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**Institutional Metamorphosis: Teresa Farnum & Associates (TFA)  
Collaborates With SUNY Ulster to Catalyze Retention Success**

*By Jennifer Farnum and Ann Marrott*

In 2005, student retention was a pressing issue at the State University of New York, Ulster County Community College (SUNY Ulster). However, the institution was about to experience unprecedented hikes in student retention: with the aid of Teresa Farnum & Associates (TFA), SUNY Ulster's overall retention increased by approximately 6% during the 2007-2008 academic year. Moreover, about 30% of students on academic probation moved to good academic standing. As President Katt stated: "We have definitely made significant movement in the right direction."

Located in Stone Ridge, New York, a small community about two hours north of New York City, SUNY Ulster is a two-year college with a student enrollment of 3,294. SUNY Ulster prides itself on maintaining small student-teacher ratios, providing diverse cultural offerings, and developing opportunities for different learner types.

When TFA first partnered with SUNY Ulster in 2005, the institution's enrollment management programming was experiencing challenges in terms of streamlining enrollment activities. According to institution administration, retention and recruitment were disjointed, responsibilities were decentralized, and the primary focus of enrollment activities centered on submitting information to the state for benchmarking purposes. Additionally, the majority of enrollment efforts were focused on recruitment; notably less emphasis was placed on retention.

Recognizing that the institution could benefit from an outside assessment of their enrollment processes, the college sought TFA's retention consulting services. Of the firms that specialize in enrollment management, SUNY Ulster selected TFA both because of the customized service they provide and the affordable rates offered. The college wanted a company that would be willing to assess their unique circumstances rather than a firm more apt to apply a general, non-specific retention planning template. In addition to TFA's commitment to customization and affordability, another consideration in SUNY Ulster's selection process was the consultants' backgrounds: all TFA associates have extensive experience as

high level administrators who have led successful retention initiatives on their own campuses.

When SUNY Ulster first began to work with TFA in March 2005, SUNY Ulster's retention rate was slightly below the community college average for the SUNY system. Faculty and administrators were concerned that student enrollment was plateauing and recognized that retention of current students needed to be high on the priority list. Thus, following initial consultations with TFA, the college immediately began to work on the five recommended "Action Items" identified by TFA, and began a partnership with TFA to create and implement a comprehensive retention plan. Moving to action from the "talking" phase was a relatively easy process, as part of the TFA approach includes forming teams responsible for plan implementation and developing specific tasks and deadlines associated with the plans. Each Team was chaired by a faculty and student services staff member; aided by an active Retention Committee, Vice President Ann Marrott and Dean of Academic Affairs Rick Gelston followed Teams' progress to ensure that they were carrying out tasks in an effective and efficient manner.

Several major steps were taken as a result of retention planning efforts and the diligence of Team members. For example, SUNY Ulster designed developmental education programming to target student needs; engaged all faculty and staff who serve as advisors in a campus-wide effort to improve advisement; and created a multitude of advising resources. Advising guidelines and resources for students taking online courses were completely revamped, and the college expanded its outreach to students in academic jeopardy.

Increasing student retention has been a project that the entire campus has rallied around. This was in part because of the collaborative nature of the retention planning workshop, during which time participants discovered together how important student retention really was to the campus—retention became viewed not as a simple statistic but rather came to embody a philosophy about institution priorities. Thus, demonstrated changes at SUNY Ulster have been the result of creating a student-centered, data-driven institutional culture. As Ann Marrott observed: "More than ever, student success and retention are part of the everyday conversations *within* and *between* faculty and staff groups. The spirit of collaboration has been passed on to students, energizing the entire campus. From small to large scale policy and procedure changes, the focus is on how actions will directly improve student success. Faculty and staff feel empowered to make proactive differences in improving student success. In many ways, it has been this shift in attitude and philosophy that has been most beneficial to the institution."

Possibly the most challenging aspect of the TFA-SUNY Ulster partnership was, from the institution's perspective, initially convincing stakeholders that student success and retention could truly be affected. This difficulty was partially due to

the fact that before TFA, “retention” was an amorphous, intangible idea that seemed overwhelming—too grand and systemic of a concept to be able to address effectively. TFA associates, however, were able to quickly move the college toward identifying issues, priorities, action items, and outcomes. The project became more manageable, and people became increasingly invested in producing positive outcomes.

Another aspect of TFA’s services that was particularly useful throughout the retention building process was TFA’s flexibility in how consulting time was used; TFA allowed SUNY a great deal of leverage in terms of applying associate expertise where and when it was most needed. Associates were charismatic, easily engaging faculty and staff in campus-wide dialogues that resulted in action. As Ann Marrott noted, “Teresa connected with our faculty in an immediate and effective way as did her colleague, George Keith. Their experience as faculty members was really important, giving them instant credibility.” Similarly, associates were masterful in helping the institution understand the sophisticated structural changes that were necessary and, at the same time, providing specific tactical steps that were needed to do so. Indeed, the last workshop that was held at SUNY Ulster attracted 90% of the faculty, all of whom remained present throughout the duration of the day-long session.

Currently, SUNY Ulster has adopted a “rolling plan,” an iterative, malleable set of guidelines and actions that change based on emerging information, baseline and current reports, new data, and feasibility of available options. Regularly scheduled Academic Senate and College Staff Council meetings were and still are used to report progress, acknowledge those working on these projects, and celebrate SUNY Ulster’s collective success.

*Note: This article was developed based on conversations with President Donald Katt, Vice President and Dean for Enrollment Management Ann Marrott, and TFA consultant George Keith.*