

**HUMBOLDT STATE UNIVERSITY**

# Supporting First Year Students: A Pilot Review of RAMP

---

Academic Years 12-13, 13-14 & part of 14-15

Office of Retention and Inclusive Student Success in collaboration with the Office of Institutional  
Research and Planning

12/12/2014

### **Collaborative Effort on Report**

This report was a collaborative effort between Retention and Inclusive Student Success (RISS) and Institutional Research and Planning (IRP). RISS program data, MAP-Works data, and Institutional Research data were shared between units for purposes of this report. Data analysis was conducted in partnership with IRP. IRP provided guidance and oversight to RISS in cases where advanced statistical analysis was required for some of the more complicated methodological issues encountered in this project. Research methods for this project are outlined in the appendix.

### **Abstract**

The Retention through Academic Mentoring Program (RAMP) was created to offer curricular and co-curricular support to first time freshmen through peer mentoring. RAMP started its third pilot year in Fall 2014. A review of the program to date yields a wealth of information that can be helpful for future planning: 1) Students are satisfied with the program and RAMP seems to be meeting a need for academic and personal support as well as transition assistance. Student feedback has been helpful for planning purposes. 2) There are some foundational components of program implementation that have been challenging but can be capitalized on as learning opportunities as HSU moves forward.

### **Key Findings**

- Resource allocations have driven annual adjustments to RAMP programming. At times the changes have been drastic, affecting the stability of the program and HSU's ability to accurately assess it.
- Significant organizational and structural changes have resulted in an annual overhaul of RAMP's mission and goals. These changes have resulted in a new baseline, annually, preventing HSU from being able to make comparisons across student cohorts or examine longitudinal trends in program data. As a result, comparability of data across years is not feasible.
- Assessment is most effective when incorporated during the earliest stages of program design. This ensures the program's mission and goals are designed in a way that can be properly measured. It also allows for an inventory of data, establishment of a research design, and a plan for data collection. When RAMP was envisioned, the university hadn't yet established a campus-wide assessment infrastructure which could work in tandem with program development and implementation.
- Overwhelmingly, freshmen report satisfaction with RAMP.
- In some cases, first-generation, low-income, and/or URM students report disproportionately positive impacts of RAMP programming.
- Students report the following ways in which RAMP helped them: 1) a safe support network of peers and peer mentors, 2) a source of reliable information that helped students navigate HSU, 3) support for academic planning, 4) acquisition of transition skills helping freshmen acclimate to college life, and 5) support for personal and academic progress.

# Table of Contents

Introduction ..... 1

What is RAMP? ..... 1

Evolution of RAMP within the Context of Institutional Challenges ..... 1

What is the Context within which RAMP Supports Retention Efforts? ..... 1

Supporting Freshmen in the Transition to College ..... 2

Program Delivery & Student Satisfaction ..... 3

Monitoring and Early Warning Using MAP-Works ..... 3

Supporting Academically At-Risk Students ..... 4

Challenges ..... 5

Recommendations ..... 5

## Introduction

This report offers an in-depth look at the first several pilot years of the RAMP program. In 2010, the CSU Chancellor implemented the CSU Graduation Initiative, which requires each of the 23 CSU's to design a plan for increasing freshmen six-year graduation rates by eight percentage points by 2015, and cut the existing gap in degree attainment for underrepresented minority (URM) students in half. As a result, HSU outlined its own graduation rate improvement plan and peer mentoring was chosen as one strategy for helping to improve student success.

In December 2011, Student Affairs secured funds to create an academic mentoring program at HSU. The Housing Department contributed resources to develop RAMP and get it off the ground as a residence life program. RAMP was launched in Fall 2012 in this context. In its second year, RAMP was moved out of residence life and the residence life framework. This was done by positioning RAMP as a co-curricular support program under the newly created Retention and Inclusive Student Success (RISS) Division. HSU is currently in its third year of offering RAMP. This report describes the influence of RAMP in the context of significant organizational and structural changes.

## What is RAMP?

RAMP contributes to the education and enhancement of student learning by providing curricular and co-curricular support services. The program provides 1:1 peer mentoring for first time freshmen. Mentors work with freshmen throughout the year, beginning with orientation week and ending with finals week of the second semester. Mentors are continuing students selected through a competitive hiring process which requires successful candidates to maintain a semester and overall GPA of 2.75 or above, have previous student leadership experience, faculty recommendations, and have attended the university for at least 2 semesters.

## Evolution of RAMP within the Context of Institutional Challenges

Over the past three years, RAMP has made adjustments to programming primarily in response to resource allocations and org chart changes, but also to student needs, university needs, and collaborations with other units. Adjustments to programming have resulted in RAMP serving different groups of freshmen, in varying capacities, across the three pilot years (Table 3, appendix). Additionally, RAMP's mission and goals have changed annually (Table 4, appendix). Annual changes have posed an impediment to assessment, preventing HSU from being able to make comparisons across student cohorts or examine longitudinal trends in program data.

## What is the Context within which RAMP Supports Retention Efforts?

Figure 1 (appendix) provides context for the role RAMP plays in the larger scheme of retention. The map in Figure 1 is a preliminary model based on the work of Vincent Tinto. A more finalized version is forthcoming. Ongoing work is being done by RISS to incorporate additional empirical retention theory into the model so HSU can get a macro level view of how our programs are mapping on to proven retention strategies. In this way, HSU can see where there are gaps or overlaps in programming and how programs may evolve to meet student and university needs with regard to retention. This model is a holistic university-wide approach to support programming and academics that will need to be considered in order to shift retention and probation outcomes. Each unit or program does its part, with retention outcomes being assessed as a function of a larger system. This is a shift toward determining what holistic model works, rather than a siloed approach to determining program effectiveness.

## Supporting Freshmen in the Transition to College

This section summarizes survey data and internal program data that identify the key areas where RAMP has assisted students.

- **Identifying Challenges and Making Adjustments:**

With MAP-Works, HSU is now able to track what types of contacts are made with students. Peer mentors identified issues via discussions with mentees and by reviewing the personalized reports generated after freshmen took the MAP-Works survey. Freshmen worked through these challenges with the support of a peer mentor, or were referred to support services on campus that had specialized training to help. Figure 2 (appendix) shows the types of non-academic interventions that occurred in academic year 2013-14. The most frequent areas of intervention were personal issues, living environment, and social connections.

*"I would have been completely lost my first semester of school if not for my RAMP mentor, and because of her, I feel like I have a much more stable standing in college life."  
-HSU RAMP Freshman*

*"They help by getting to know about the "how to's" on campus."  
-HSU RAMP Freshman*

- **Early Exposure to Campus Resources:** RAMP introduces freshmen to campus resources. Figure 3 (appendix) and Figure 4 (appendix) show the percentages of students who knew how to access various campus resources by the second half of their first semester. RAMP mentors used this information to initiate contacts between students and services they may need, but might not yet know how to access.

- **Navigating HSU Socially and Organizationally:** Mentor meetings helped students get their questions answered about every aspect of campus and to get information for navigating the university. Freshmen felt comfort and trust in the peer mentor relationship to help them navigate the transition to college life. Additionally, RAMP helped with information about resources, academics, and how to get involved on campus, socially (Figure 5, appendix).

*"I had major anxiety about academics and socializing and a lot of things until I met with my mentor. He told me it was gonna be okay and gave me tools to succeed." -HSU RAMP Freshman*

- **Developing Academic and Personal Skills for College:** Over the past two years, RAMP offered academic workshops helping students learn how to fend for themselves and make adjustments for personal and academic success (Table 5, appendix). Some of those workshops existed in partnership with academic departments, staff from the Learning Center, and Residence Life staff. RAMP's most highly attended academic event in 2013 was RAMP Up Your Courage, an opportunity for students to get to know faculty and engage them as approachable resources. Learning outcomes showed an increase in skill acquisition and confidence in approaching faculty for help (Table 6, appendix).

- **Providing Personalized Support:** RAMP provided a strong "insider" support network from mentors who had gone through similar experiences. Freshmen got information about HSU through comforting, supportive relationships with mentors. Mentors helped with academic planning, transition skills, and encouragement toward academic and personal progress (Figure 6, appendix).

*"My mentor has advice about time management, first year mistakes, etc. She listens to me talk about the issues I've been having adjusting to college life, and she is sympathetic and supportive." -HSU RAMP Freshman*

- **Finding Social Groups, Meeting People, & Making Friends:** RAMP events (Table 7, appendix) helped freshmen get acquainted with one another in comfortable and easily accessible university settings.

- **Information About What is Expected to Graduate:** Internal program tracking records show the majority of time spent on mentor conversations was focused on academic related topics (Figure 7, appendix). Through MAP-Works, HSU is now able to identify *specific* academic interventions being made with students. Academic Success Planning was the most frequent intervention for academic year 2013-14 (Figure 8, appendix).

## Program Delivery & Student Satisfaction

This section summarizes survey data to understand program delivery from a student perspective.

- **Meetings with Mentors:** Between 91-92% of freshmen found it easy to schedule meetings with mentors (Figure 9 and Figure 10, appendix). Overwhelmingly, freshmen felt the quantity of meetings with mentors was just right (Figure 11 and Figure 12, appendix). Students who felt there were too many meetings were more likely to be non first-generation (10%) or not low-income (8%). Students who felt there weren't enough meetings were more likely to be first-generation (7%) or low-income (9%) (Figure 13 and Figure 14, appendix).

Fall 2013 data show that the majority of freshmen felt meetings with their RAMP mentors were helpful (Figure 15, appendix). Most interesting is the finding that first-generation students reported at 10 percentage points higher than their non first-generation peers (38% and 28%, respectively), that meetings with mentors were extremely helpful (Figure 16, appendix).

- **Peer Mentor Matching:** A surprising finding that came out of Fall 2013 assessment was student preferences for being matched with a mentor. While 49% of RAMP students didn't have a preference for being matched with a mentor, 42% preferred to be matched with a mentor from their area of study (Figure 17, appendix). Interestingly, there were no statistically significant associations between how students answered the question and what college or major they were in. There were statistically significant associations in how URM vs. non URM students wanted to be matched with a mentor (Figure 18, appendix). 37% of URM and 46% of non URM students said they preferred to be matched by area of study.
- **Student Satisfaction with RAMP:** Overwhelmingly (94%), students reported high satisfaction with RAMP (Figure 19, appendix). First-generation students (96%) were slightly more likely than non first-generation students (92%) to say they were satisfied with RAMP (Figure 20, appendix).
- **How RAMP Helped Freshmen:** RAMP provided: academic planning support, a support network that empowered students personally and academically, an information resource, and tools to ease the stress and anxiety associated with transitioning to college life (Figure 21, appendix).

*"I always get very helpful information from my RAMP Mentor and sometimes the meetings are kind of like a reality check for me. They help me know what I need to work on because I'm talking to another person about it." -HSU RAMP Freshman*

## Monitoring and Early Warning Using MAP-Works

- **Oversight and Campus Coordination:** In pilot year 3 (2014-15), RAMP took on the coordination and administration of MAP-Works for the larger campus. RAMP is now the central point for MAP-Works, focusing on coordinating outreach and intervention for at-risk freshmen using the interface as a tool.

- **Programming Changes for 2014-15 - Academic Updates using MAP-Works:** Previously, mentors reviewed academic update narratives in consultation with the RAMP Director/Coordinator, and pursued appropriate student outreach. A business process was developed with ACAC and EOP: Professional advisors will do initial outreach with students. Peer mentors will provide back-up encouragement to prompt students to see the faculty mentor who issued the academic update.
- **RAMP Usage:** Mentors use MAP-Works to log contacts, remind freshmen to take the surveys, review survey results, review academic updates, and set up intervention tasks. RAMP professional staff use MAP-works to monitor risk indicators, coordinate referrals, ensure appropriate services are being delivered to students, and use MAP-Works data to inform program adjustments and training.

## Supporting Academically At-Risk Students

This section summarizes survey data, internal program data, and MAP-Works data to get a better understanding of RAMP's strategy for supporting academically at-risk students.

- **Year 1 (AY 2012-13):** RAMP offered no special intervention for students on academic probation.
- **Year 2 (AY 2013-14):** In Spring 2014, RAMP prioritized its services toward freshmen who were on academic probation. LPM students on probation were also transferred to RAMP for services in Spring 2014. From Jan 21 - March 15, 2014, the primary task was for RAMP mentors to serve probationary students every two weeks. Students were prioritized for either: 1) immediate intervention from professional Learning Center staff, 2) a "3-way meeting" with the student, RAMP mentor and Learning Center student staff, or 3) a meeting with the RAMP mentor.
 

*"RAMP really helped me figure out what to do when I got on academic probation." -HSU RAMP Freshman*
- **Year 3 (AY 2014-15):** MAP-Works is now being used to monitor risk indicators<sup>1</sup>. Coming into the Fall 2014 semester, a disproportionate percentage of RAMP students were at high/very high risk compared to non-RAMP students (Figure 22 and Figure 23, appendix), likely reflecting the targeted nature of this year's mentee population. However, there was a dramatic *decrease* in high/very high risk status for RAMP students by the end of the semester. In Spring 2015, RAMP plans to prioritize its services toward freshmen on academic probation and freshmen who have moderate/high/very high-risk indicators in MAP-Works. The primary task for RAMP mentors will be to serve at-risk students every two weeks. Students will be prioritized for either: 1) immediate intervention from professional advisor or Learning Center staff, 2) a "3-way meeting" with the student, RAMP mentor and Learning Center student staff, or 3) a meeting with the RAMP mentor.
- **Student Usage of Resources:** Despite freshmen knowing about services and how to access them (Figure 3 and Figure 4, appendix) self-reported usage of services, particularly those that are preventative measures for probation, was relatively low. Probationary students who, likely, needed tutoring and learning center services the most, were accessing services in low numbers (Figure 24 and Figure 25, appendix). Additionally, only a little over half of probationary students were going to professors' office hours for help. There is a slight jump in service usage for tutoring services from year 1 to year 2 likely due to RAMP's emphasis on introducing students to resources earlier in the semester, however it is still a concern that students are utilizing support services in low numbers, particularly those who ended up on academic probation.

<sup>1</sup> MAP-Works' risk indicator algorithm is proprietary. We do know that it updates each semester and is unique to each campus. Included in the risk indicator are: pre-college data, enrollment data, demographic data, survey data, academic updates, and GPA.

## Challenges

There are several factors that pose challenges in assessing RAMP:

1. When RAMP was envisioned, the university hadn't yet established a campus-wide assessment infrastructure that could work in tandem with program development and implementation. As a result we have limited outcomes data.
2. The goals for year 1 and 2 were centered around probation and retention outcomes. Because multiple factors influence retention and probation, we cannot analyze retention and probation data solely within the context of one program. Data will be confounded by factors including what other types of services a student received, or mentoring they may have received from programs other than RAMP. These factors inhibit HSU's ability to attribute correlation between RAMP and retention.
3. Annual program changes have created a new baseline, each year, with regard to measures. Because the program changed drastically from year to year there is no stable baseline data to use as a reference point, and little longitudinal data to use for trend analysis or predictive analytics. The program data we do have indicate RAMP is meeting a need for students and that student satisfaction is high. Yet, due to previously mentioned data limitations, RISS and IRP were unable to yield successful results using regression analysis and other methods for statistical modeling to determine what factors are predictors of positive student outcomes in relation to RAMP. This leads us to the following joint RISS and IRP recommendations:

## Recommendations

1. There needs to be stability in program design and implementation for *at least* the first 3 years of a program in order to accurately assess program impact. (A full assessment would include tracking a cohort through a 6-year graduation cycle).
2. Assessment should be incorporated during the earliest stages of program design. This ensures the program's mission and goals are designed in a way that can be properly measured. It also allows for an inventory of data, establishment of a research design, and a plan for data collection.
3. It is the recommendation of RISS and IRP that Fall 2015 become the new baseline for RAMP assuming HSU can commit to a stable implementation of the program over the next 3 years.
4. Going forward, the mission and goals of RAMP need to remain stable, annually, through the entire program review period. The one thing that can change annually are the outcomes or objectives, which are the measurable dimensions of goals that speak to planning.
5. Retention outcomes should be assessed as a function of a larger system. HSU could benefit from a shift toward determining what holistic retention *model* works for us. This would get us away from the methodologically problematic approach of isolating a program and determining its independent effect on retention.
6. A larger university assessment needs to be done on incoming freshmen to determine *who* needs to be served and *how* they need to be served. This is a larger university learning opportunity that can inform campus practice, more generally, with regard to resources and programming and could help HSU make a shift toward a model that works for us.
  - a) With regard to freshmen, MAP-Works data should be part of the larger assessment process in determining who needs to be served and in what capacity.
  - b) An action research and data readiness project was recently funded for HSU by the CSU Chancellor's Office. As part of the project, HSU will analyze MAP-Works data and conduct special research projects designed to broaden our understanding of first time freshmen. This information can be used to inform RAMP programming as well as the larger university campus.