

# A UTILIZATION-FOCUSED EVALUATION OF INSTITUTIONAL PERSISTENCE AND WITHDRAWAL IN AN ACADEMIC UNIT

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this evaluative study was to provide input toward the development of a plan to improve student persistence within one academic unit at Southeast Missouri State University. Since the framework guiding this study was Patton's (1997) Utilization-Focused Evaluation, the research questions, means for data collection, instrumentation and analysis were developed with the primary intended users. Methods and instruments that were utilized included a current student satisfaction survey, focus groups, graduate exit surveys, student records data, and contact with students who withdrew.

Although much of the evaluative data were positive, there was still room for improvement. Recommendations developed by the retention committee were categorized under the following headings: experiential learning, instructional content, classroom strategies, campus resources, intentional student contacts, value of a liberal education, communication with students, graduate follow-up surveys, student finances, transfer students, advising, student involvement, facilities and equipment, and recruitment. The retention committee will determine strategies for implementation, plus they will make decisions about measurements and further evaluations. Evaluation will lead to new strategies, implementation and further assessment (Braxton et al., 2004; Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Lotkowski et al., 2004; Swail et al., 2003). This continuous quality improvement cycle is what sets institutions, and academic units, that focus on improving student persistence apart from those who do not.