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News Bureau • Schofield Hall 201 • Eau Claire, WI 54702

phone: 715-836-4741

fax: 715-836-2900

Web: www.uwec.edu

e-mail: newsbur@uwec.edu

First-year retention rate at all-time high

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EAU CLAIRE — A higher percentage of students returned in fall 2009 to the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire after their freshman year than at any other time in the university's history.

The fall 2008-09 freshman-to-sophomore rate was 84.4 percent, topping the previous high of 83 percent in 2004-05. The 84.4 percent retention rate also is well above the 71 percent national average for first-to-second-year students at four-year public universities, said Kris Anderson, UW-Eau Claire's executive director of enrollment services and director of Admissions.

"The quality of our freshmen class is consistently high and they come here very well-prepared," Anderson said, noting that UW-Eau Claire freshmen typically rank in the top 25 percent of their high school graduating classes and have average ACT scores of 24.5. "We are committed to providing these talented freshmen with quality experiences inside and outside our classrooms."

While there is no data to confirm the reason for this year's record high first-year retention rate, research has shown that freshmen who feel connected to faculty, other students and the campus are more likely to return in their sophomore year, Anderson said.

UW-Eau Claire supports first-year students in a number of ways, Anderson said. Examples include providing new freshmen with quality advising, strong residence life programs, abundant extracurricular activities and close contact with faculty beginning in their first-year classes, she said.

"As a campus, we work hard to help new freshmen make connections right away," Anderson said. "We want them to feel supported and confident from the start of their college careers."

UW-Eau Claire research shows that personal reasons and financial concerns are the two reasons students most often cite when leaving the university, said Dr. Susan Turell, associate vice chancellor for Academic Affairs and dean of undergraduate studies.

The university is developing a 10-year retention plan that will address many of the issues that students say cause them to leave, Turell said. She said the plan will address things like academic program advising and admittance; course availability and transfer credits; at-risk students, such as first-generation students; financial concerns; and student affiliations with UW-Eau Claire.

The struggling economy might be factoring into students' decisions to return to UW-Eau Claire for their second year, Anderson said. With jobs hard to come by, students who considered leaving college may decide that continuing their education is in their best interest, she said.

"UW-Eau Claire has a long history of graduating students who excel in their professions," Anderson said. "In these tough economic times, more of our new freshmen may be thinking about the long-term value of having a degree from an exceptional university like this one."

For more information, contact Kris Anderson at 715-836-2887 or anderskc@uwec.edu.

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