New UA Center Helps Students Thrive, Not Just Survive, College

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A new UA center is dedicated to helping students learn how to thrive during their college years — in and out of the classroom.

With that mission in mind, it's no surprise how the Thrive Center [1] got its name.

"We really wanted to communicate that we want students to do more than just survive college — that we really want them to thrive during college," said Cynthia Demetriou, associate vice provost for student success and retention innovation. "That means that they're growing not just intellectually, but also socially, emotionally, and that they're building a network and planning a pathway so that they're thriving overall as individuals."

The center — which is part of part of Student Success and Retention Innovation [2], the unit dedicated to the success of all undergraduates — was established over the summer. It is located in the basement of the Robert L. Nugent Building but will move into the Student Success District, which is now under construction [3] with an expected completion date in 2021.

The center’s establishment resulted from a reorganization of the Office of Academic Success and Achievement, said Michelle McKelvey, the Thrive Center's director and former director of the Office of Academic Success and Achievement. That office had split its focus between student support programs and retention-data tracking, McKelvey said. Retention and data tracking now are overseen by the Student Success and Retention Innovation Strategy Team [4].

"It allows us to be really focused on the students' needs," McKelvey said, adding that the Thrive Center works closely with the strategy team.

The center coordinates all of the programs and services that had been managed by the Office of Academic Success and Achievement, along with a few others that had been housed elsewhere. Among the programs that are now within the Thrive Center are:

- **Arizona Assurance** [5], which provides financial and support services to low-income Arizona students.
- **First Cats** [6], a community of more than 10,000 students, faculty and staff who are or were the first in their families to attend college.
- **Fostering Success** [7], a program that connects and provides resources for students who have been in the foster care system or are struggling with homelessness.
- **The New Start Summer Program** [8], which for more than 50 years [9] has given students a head start on key prerequisites and a feel for the campus before the school year begins.
- **UAdvantage** [10], a program that allows incoming freshmen to take six credits before the
fall semester while connecting with peer advisers and other campus resources.

- **Wildcat Welcome**, a 30-day program at the beginning of each school year designed to help students acclimate to college life.

First Cats, McKelvey said, began in fall 2016 as a mentorship service for first-generation students. It has expanded into a campuswide initiative that connects first-generation students with first-generation alumni, including faculty, staff, and graduate and professional students.

Thrive Center's programming includes monthly meetings, called First Cats Wednesdays, which serve as networking events and connect attendees to campus resources. First Cats Mixers, held every semester, began last fall and feature speakers and community-building activities.

"It's critical that that support comes from faculty and staff all over the University, not just in Thrive," Demetriou said.

To keep the First Cats community strong, the program offers a "1st Cats" graphic that faculty or staff members can add to syllabi or email signatures to indicate that they are first-generation college graduates. The office also has door placards bearing the graphic. To get the graphic or a placard, contact Victoria Navarro Benavides, First Cats initiatives coordinator, at vnbenavides@email.arizona.edu.

Driving the Thrive Center's mission, McKelvey said, is the understanding that students cannot do well academically if they're concerned about other aspects of their college experience, such as food, housing or mental health support. Many institutions divide student support between academic and nonacademic services, "but that's not how the student views their experience," McKelvey said. "They view it as 'college.'"

To address concerns that lie outside the classroom, the center connects students with units on campus including the Campus Health Service, Counseling and Psych Services and Housing and Residential Life. It also is developing a financial wellness initiative to help students manage their finances during college. That initiative is expected to be launched in the fall.

McKelvey said she's always interested in opportunities for the Thrive Center to collaborate with other units on campus. That's already happening, she said: The center works closely with Student Engagement and Career Development, and the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences has its own First Cats program.

Anyone interested in collaborating with the center can contact McKelvey at mfig@email.arizona.edu.

"Acknowledging the great resources that already exist on campus is really important to us," McKelvey said. "Thriving here on campus can happen anywhere."

The Thrive Center has the opportunity to flourish under the new strategic plan, Demetriou said, which "puts students at the heart of the University."

"It's a great time for the Thrive Center to really grow," she added. "It's going to make a great contribution to campus."