Freshman Agile Standup (FAST)

- David Bruce, Associate CIO, University of Arkansas
- Matthew Henry, Dean of Innovative Education, LeTourneau University
- Eric Himes, Director of Digital Media Services, Marshall University
**ABSTRACT**

The Freshman Agile Standup (FAST) project offers an innovative approach for improving first year student retention by leveraging industry proven Agile methodologies. By adapting the Agile stand-up meeting for the classroom, the FAST focus on continuous improvement and instant feedback engenders peer support and strengthens just-in-time intervention by higher education institutions.

This project directly addresses one of the most pressing issues facing institutions of higher education—the problem of first year student retention. Improving retention rates create positive ripple effects throughout an institution and are tied directly to student affordability, the institution’s business model, college and university rankings, and successful execution of the institution’s core academic mission. The need to improve student retention—and ultimately graduation rates—is of central concern to a majority of colleges and universities regardless of size, location, mission or ranking.

By increasing student engagement, strengthening student goal setting and providing instant feedback into retention systems, FAST can make a positive impact on student retention. Increasing student retention provides value to colleges and universities by stabilizing enrollment and increasing financial resources. Retention is also a key indicator for improving an institution’s ranking, which affects its ability to recruit quality faculty, staff and students.

Because improving student retention leads to increased graduation rates, this project also directly provides value to communities, businesses and industries by increasing the level of education and credentials of those in the workforce. Furthermore, children of parents who graduated from college are more likely to pursue higher education themselves, providing an impact that continues generationally.

The FAST project utilizes the established practice of Agile stand-up meetings in the first year experience to meet the goal of increasing student retention rates.

The following assumptions are foundational to this project:

- College completion and year-over-year retention rates are lower than they could and should be.
- The increasing cost of higher education is a concern for individuals and institutions.
- Resources are constrained for both individuals and institutions.
- Improving student retention rates leads to positive outcomes for individuals and institutions.
- Agile methodology provides value by increasing social and academic engagement for students.
Agile is a systems development methodology used by technology industry leaders to develop complex IT systems. Generally, Agile teams consist of fewer than 12 individuals. At its core, Agile focuses on instant feedback and continuous improvement. The Agile stand-up meeting, a core practice of Agile systems development, provides an opportunity for peers within a team to share wins and help solve problems to avoid losses. These short—usually 15 minute—daily meetings focus on team members answering the following three questions:

- What did I accomplish yesterday?
- What am I going to accomplish today?
- What obstacles stand in the way of my success?

The FAST project proposes to use Agile stand-up meetings as part of first year experience programs. In this model, students are broken into 10 or 15 member cohorts that meet two to four times a week in stand-up meetings facilitated by students, faculty or staff who have undergone a rudimentary orientation in the methodology. The focus of the meeting is to answer the three Agile stand-up meeting questions.

In addition, the FAST project proposes to develop a mobile app to be used in conjunction with the stand-up meetings to provide instant input into existing retention and intervention systems. The app can capture information ranging from the general mood of individual students to specific concerns that may be raised during meetings. Such feedback can facilitate efficient triage and immediate intervention by student success professionals.

Students continue with their cohort throughout the first year experience. Social engagement, a factor known to increase student retention, is strengthened through repeated reflection and peer problem solving.

The FAST team deployed a prototype at LeTourneau University to test the process. Two freshmen Cornerstone courses, LeTourneau’s first year experience course, piloted the process. Each course met once a week for 10 weeks.

At the beginning of each class period, a facilitator led the FAST process. After the course finished, students were asked to respond to the following questions:

- What effect, if any, do you think these questions will have on your continued success as a college student? Why or why not?
- Do you think the number of times these questions were asked was helpful and reasonable? Why or why not?
- What do you think would be a reasonable number of times during a semester?
- Anything else that comes to mind?
Details of student responses are attached. The team was particularly surprised and pleased by these responses:

- “Answering the three questions has taught me to evaluate my performance and experiences at college at regular intervals.”
- “These questions challenged me intellectually, socially, and spiritually.”
- “I think by remembering recent accomplishments, however small, and setting small goals for the coming week is so beneficial towards personal success.”

Obviously, retention rate is the primary key performance indicator for this project. Although there are many variables that influence student retention, FAST aims to address the following three variables.

- Studies show that a student’s social and academic engagement is influential in student retention. Because the stand-up meeting provides an avenue for discovering common interest and learning about academic resources while building relationships, FAST creates value for students by increasing social and academic engagement, especially among peers. The development of social and academic engagement is particularly important for the success of underserved learners.

- Goal-setting theory indicates that individuals who set goals are more likely to perform at higher levels than individuals who do not. One study indicated that goal setting was particularly effective in helping to retain students who were on academic probation. Asking “what did you accomplish since the last time we met?” and “what are you going to do between now and the next time we meet?” requires the student to engage in consistent and regular goal setting and reflection. A student’s potential to persist to graduation is strengthened by the goal setting life skill learned through FAST.

- Attribution theory related to retention claims that students who feel in control of their own success are more likely to succeed. When a student feels that success and/or failure is out of his or her control, the student is more likely to fail. Because of the focus on peer-led problem solving, FAST stand-up meetings provide regular and instant feedback, allowing the student to better control outcomes and ensure degree completion.

Efficient and effective intervention is another KPI for successfully addressing retention issues. The FAST app, configured to feed directly into existing campus retention systems, will enable student success professionals to respond with instant feedback on student mood and identified issues. Colleges and universities can be more efficient with resources devoted to intervention by specifically targeting students in need based on FAST system data.

Retention has a major impact on most college and university business models. An increase in retention creates a direct increase in revenue and contributes to financial sustainability. Using one of our team members’ campuses as an example demonstrates that even a modest 1% increase in retention in an incoming class of 2,200 first year students generates $200,000 in revenue. In this example, if the retention impact increases beyond 1% in the second and third year, the cumulative
net revenue projection could exceed $500,000. Clearly, FAST has the ability not only to pay for itself, but to actually generate revenue beyond the cost of the program.


http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/asu/f/beck_hall_2009_the_college_persistence_questionnaire.pdf

http://csr.sagepub.com/content/11/2/227.abstract

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Appendix A
Student Responses from BMA 2015 Team 7
Freshman Agile Standup (FAST) Pilot at LETU

The BMA 2015 Team 7 used a modified weekly version of the Freshman Agile Standup process with two freshman first-year experience courses at LeTourneau University. These courses, referred to as Cornerstones, meet once a week. One of the team 7 members led the standup at the beginning of each Cornerstone course throughout the Fall 2015 semester. This team member wasn’t able to be present at each Cornerstone class meeting. When he wasn’t present, one of the LeTourneau University assigned Peer Advisors for the course lead the standup. The courses were scheduled to meet for 10 weeks. The schedules were modified and some meetings were canceled or the class did not meet in the classroom. The standup began at the beginning of each class period and asked these questions:

- What did I accomplish or are you proud of since the last time we met?
- What are you excited about or are going to accomplish between now and the next time we meet?
- What obstacles or roadblocks stand in the way of your success as a student?

After the Cornerstone course was completed for the semester, questions were sent out to each of the students in the course. Overall, 33 students and Peer Advisors received the questions. Nine completed the survey, and an additional three partially completed the survey. The questions and results of those questions are detailed below.

Summary
The questions asked of each of the students were such that a free form response was expected. Overall, the results of our pilot were greater than expected. Students indicated some life-lessons learned by applying the process to their own self-awareness. We believe we have a good process to help a first-time in college student head towards success.

On the timing of the questions, overall, we received positive response to the weekly format.

There are some things to consider as we move forward. 1) Number of students in the group; 2) Mind-engaging questions, are these three strong enough? 3) Peer lead versus administrative lead; 4) Place to have students write the answers rather than in a standup format.
**Detailed Results**

All questions were given a free form short answer format response.

What effect, if any, do you think these questions will have on your continued success as a college student?

I think it will improve my success as a college student.

They (the questions) prompt a weekly evaluation of your goals.

It was good for me to ask myself these questions every week. Not only was it beneficial for me to remain academically focused every week, but these questions challenged me intellectually, socially, and spiritually.

I believe that if I continue to ask myself these questions as the college life continue, and stop to think about the answer, that I will reflect on the answer and try to change the bad for the better.

I felt like these questions made me reflect on what had happened the past week and what I could do to change the negatives.

I think it was a good way to start the class. It made me feel like XXXXXX [Team 7 member] and my professor actually cared about me and how my life was going.

Yes, I believe so.

They have made me see that I can take control over my situations with help from others.

It made me reflect on my week and what had happened. It helped me learn from my mistakes and then make changes in order to prevent those mistakes in the future.

**Why or Why Not?**

answering the three questions has taught me to evaluate my performance and experiences at college at regular intervals.

By reflecting on your goals you will be able to stay focused better.

I think by remembering recent accomplishments, however small, and setting small goals for the coming week is so beneficial towards personal success.

I also liked the fact that he asked what stood in our way because i felt like I could go to anyone in that class, especially my professor, to help me with my roadblocks. One of my classmates said that one of hers was that her professors doesn’t put in grades, and Mr. Henry emailed her asking her about it to try and solve the problem. I feel as if these questions are beneficial because it gives us, as students, the opportunity to voice our concerns.

It helps me to identify problems, as well as relate to the students in my class who share that they have been going through the same circumstances . It also helps me to find a quick solution. Talking about the things I am looking forward to, makes me remember why schooling is so important and necessary.
It made me think of what I needed to change.

**Do you think the number of times these questions were asked was helpful and reasonable?**
Yes.

once a week is great.

Yes, once a week was just enough to challenge and refocus myself with these questions.

Asking myself about the good things of the week and bad things of the week created room for reflection and helped me focus on what I need to change and keep up. So I do believe that it was necessary.

Yes

Yes

Somewhat

yes

It was helpful to hear them repeated so that you knew what questions were coming. It would of helped if we had the questions written down to look at as well. It also would have helped if we were asked the questions more often.

**Why or Why Not?**

once a week gives me enough time to think hard about the questions and have new experiences that effect my answers.

having it at one single time a week allows for primary focus to be given to harder subjects. having the questions at the end of the week allow for reflection on what has happened, and expectation of what will happen.

They helped me go through the the week as I continued to re ask these questions

Because it was lot too many questions, but it was also not too few.

I think they could have been asked differently, so that you don't have a automated response. You don't put any thought into the answer if you already have a planned response.

it helped me see that if we share with each other we can grow closer as a community.

It was helpful because you could expect the next question.

**What do you think would be a reasonable number of times during a semester?**

anywhere from 8-10 times during a semester sounds reasonable to me.

yes.

Once a week for the entire semester would be great.
The same amount of times.

50

I think once a week or month would be good.

every cornerstones class is fine, as long as there are more mind engaging questions
every week

I think at least once a week if not more.

Anything else that comes to mind?
I enjoyed having to think about my college experiences and telling others about them and learning from other students experiences.

I liked the peer led version, I also liked have Mr. Henry come in. It changed the flow having both. I am not saying this happened from what I observed but, people tend to filter out information that is around them if it is consistent. So I think changing the person who asks the question every so often would be a great benefit.

I think it's more beneficial to me personally to write down my accomplishments and goals to look back over at the end of a semester. I liked the social aspect of talking about stuff as a group, but a more personal aspect would have been nice too.

Thank you so much for this experience!

no

A smaller group would have been easier to talk to and get more personal with other than that I enjoyed participating.