

## Promoting Student Success

The University of Central Arkansas is dedicated to supporting a diverse student, faculty and staff population. It is one of the university's core values of intellectual excellence, community, diversity, and integrity, and found in the AVID (academic vitality, integrity and diversity) acronym which is a part of the [strategic plan](#) to aspire to be a premier learner-focused public comprehensive university."

Angela Webster, UCA's associate vice president of Institutional Diversity and chief diversity officer, works alongside a team of advocates across campus to foster an environment where everyone feels visible, valuable and validated.

While Webster is proud of the progress and initiatives the university has implemented, she says there are always ways to improve. Several faculty and staff members, community members and students are working individually and collectively to examine university policies, practices, procedures, and experiences that could help to realize our core values.

Kurt Boniecki, associate provost for academic success at UCA, is one of those leaders. When Boniecki arrived at the university in 2000 as an assistant professor, he was happy to be a professor for the remainder of his career.

"You go and get tenure, become an associate professor, and work on your research and teaching. I love teaching; my passion was there."

As a psychologist, Boniecki has always been interested in human behavior, and he enjoyed seeing his research contribute to science and general knowledge. In 2008, Boneicki was elected UCA Faculty Senate president. In that role, Boneicki learned that he not only had a knack for leadership, but he also found that his knowledge and research could have a more direct and immediate impact on students.

In 2012, he accepted the offer to his current position, associate provost for academic success. In this role, Boniecki oversees the undergraduate curriculum review process, the Center for Teaching Excellence and Academic Leadership, the Office of Student Success, Learning Communities and the Department of Student Transitions.

Within his purview, a couple of programs focus specifically on diversity, belonging, equity, and inclusion. One is the College Transition Collaborative (CTC), a program born out of Stanford University that partners with several institutions around the country. CTC uses an intervention that increases a freshman's sense of belonging at college by normalizing their anxiety and encouraging engagement.

"Many students who start their freshman year are starting at a university that is bigger than their hometown, and it can be a shock," Boneicki said. "Any doubts you have can pile up that freshman year, and unless you get engaged and connected, it can be a driver for leaving the university."

Boniecki says many things can drive that feeling, but it is especially true for underrepresented students, such as students of color, first-generation college students, and women in STEM. Psychology researchers at Stanford created an online intervention that has shown positive results for those students.

Another program is the Gateway to Completion (G2C) project, which involves identifying courses that have high numbers of students earning a D or F, withdrawing or not completing a course. To put it simply, DFWI

rates. UCA began participating in spring 2018 in collaboration with the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education.

“While a ‘D’ is a passing grade, it is not a successful grade,” Boneicki said because students must maintain a ‘C’ average to stay at UCA and graduate. “Even incompletes and withdrawals are not ideal because — even though they don’t affect the GPA — they indicate something happened that caused the student to not be successful in the course.”

The university took a close look at high-enrollment courses, analyzed the DFWI rates, and then broke them down by demographics to see disparities. High-risk gateway courses at UCA have DFWI rates of 20% or higher and significant achievement gaps in completion among student populations.

One particular class, Principles of Accounting - a requirement for all business students earning a BBA, had a high DFWI rate among the general student population and even higher among Black students.

“It was a wake-up call for the department,” Boneicki said. “They joined the G2C effort to see how they could redesign the course and commit to bringing down the DFWI rate.”

Their efforts have been successful in bringing down the DFWI rate, and Boneicki applauds this first step. Still, he says there is more work to be done.

Boneicki emphasizes that a program redesign does not reduce rigor and that professors don’t change their standards.

“There are sometimes very simple changes we can make in the delivery of the course, and things faculty members can do to make a big difference in how students learn the curriculum. A high DFWI rate is not an indicator of rigor. It is not a badge of honor. If you clearly define what your students should know, that is your rigor.”

Leaders in the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences requested to add its introductory writing course to the G2C cohort because they saw room for improvement for underrepresented students.

“I told them their DFWI rates were among the lowest on campus, but they looked at their data and were not satisfied with the gap,” Boneicki said.

That is an example of being committed to equity, Boneicki said. His hope for all departments across the UCA campus is a constant strive for improvement to ensure success for all students.