesses which will require intervention.

With the students you are assigned please focus your attention on the sections titled “Academic Motivation” and “Specific Recommendations.” If a student has a red section under the first four motivation fields, be sure to recommend our tutoring facilities. For example, if a student has stated that they lack confidence in Math and they are enrolled in College Algebra, try to make them aware of the math tutors’ schedules. Please remember that if we do not have tutors for a subject or class then recommend that they utilize the online SMARTHINKING tutorials.

Take special note of the section titled “Specific Recommendations For X.” This is a list of twenty-five recommendations based of the student’s responses. This list is a combination of academic and social recommendations. We are not counselors or therapists and can only help individuals with academic concerns. If a student wants to see a counselor for depression or an unwanted habit, we must refer them to the university counseling center. Please alert a retention specialist if you come across any students with this indicator.
fig 1. What can you conclude about the student’s attitude towards educators?

fig 2. This student has indicated some concerns about social activities. What would you recommend for him/her?
fig 3. You will see three codes under “admission code:” Accepted, Accepted Alternative, Accepted Alternative (committee)

**Admission Standards:**

The University and the State of Texas require minimum class ranks, GPA’s and SAT/ACT test scores for a student to obtain admission. Often times students do not meet these requirements for a variety of reasons; poor test scores, low rank etc. Research indicates that students who do not meet the full admission standards are more likely to have academic difficulty their first year. Below is a description of the three Admissions tiers. You will see these codes in BannerTools under “student information.” (see fig. 3)

**Fully Admitted**

If an individual meets all of these criteria, e.g. top half of their class, excellent GPA and test scores they are fully admitted to the University. Typically these students are not considered “at-risk.” However, if they self identify either to a professor or
through the College Student Inventory (CSI) as having issues, we will attempt to help them overcome any difficulties they might be experiencing.

**Alternatively Admitted**

Some students might be in the top half of their class, but perform poorly on the SAT/ACT, these individuals are classified as alternatively admitted. Research conducted at this university confirmed that these students underperform academically and have statistically lower graduation rates. The majority of the students you work with will be from this group.

**Alternatively Admitted (Committee)**

There is a third group of students who are admitted by a committee of professors and staff members. These students do not meet any of the state or university requirements for admission, but usually had extenuating circumstances such as an illness. The Retention Specialists will assist this group.

All students attending TAMUCC fall somewhere in these categories, but remember that these designations do not guarantee success or failure.

**Texas Success Initiative (TSI)**

*From the Texas Coordinating Board:*

**“§4.55 Assessment**

(a) An institution shall assess, by an instrument approved in §4.56 of this title (relating to Assessment Instruments), the academic skills of each entering undergraduate student prior to enrollment of the student. Under exceptional circumstances, an institution may permit a student to enroll in freshman-level academic coursework without assessment but shall require the student to be assessed not later than the end of the first semester of enrollment in freshman-level academic coursework.
(b) An institution offering collegiate-level credit to students via a Multi-Institution Teaching Center (MITC) or a university system center, or to in-state students by distance learning delivery systems shall ensure that students are assessed as required by this section.

(c) An institution may not use the assessment or the results of the assessment as a condition of admission to the institution.

Source Note: The provisions of this §4.55 adopted to be effective December 3, 2003, 28 TexReg 10753”

The Texas success initiative was implemented by the state legislature in 1999. This law states that students not meeting TAKS or SAT/SAT exemptions must obtain a minimum score on an accepted entrance exam (THEA, COMPASS etc.) that focuses on math, reading and writing skills. The law notes that students cannot be denied admission if they do not meet minimum standards. These individuals are admitted to TAMUCC and given the designation of Not College Ready (NCR) and are required to enroll in a developmental math (0398/0399), reading or writing tutorials. NCR’s have a hold placed on their records and cannot drop these courses and must pass the math courses with at least a C and the reading with a B. Students enrolled in writing 0099 must meet with a writing consultant at least once a week for thirty minutes. Students must repeat these courses until they have passed them with the minimum acceptable grades. Some your assigned students will be NCR’s, in your communications focus on their developmental courses. Remind students of tutoring opportunities and of the online support that SMARTHINKING offers. If these students note that they are performing poorly in these classes remind them that they are a required and that they cannot drop.

These individuals are often lacking reading; writing and math skills due to poor preparation in high school or other extenuating circumstances. Their developmental courses are designed to provide basic skills that offer training for future courses.

Do not call these classes remedial! If students call them remedial or any other derogatory moniker please correct. The Retention Specialists, Hector, Colin and
John, coordinate all TSI issues. If a student has a question about TSI compliance refer them to the Retention Specialists.

![TSI Status screenshot]

*figure 4: The TSI Status will show CR for “college ready” or NCR for “not college ready”*

**Contacting Students:**

You will be expected to contact students through either phone or email, typically your first contact will be via email. You will be expected to log all contact notes with students in the Honer System. This application requires for you to enter the students id number (ie A4815162342). There is a section then provided for you to describe any communication you have with a student. Please remember to be as detailed as possible including date, time and what was discussed.

You will be instructed on when and who you will be contacting. Typically you will be required to send an introductory email to your assigned students informing them of your services. If you receive no response and the student has been identified as struggling in their classes, continue to send follow up emails reminding them of services and any approaching academic deadlines (eg drop dates, final exams, etc.).

If a student has not responded to your email attempts, your next step will be to contact the student via telephone. Please use your best judgment when determining to make phone contact with one of your mentees. For this step you will use the telephone in the computer lab. Long distance numbers require a code, so please ask a Retention Specialist for the code before you attempt to call.

When you speak to students on the phone please remember that you are representing the TLC. You must be polite and cordial at all times, and never
condescending or arrogant. Some students you contact might be upset or hostile, please do not lose your temper or become frustrated. Remain calm and try your best to inform the students on the usefulness of tutoring and recommendations for other services.

**The Honer System**

![Peer Leader Session Form](image)

*figure 5: The Peer Leader Session form requires you to enter the student’s id number and provides a space to describe your student contact.*

Whenever you make contact with a student, via email or phone, you must enter the details of your conversations in the Honer System’s “Peer Leader Session Form.” This form allows for a secure means of logging contact notes. Periodically the Retention Specialists will view these notes to ensure quality and to provide you with advice and guidance.

You should use the Peer Leader Form for detailing phone calls or to provide a summary of follow-up email conversations. When filling out the form please include the students primary concerns, any classes they are struggling in and what services you referred them to.
To avoid any security breaches or violations of FERPA (see the section below for an explanation of FERPA) try to keep your notes electronic in the Honer System. Written note are discouraged as they can be lost or left behind on your desk. If you do happen to write any information down about a student on paper, please shred it as soon as possible.

**Accessing the Honer System**

To access the Honer system open your web browser and go to [https://10.3.80.166/stusys/](https://10.3.80.166/stusys/)

After entering your username and password you have access to the Peer Leader Session Form. The computers set up for Insight Mentors in the TLC computer lab can only access the Honer system. If you have any technical questions regarding the peer leader session form please contact Robert Honer at Robert.honer@tamucc.edu

**Federal Education Right to Privacy Act FERPA(You can get in trouble for this one):**

From Wikipedia:

“The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA or the Buckley Amendment) is a United States federal law codified at 20 U.S.C. § 1232g, with implementing regulations in title 34, part 99 of the Code of Federal Regulations. The regulations cover violations such as parent volunteers grading another child's work, school employees divulging information to someone other than the child's parents about a child's home life, grades or behaviors, and school work posted on a bulletin board with a grade.”

All contact that we have with students is regulated by FERPA and the state version TAC §207.9. Remember that privacy is a right to all individuals who attend the university. The retention office is trusting you with extremely sensitive information that if misused (e.g. telling someone else about personal academic facts regarding a student or doing something illegal with the information you have access to, you can
be prosecuted.) You were hired for your professionalism and with the expectation that you would abide by and respect not only the law, but also the fundamental right to privacy.

In higher education we must be extremely cautious when dealing with students and their parents. Often times you will call a student’s number that is on file which is actually their parent’s number. Under FERPA we are only allowed to communicate a minimum amount of information to a parent. Only tell parents that you are calling from the TAMUCC Retention Office and would like to provide their son or daughter with information on academic support services. Do not go into details about the student’s admission status/test scores or performance. Divulging this information would be a direct violation of FERPA.

Some Thoughts on Professionalism:

Insight Mentors are highly qualified, young individuals who are required to abide by all policies and procedures outlined in this manual as well as the TLC’s contract. As mentioned earlier you are now representatives of the Tutoring & Learning Center and are expected to conduct yourselves in a mature and ethical manner. Insight Mentors are to an set example for the students they have interaction with and for the rest of the campus community. Please be sure to thoroughly read the TLC contract and understand that by signing you have agreed to all rules and stipulations. Pay special attention to the sections on proper office attire, abiding by schedules and filing complaints. Any violations of these rules will result in a verbal warning; the second infraction will result in either reduced hours or termination.

Your supervisor, Jason DUBose, will regularly check with your professors to ensure that your academic performance continues to be exemplary. Your academic success is paramount to us. If you feel that you need time off to study or prepare for classes, please let us know at-least two to three day sin advance.
Conclusion

The Retention Office hopes that each of you will bring your own unique experiences and life lessons to this position. We encourage each of you to feel free to talk to Hector, Jason, Colin or John at any time. We are all members of a crucial team that is trying to achieve a very significant and challenging goal. We look forward to working with each and every one of you and learn from your strengths and ideas.