



The University of Vermont  
RUBENSTEIN SCHOOL OF  
ENVIRONMENT & NATURAL RESOURCES

**Rubenstein School of Environment & Natural Resources**  
**Retention Plan**  
**November 2, 2012**  
***Updated November 2014***

**Context**

The Rubenstein School (RSENr) offers hands-on environment programs that integrate natural sciences and social perspectives. Our close-knit community of faculty, staff, and students challenges our undergraduates to discover the knowledge, skills and values needed to become innovative and effective leaders.

RSENr's academic programs include an innovative Core Curriculum moves from multidisciplinary knowledge to interdisciplinary understanding through each advancing course, culminating with a senior capstone experience based on experiential learning. Our faculty are accessible and responsive to students, often providing students with research and field opportunities on their own research projects. The Rubenstein School staff also play an important role in supporting students through their college journey by providing administrative assistance and co-curricular advisement.

The 1<sup>st</sup>-to-2<sup>nd</sup> year retention rate for RSENr students from Fall 2007 – Fall 2011 averaged 88.74%, the highest among academic units and above the UVM average. The 2<sup>nd</sup>-to-3<sup>rd</sup> year retention rate reflects a different story as it decreases to below the UVM average in the same Fall 2007 – Fall 2011 time period.

There may be many factors affecting student attrition. Anecdotally, we often hear from students that the costs of attending UVM are too high. As a result, these students may opt to transfer to their local colleges and universities. Also worth noting is that the Rubenstein School enrolls a higher percentage of out-of-state students than UVM as a whole: 20/80 in-state to out-of-state, compared to the UVM total of 33/67 in-state to out-of-state (see Institutional research table). Retaining out-of-state students is typically harder than retaining in-state students most often because of the tuition differential and to some extent, the fact that these students are much farther away from home and from important support networks.

In preparing this document we paid particular attention to the following points/goals:

- **Advising** – How can we improve the advising process, and improve communication between advisor and advisee? What communication mechanisms or technologies can we utilize?
- **Proactive Outreach to students** – Build strong and multiple lines of communication among student, advisors, and staff to create a support network for all students, especially students who may fall into at-risk categories. Work collaboratively with UVM offices who provide direct support to students from these identity groups. Better outreach to connect students to campus and RSENR resources.
- **Student engagement & High Impact Learning** – Focus on 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year students' engagement in hands-on experiences and high-impact learning practices (like internships and service-learning) that make education more meaningful, and that connect theory to practice and individuals to community.
- **Community Building** – The relative small undergraduate population, the design of our new Aiken Center, our curricular as well as co-curricular activities permit our faculty and staff to connect formally and informally with students

### **Current programs, initiatives, protocols**

*When utilized by students, the programs below contribute positively to the retention of students in the Rubenstein School. We will continue to focus on increasing student participation to take advantage of these resources.*

- **Core Curriculum**—RSENR's academic programs include an innovative Core Curriculum that has been disseminated nationally (Manning 1998; Ginger, Wang, & Tritton 1999). Our Core moves from multidisciplinary knowledge to interdisciplinary understanding through each advancing course, culminating with a senior capstone experience based on experiential learning. Another strength of this design is that students enter the Core Curriculum as a cohort and share a common academic experience across all majors in RSENR throughout the undergraduate program.
- **First Year advising program**— During Orientation, each incoming student and family receives a Rubenstein School Handbook that provides curricular and co-curricular information about the School. This is updated annually.

First-year students in RSENR are assigned to a First-Year Advisor. These faculty members have a particular interest in helping new students transition to UVM and college life, and help them explore their strengths and academic options to find the major that best suits their learning goals. The First-Year Advising Program is tied to one of our Core Courses, NR 6, Race and Culture in Natural Resources. Each week students meet as a first-year class to hear a lecture or presentation by a guest speaker, then meet with their advising group for a seminar style discussion. First-year advising groups are typically less than 20 students, allowing them to get to know their advisor and peers

well. Students stay with their First-Year Advisor through the Spring semester, and are moved up to an upper-level advisor in their major in the fall of sophomore year.

Because students get to know the First-Year Advisors very well, they feel comfortable coming to them with issues that could result in a student leaving UVM. Advisors work closely with Student Services staff to resolve these issues. This program is a significant contributor to our typically higher than the UVM average first year retention rate. We also add that sometimes the larger conversation with a student is to explore where each student can be most successful and that may be in a major outside of the Rubenstein School. Advisors are well-prepared to assist students in this exploration while each Spring we host a “Major Confusion” event where upper level students share their experiences and wisdom with 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> years.

- **Student Clubs** – Rubenstein School students are encouraged to participate in organization within the School and to attend Rubenstein School-sponsored seminars and programs. A weekly calendar of events is distributed to electronically to all students, faculty, and staff. We also sponsor several RSENR student clubs such as a UVM Chapter of the Ecological Society of America called SEEDS (Strategies for Ecology Education, Diversity and Sustainability), as well as student chapters of The Wildlife Society and the Society of American Foresters. RSENR also support the Aiken Scholars Program, a Residential Learning Community in the Green House.
- **RSENR Stewards Program**—Student leaders in the Rubenstein School Stewards Program provide community building events and meet with individual students to discuss major options, experiential learning opportunities, and student life broadly. This has become a competitive application process, approximately about 40 applicants each Spring for limited openings in the Fall.
- **RSENR Student Advisory Board (SAB)** – The SAB meets with the Dean of the School through the year. This group of students that ideally represents all majors and years provides an on-going connection with the faculty and administration. They provide insight and feedback into School issues including curriculum, teaching, academic advising, and community building activities.
- **RSENR Graduate Mentors**—In Fall 2012, students in our Graduate Program began a mentoring program that pairs undergraduates with graduate mentors to facilitate student success and life after college preparation. This will be another resource to connect students to high impact experiences that can increase retention. Each year there are approximately 20-20 graduate mentors who are partnered with 30-40 undergraduate mentees.

- **Communicative advisors**—Although we do need to focus more intentionally on upper-level advising, as a group the Rubenstein School advisors are available to students and interested in advising. Many advisors send emails during the semester to their advising group to welcome them at the start of the semester, or to ask them to set up registration appointments. Most students know their advisors and feel comfortable going to them for advice or assistance.
- **Diversity Task Force** -- This volunteer group of faculty, staff, and students are committed to issues of diversity. The DTF generates and contributes to the development of ideas for diversity initiatives in curricular and other programming in The Rubenstein School.
- **Small community size; accessibility of faculty and staff**—We have only 630 undergraduates, so our 40 faculty, and 30 research and administrative staff members are able to get to know many individual students. Students meet the Student Services staff at Orientation, and the Aiken Building is a physical space that ties the community together—students spend time in the building, so are likely to run into faculty and staff.

There are many opportunities for our faculty, student, and staff to get to know each other informally. At the opening of each Fall we host Doc Donnelly Day barbecue that draws hundreds of students, we hold community coffee hours and socials, and each year with a Community Celebration that recognizes our students, staff, and faculty.

We utilize technology and social media by way of a RSENR YouTube Channel and Rubenstein School Community Page on Facebook to celebrate our communities accomplishments and disseminate announcements.

- **Office of Experiential Learning**—Generally 75% of our students participate in numerous opportunities for “High Impact Learning Opportunities” that engage them in a deeper, hands-on educational journey. To assist with this process, we have a full-time Career Services and Internship Coordinator housed in the Dean’s Office and connected to the UVM Career Services Office as well as a Community-Based Learning Coordinator.

Our updated website provides profiles of student interns and research, included YouTube clips of interns in the field.

- **Service-Learning**—About 1/3 of all service learning courses at UVM are offered through the Rubenstein School. Although we need to become more intentional about ensuring the courses are available in all majors starting early on in the student experience, service-learning courses can ensure that students are engaging in high impact experiences to increase retention.
- **Internships**-- There are abundant opportunities for research with faculty and graduate students, and internships with environmental professionals. Our Career Services Coordinator works to set up experiences for students both

locally and nationally/internationally, utilizing a learning contract that helps to ensure these experiences are academically rigorous, and add depth to the educational experience.

- **Research** -- Many Rubenstein students are actively involved in on-going research projects with faculty and graduate students here in the Rubenstein School. Student researchers learn skills in empirical observation, utilize cutting edge technologies, and develop a sense of excitement about asking the big questions while working hard toward solutions. Our hope is to better coordinate the opportunities in RSENR and create a mechanism to better connect undergrads to projects.
- **ALANA Student Recruitment & Retention** – We have worked hard and been successful in our multicultural education/recruitment efforts. Fall 2012 ALANA students in RSENR accounted for 10% of the total numbers of enrolled ALANA students at UVM. Since 1995 the Rubenstein School has applied for and attained USDA Multicultural Scholars grants and with the addition of other grants of gifts, we have raised of over \$2 million toward our diversity efforts.
- **Collaboration with UVM student support services** -- RSENR faculty and staff have very effective relationships with such offices such as the ALANA Student Center, LGBTQ Services, ACCESS, Learning Cooperative, Counseling and Psychiatry Services, and Dean of Students. We work together to identify students struggling and at-risk to provide integrative support as well as respond quickly to students in need. We also work with TRiO Programs and McNair Scholars to provide opportunities to students from underrepresented groups.

## Issues

*These are factors that create issues which may cause students to leave UVM.*

- **Transition from 1<sup>st</sup> year to 2<sup>nd</sup> year Advising**—Our First-Year Advising program is highly successful, and although we have accessible and willing upper-level advisors, students often don't connect with their new advisor soon after the start of their second year. Without the structure of a class with their advisees (as with NR 6 in the First-Year Advising Program), there is no system in place for upper-level advisors to meet with their advisees regularly. We need to create a systematic structure to connect students to their upper-level advisors, and ensure that good advising is taking place.

Students have expressed that as they enter their 2<sup>nd</sup> year, it feels harder to change majors, either within RSENR and across UVM.

- **Advising Load**—While there are currently 630 enrolled Rubenstein School undergraduates, there are approximately 300 additional Environmental Studies majors within the College of Arts & Sciences and College of Agriculture & Life Sciences who are

assigned as advisees to RSENR faculty. In other words, there are a number of RSENR faculty who advise non-RSENR students and whose advising loads number 50-60 undergraduates.

Additionally, there has been increasing inquiries from students in various majors across UVM who are engaged in environmentally-related internship and research experience who are seeking internship credit and faculty sponsorship through RSENR. We do not have the resources to support these requests.

- **Increasing class size** – The size of each incoming class has increased in each of the last three years. While we are pleased to see growing interest and commitment to the environment, we are experiencing our own growing pains and run the risk of losing our sense of community which has been a hallmark of the classroom experience. Additionally, as class size increases, the size of our major, upper-level courses also increase which, again, takes away from a positive student-faculty experience.
- **Student Services Tracking System**—Student Services staff members work with increasing numbers of students on issues ranging from needs for academic support to physical and mental health issues. We need to create a system to identify at-risk students earlier, and to track those who are receiving support. We offer support to ALL students and routinely refer students to other UVM Offices like Student Financial Services. Our sense is that some students are in circumstances where we have little, if any, ability to change.
- **Student Services Support for Faculty Advisors**—The Student Services Team provides support for faculty advisors. We need to be more intentional about communicating what is available, and in providing regular training and development opportunities for advisors.
- **High Percentage of Out-of-State Students**—The breakdown of students by residency in RSENR is 20/80 in-state to out-of-state, compared to the UVM total of 33/67 in-state to out-of-state (see Institutional research table). Since the retention of out-of-state students is lower, this creates a greater challenge for us. Anecdotally, high cost and lack of financial resources is the most common reason RSENR students give for leaving UVM. Counseling students to help increase understanding of the value of what they are receiving versus the debt they are taking on may help, although this issue is one that we have less control over at the academic unit level.

## Proposed initiatives

### Academic Advising

- Training

- First Year Advisor Check-In and Training (October 2014)
- General training for all advisors (Spring 2015)
- Resources
  - Student Services updates at monthly faculty meetings
    - Academic Alert system (September 2014)
    - Experiential Learning (October 2014)
  - [Four-year Plan for Career Success](#) (Online August 2014)
  - [Sample 8-semester Program Plans](#) (Online November 2014)
  - Four-Year advising checklist and script for advisors (please see draft)
  - Calendar of student services outreach (in progress)
- Programming
  - Host Annual or Biannual program meetings
    - Three of the six of programs have met to date
  - Presentation on all majors to all First-Year students in NR6 Race & Culture in Natural Resources (Fall 2014)
  - Get advisors and student services staff in front of sophomores & juniors (Spring 2015)
  - Provide group advising sessions (Spring 2015)
- In progress
  - Streamline the curriculum
  - Provide incentives and support to advisors that are connected to equitable workloads

### **Student Engagement**

- Creating a more academically challenging environment – create more research opportunities
- Engagement: sophomores take an internship, service, study abroad
- Class community service days
- Provide extra credit to attend lectures and other academic events
- Be explicit about experiences and learning outcomes
- Coach students on preparing for the advising session
- Better utilize our student leaders, such as the RSENR Stewards and Student Advisory Board, as a communication and feedback loop on the student experience, especially as it relates to student retention
- Enhancing Aiken Scholars Program to become more substantive and to extend over 4 years

### **Outreach**

- At the beginning of each year host “Open House” to connect sophomores to new advisor

- Each semester host “State of the Program” where Program Directors and faculty meet with all the majors for updates and year/ semester planning
- Host discussion on debt vs. investment in education
- Contact students requesting transcripts sent to other universities
- Host RSENR student clubs and research fair featuring Forestry Club, Wildlife & Fisheries Society, current graduate research
- Invite UVM student services offices to table in the Atrium

### **For continued dialogue...**

As referenced in the document “Student Persistence at UVM” the supportive campus environment, academic and social integration are cited as crucial factors in student persistence. We absolutely agree, and in the spirit of working more collaboratively with other UVM student support services, we post the following questions to stimulate a larger dialogue:

- Discussion between faculty and staff about connections between academic and social/personal
  - How does student life affect academic life?
- What are the most common retention issues?
- How much does social support affect retention?
- Scholarships? How much financial resources are needed to affect a student’s decision to stay or transfer out of UVM?
- Is it intrusive for academic units to reach out to students with financial holds or transcript requests?
- What information or support is provided in a financial aid counseling session?