

A. Institutional Description

UCF, founded in 1963, is located in Orlando, Florida. A metropolitan public research university, UCF is composed of an additional 10 regional campus locations, 13 colleges, offering 181 bachelors and master's degrees, and is home to nearly 65,000 students from 50 states and 153 countries. UCF is the largest university by enrollment in the state of Florida, and leads all universities in Florida by conferring more than 15,000 degrees a year.

B. Program Development

EAB is an online research forum dedicated to providing peer-tested research that answers education's most pressing issues. Within EAB, Student Success Collaborative (SSC) is an online interactive predictive analytics platform that uses a variety of factors to better support, retain, and graduate more students. The "murky middle" is a population defined by EAB SSC to identify students with a GPA between a 2.0 and 3.0. Murky middle research highlighted the risk of dropping out associated with this population, finding that students within this GPA range made up approximately half of the attrition that occurred at institutions after their first year (EAB, 2015). Higher education institutions were encouraged to support a culture shift within the advising community to provide more intentional and individualized support to these students as research found that small GPA gains from semester to semester contributed to students greater likelihood of graduation over time.

First Year Advising and Exploration (FYAE) is the primary academic advising office for First-Time-in-College (FTIC) students during their first year at UCF, providing academic support and guidance to more than 6,500 students a year, connecting them with appropriate academic resources necessary to their success.

Knight Watch Program - NACADA Program Award Nomination Application

FYAE has taken a proactive effort to develop a program to reach first year murky middle students and launched a pilot of the Knight Watch Program in the fall 2015 semester. Specifically, FYAE placed particular importance on making earlier connections with students at a greater risk of academic probation (GPA falling below a 2.00). Thus, summer and fall admits with a GPA between a 2.00 and 2.59 at the end of their first semester at UCF were placed into the program. During the pilot year, student participants had no prior knowledge of Knight Watch or its requirements until they were informed they were placed into the program. This had an influence on students' perceived legitimacy of the program, which most certainly impacted initial program participation. Additionally, no penalty or registration holds were placed on students' accounts if they did not fulfill the requirements.

The pilot launch was designed to create awareness regarding students GPA, and gather student feedback about their academic performance. Students were expected to meet with their assigned FYAE advisor and complete a short reflection statement stating any reasons which contributed to their academic performance. Top responses from students included lack of preparation and studying, lack of interest in coursework, and financial stressors. During the fall 2015 semester, a total of 178 students were placed in the program. A total of 109 (58%) completed an academic advising appointment with FYAE and 30 students (27%) completed the reflection statement. Of the identified population, 126 (85%) students remained in good academic standing following the semester they were identified as "murky middle." However, the results of student's end of semester academic standing did not distinguish between students who did not participate in the academic advising component. As the program developed, identified students were distinguished between participants versus non participants and assessed in areas of retention and academic standing results.

Knight Watch Program - NACADA Program Award Nomination Application

In fall 2016, the program was redesigned to include greater academic interventions to support students and collect additional evaluative data. Students were expected to complete the following program requirements: complete an online academic questionnaire, attend an information session facilitated by FYAE, attend an academic advising appointment, meet with their assigned peer mentor throughout the semester, and participate in at least one campus and/or community service activity. A total of 685 students were identified to participate in the restructured program between the fall 2016 and spring 2017 semesters.

To provide quality academic support services to 685 FTIC students was not without challenge. FYAE recognized that reaching more students (over three times the amount compared to fall 2015) would require intentional messaging to create awareness of the program. In fall 2016, FYAE began including program information on the office website for students to review and created an email communication plan to send intentional and timely messages to students placed in the program. FYAE decided to employ strong language in messaging to students such as “mandatory” and “strongly encouraged” to increase participation and reduce “no-show” appointments. Students received emails from the FYAE office about their participation in the program a week before classes began, and again during the first week of classes. Additionally, students were invited to RSVP and attend information sessions held during the second week of classes to learn more about the program. FYAE Advisors and Peer Mentors collaborated to host group information sessions for students to attend and schedule both their advising and peer mentor appointments at the same time.

As a newly designed academic program, no funding was available to support increased programmatic efforts, including the hiring and training of Peer Mentors who would work with FTIC students placed in the program. To meet this challenge, FYAE formed a partnership with the

Knights Watch Program - NACADA Program Award Nomination Application

UCF LEAD Scholars Academy, an academic support office that oversees high achieving UCF students (with cumulative GPAs of a 3.00 or higher), and instills tenets of academics, community service, and leadership over the course of the students' participation in the academy. Specifically, students in the LEAD Scholars Academy are required to complete service hours and complete an upper level leadership course. Collaborating with LEAD Scholars Academy, FYAE recruited 15 second year student leaders to participate as Knight Watch Peer Mentors for fall 2016. As Knight Watch Peer Mentors, each student leader met with students to help them identify and discuss any transitional issues from high school to college and shared their personal college journey to establish rapport with students. Peer Mentors also facilitated discussion on topics related to goal setting, time management, and motivation to help students overcome transitional challenges and improve their academic performance by the end of the semester. Additionally, they created two community service activities for their students to participate in during the semester. For their service (since compensation was not feasible), each Peer Mentor was able to apply their required LEAD service learning hours towards their mentoring role with students in the program. Between the fall 2016 and spring 2017 semesters, Knight Watch Peer Mentors were able to host over 150 community service hours for the UCF and Greater Orlando communities, while also helping Knight Watch students fulfill the community service and peer mentor meeting requirements for the program. To date, FYAE and LEAD Scholars Academy have recruited more than 30 LEAD Scholars to serve as Knight Watch Peer Mentors, with plans to continue this unified partnership.

As the program develops, it is hopeful that students placed in the program will actively and willingly participate. Awareness of the program is further expected to grow as FYAE continues to improve the program website, establishes additional campus partnerships, and provide more positive incentives for students to complete the program.

C. Goals and Objectives

The goal of the Knight Watch Program is to reduce the risk of UCF FTIC “murky middle” students being placed on academic probation in subsequent semesters. The program aims to achieve this goal by implementing the following objectives:

1. Increase student awareness and use of campus resources and services.
2. Enhance student awareness of their academic progress and how their semester performance impacts financial aid, academic standing, and progression towards degree completion.
3. Creation of an individual action plan for student’s successful transition into the following semester at UCF.

D. Program Description

The Knight Watch Program is for First Time in College (FTIC) students assigned to First Year Advising and Exploration (FYAE) with a GPA between a 2.00 and 2.59 at the end of their first semester. The program seeks to inform these students of their academic progress and provide them with additional academic support via academic advising, peer mentoring and campus engagement opportunities as a proactive measure to reduce their risk of academic probation in a subsequent semester.

E. Procedures Used in Program Evaluation

Both qualitative and quantitative data were used in the program evaluation. As previously mentioned, during its pilot year, the program only collected reflection statements highlighting the student’s experience and yielded very little results (27% completion). Beginning fall 2016, evaluations were disseminated using online survey software to all participating students to assess their learning and gather programmatic feedback. Evaluations were sent throughout the semester;

1) prior to the student's participation in the program, 2) mid-semester, and 3) at the end of the semester, following the release of official UCF grades. All evaluations included questions regarding student's self-reported academic performance, campus resources they used, knowledge of academic deadlines, learning from their peer mentors and academic advisor, and an open commentary space for students to share any additional comments regarding their overall program experience. By the conclusion of spring 2017, a combined total of 1,200 program evaluations (initial n=596, mid- semester n=312, final n=292) were completed by students in the program.

Additionally, student enrollment, retention, GPA/academic standing, and demographics were tracked via reports from the University Registrar's office and official University data through Institutional Knowledge Management (IKM). This data was used to assess program outcomes and establish a historical base line and benchmark as the program continues to develop.

F. Results/Outcome

Of the 685 students identified to participate in the 2016-2017 Knight Watch Program, a total of 577 students (84%) students actively participated in at least one intervention (academic advising, peer mentor meeting, academic questionnaire and/or information session) of the newly designed Knight Watch Program. Specifically, 529 (77%) met with their academic advisor and 408 (60%) met with their peer mentor at least once. Although no longer a component of the Knight Watch program, 241 students (35%) engaged in a community service/campus activity.

A total of 292 (53%) program participants completed the final program evaluation. Students were asked to share what they felt was the most important component of the program. Students rated the FYAE advising appointment as the most helpful component, followed by their peer mentor meeting, and community service. Students also shared what they learned by being in the semester long program. Top responses included how to manage their time, which campus

Knight Watch Program - NACADA Program Award Nomination Application

resources are available and how to access them, how to improve their GPA, and the importance of meeting with an academic advisor. Students also reported their feedback regarding what they would change or did not like about the program. As reflected in the programmatic participation results above, students commented on their lack of interest or desire to complete community service. Additionally, students felt that community service should be replaced to include more meetings with their peer mentors to build greater rapport and trust with them throughout the semester.

Below are some student comments regarding the program:

- “The Knight Watch Program has provided me a wake-up call that I needed when it came to maintaining a good academic standing with UCF. By showing me what I needed to improve on and how I can monitor my progress as the semester goes on, I feel as though the program as a whole was extremely beneficial to me and I greatly appreciate it.”
- “My peer mentor really helped me to realize my goals and how to accomplish them, she was very attentive, extremely pleasant and also helped me to be involved with clubs.”

Academic data has revealed a correlation between program participation and a student’s academic improvement. Of the 2016-2017 participants who completed three or four program components, the first to second year retention rate was 91.3% (compared to retention rates of 79.3% for participants completing 1-2 program components and 75.9% for identified Knight Watch students who did not participate). This 91.3% retention rate for the most involved Knight Watch participants exceeds the UCF retention rate of 89.6% for the 2016-2017 Summer-Fall, Full-Time, FTIC cohort (UCF IKM:46591). Additionally, program participants had lower rates of being placed on academic probation after their Knight Watch semester (8.5% rate of probation for students completing 3-4 program components; 18.3% rate of probation for students completing 1-

2 program components) versus the identified students who did not participate (25.0% rate of probation).

G. Potential for Adaptation by Other Institutions

While the Knight Watch Program has been implemented solely for FTIC students, the potential for this program to extend to students of all classifications, colleges, and majors most certainly exists. EAB has reported that 2 out of 5 murky middle students drop out in their second year. In addition, they further report approximately half of the attrition that occurred after the first year were of students in the murky middle. With this in mind, colleges across the nation should consider serving this population at all academic standings. Specifically, colleges are encouraged to connect with sophomore murky middle students by providing them with ongoing academic support in their second year in which these students are at their greatest risk of attrition. Institutions may also consider establishing an academic advisor or coordinator in their designated colleges and support offices that specifically creates messaging, interventions, and coordination of efforts to connect with this important population. This coordinator could also serve as a campus-wide trainer to academic advisors about how to best academically advise this overlooked population.

Furthermore, partnership is a huge component of developing a program that supports murky middle students, especially if financial resources may be lacking or not readily available. As institutions look to develop interventions such as co-curricular involvement and potential peer mentor support for these students, they must consider other offices and programs that may already exist on their campuses and provide these types of services to students already. Such offices and departments offer potential cross-institutional partnerships that can easily streamline new murky middle initiatives, while also creating greater visibility and prominence of each office or

Knight Watch Program - NACADA Program Award Nomination Application

department involved. For example, both FYAE and LEAD Scholars Academy mutually benefit from the Knight Watch Program; FYAE receives high quality student leaders to mentor the FTIC Knight Watch students, and LEAD Scholars Academy receives regular enrollment of students completing their Leadership course each semester, as well as increased community service hours completed by their LEAD Scholars students. This successful pairing of academic offices further positively impacts UCF students; Knight Watch students connect with high achieving, upperclassmen students that help them transition and succeed, while Knight Watch Peer Mentors gain important life skills and invaluable professional work experience.

Knight Watch participants reported valuable experiences and demonstrated positive gains in their academic performance when compared to their peers who did not participate. As FYAE enters into the fourth year of the Knight Watch Program, a deeper analysis of academic performance data will be conducted and changes will be made based on student feedback.