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STUDY

Working as a Team for Student Success

Ways to collaborate across
a college to better serve
undergrads

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Working as a Team for Student Success

Ways to collaborate across a college to better serve undergrads

At Northern Arizona University, staff and faculty members were frustrated. Despite having all sorts of support in place — peer mentoring, supplemental instruction, faculty training — retention and graduation rates were not changing. “We were essentially losing 25 percent of our students every year,” says Melissa Welker, the university’s executive director of student success initiatives and programs. In response, the university started to examine how its administrative units were set up and whether the divides between them hampered students’ ability to succeed academically.



Northern Arizona U.

Northern Arizona U. has focused more on raising retention and graduate rates in recent years. Here, a math instructor at the college helps undergraduates.

Northern Arizona isn't alone in re-examining long-standing organizational structures and operations. Other colleges are looking for ways to better serve undergraduates by making sure administrative and faculty offices that are typically "siloed" are working together.

"Institutions were never really designed around students," says Bridget Burns, executive director of the University Innovation Alliance, a coalition of public universities working to spread pioneering approaches to student success. "They were originally designed around faculty and administrators. The entire institution is little boxes and pieces that are trying to help make life for the student easier, but they are not connected holistically."

In 2015, Northern Arizona started breaking down those compartments. It consolidated administrative functions that had been decentralized throughout its approximately 20 satellite campuses and around its Flagstaff campus. It formed teams with faculty and staff members from across the institution.

The teams have created relationships where none existed before, say administrators. In particular, the departments of academic affairs and student affairs, which reported to two different vice presidents, "had been siloed for a long time," Welker says. "When I first started at this university in '07, the two sides really didn't know what each other was doing. There was no facilitated way

in which conversations were happening."

Northern Arizona serves about 23,000 students at Flagstaff and 5,600 more online. Each team meets at least once a month and is focused on a specific student population, such as transfer students, online students, or first-year students, to understand "who we were losing and why," Welker says.

With about 10 members on a team, major units, like student affairs and admissions, are often included, but also those in charge of helping specific groups. The transfer team, for instance, had a representative from the center for veterans because many transfer students are former military personnel, says Terri Hayes, executive director of university advising. Faculty members served as needed.

Educating the Faculty

The teams have worked well, but Welker says she wishes academic departments had been included earlier in the planning. They were engaged eventually, but lesson learned: Educating faculty members about the retention and graduation challenges the university faces is crucial.

Since the start of the overhaul, new committees have been formed as the need has arisen, such as one devoted to getting a handle on all communications sent to stu-



Northern Arizona U.

Faculty members at Northern Arizona U. have become more involved in its new student-success teams.

dents. “This has led to increased collaboration across divisions and departments to ensure messaging is not redundant,” Welker says.

One of the big changes the university made was to centralize its academic advising center. Previously, advising was dispersed through departments and divisions, says Hayes, whose position of executive director of university advising was created in 2016. Some advising centers had walk-in hours, some didn’t. Some had the ability to allow students to register online for an appointment, others didn’t. Some had very high adviser-to-student ratios, others were better staffed.

A major change like this is never easy, Hayes adds. After all, “we were messing with people’s jobs and department, and you can’t just say, This is how it is.” Her advice: Communicating any changes with respect and sensitivity is key.

So far, the consolidation of advising services has had benefits, say administrators. Besides making the process less fractured for students seeking an adviser, it also enhanced the department’s coordination with student affairs, which provides, among other things, peer mentoring and tutoring. The departments are now more likely to complement each other’s efforts or divide up the tasks rather than replicating them.

‘What’s Not Working for You?’

One area where campus collaboration can help is in developing student-success technology.

Take Portland State University, which has developed a tool to deal with a major obstacle for students: figuring out what classes they should take, and when those classes are available, in order to complete their degree on time.

“We were messing with people’s jobs and department, and you can’t just say, This is how it is.”

The new degree-planning tool could not have been created without teamwork. It required input from faculty members and leaders of key administrative departments, such as the registrar, financial aid, information technology, and enrollment.

Most degree-audit tools are “designed for universities, not for students,” says Sukhwant Jhaj, vice president for academic innovation, planning, and partnerships. “It



Kelly J. James, Portland State University

Administrators and faculty at Portland State U. worked together to create a degree-mapping tool. Here, students attend a class at the university.

shows what you've done and what you need to do, but doesn't tell you how to solve problems."

In looking at what to change, "we put problem-solving on its head," Jhaj says. "It's not small groups of people in tall buildings making decisions, but we first worked with students asking them, 'What's not working for you?'"

The software, which was developed in partnership with a tech company, helps automate the way students build degree plans, including how many credits they should take and when they should expect to graduate. It also accounts for the impact of studying over the summer and what students' financial aid will cover, and allows students to compare different majors using a variety of metrics. While all that is good for the students, it also provides the university information to project future course demands.

"In many institutions right now, the degree-planning experience is very bifurcated, and what's true for PSU students is true for students at many urban-serving institutions across the country," says Hans VanDerSchaaf, director of projects for the Office of Student Success. "In order to make a degree plan — they're lucky if their institution actually has a degree map that they can find. Maybe you find that in one part of the university or get that from your adviser. Then you have to find out what are the courses offered. And say you want to find the in-

structor — that's another website you have to go to."

Technology has also played a role in Northern Arizona's efforts; it received a three-year, \$225,000 grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust, which helped pay for a new system that allows different departments to see one another's notes regarding a student.

The technology, Welker says, has been a foundational part of linking departments. "We can say we're all working together, but it's really important to see each other's work and to see what's actually happening to the student," she says. "We don't want to pass the student around, we want to pass the issue around from office to office, and that is where we are headed."

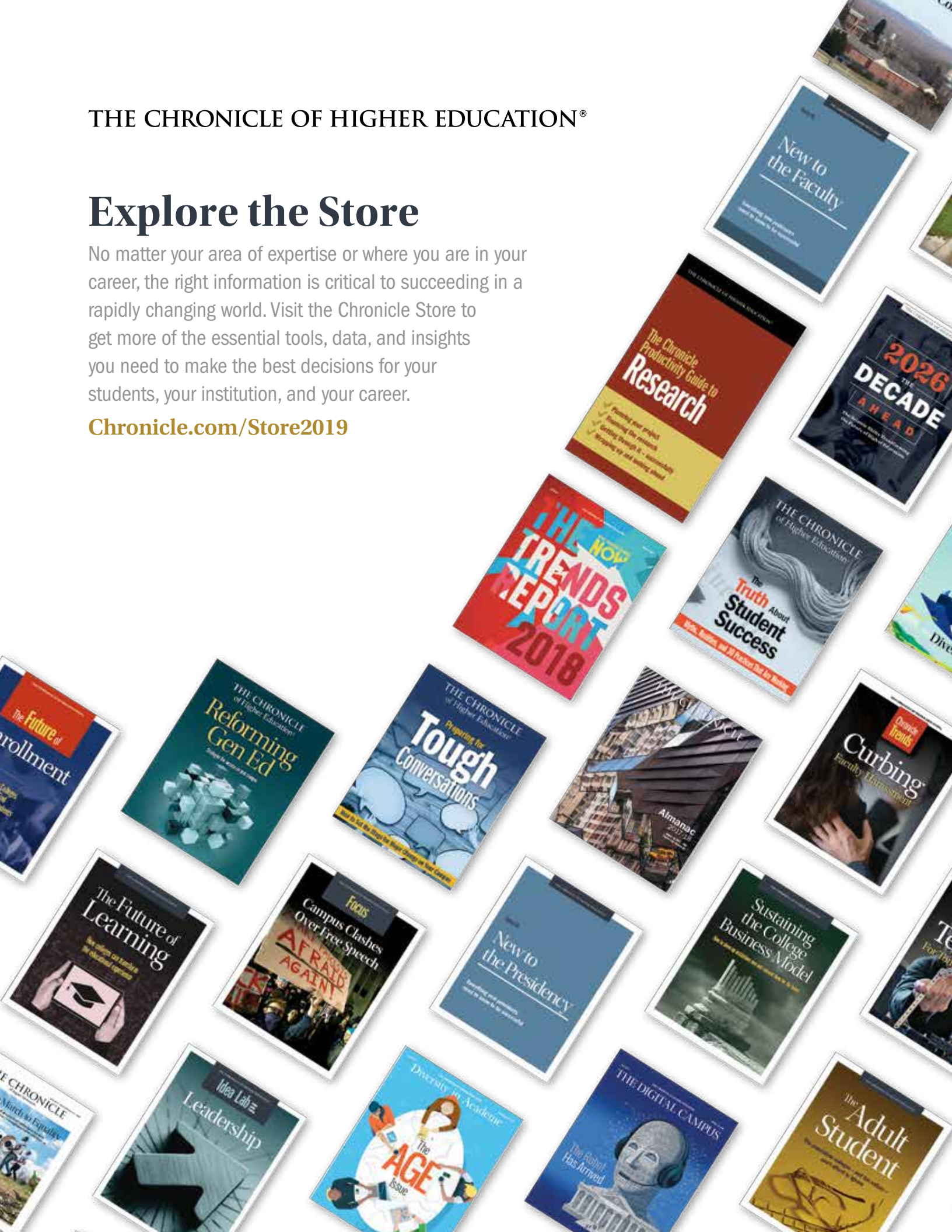
Retention rates have crept up slightly at Northern Arizona, although they took an unexpected dip in the last academic year, which officials are still trying to understand. And it's hard to measure whether student satisfaction has improved, because it wasn't systematically measured before. Now, for example, every student can fill out an online survey about his or her advising experiences.

"I certainly think there's less confusion," Hayes says of the advising changes. "As the team is unified there's less runaround. But we are still very much in the middle of a transformation."

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