NEW OFFICE TO ASSIST STUDENT INVOLVEMENT AND SUCCESS (OASIS)

Christine Holmes

Background
Student attrition in higher education mostly results from the interplay of a variety of factors, rather than any single dominant cause. There have been two major attrition studies at Southern Cross University, the Parr et al report (1996) and the School of Social Sciences/Learning Assistance study (2003). There were considerable similarities in terms of patterns of enrolment and stated reasons for dropping out:

- ‘work commitments’ (47% of discontinuing students) and
- ‘family reasons’ (41% of discontinuing students).

A number of studies at other universities which have investigated attrition patterns among school leavers (e.g. the University of Western Sydney) have found that financial strain and the need to work greater hours has become an increasingly significant factor in attrition of recent years.

Retention Working Party
The Australian Universities’ Quality Agency Audit Report of SCU (November, 2003) had identified ‘above average’ attrition rates compared with the sector. A Working Party was established by the PVC (Academic & Quality), Professor Zbys Klich, to consider all matters relating to attrition and retention. The Retention Working Party Report of October 2004 identified existing activity that can be strategically built upon in the coming years to improve retention rates.

The Retention Working Party Report of October 2004 identified some common features and qualities of successful projects or programs in the tertiary education sector:

- A co-ordinated, whole-of-university approach to retention,
- A focus on improving the quality of the first year experience and
- More effective sponsoring of virtual communities and more adventurous flexible delivery are two areas in which innovation is expected in the coming years, to enhance retention and encourage a sense of belonging among distance learners

Office to Assist Student Involvement & Success (OASIS)
Recommendation 9a from the Working Party Report was to improve front-line services to students and there are several ideas that Student Services intend to explore for implementation in 2006. In line with the quality programs identified by The Retention Working Party Report and subsequent recommendations, the Director of Student Services, Carl Rallings, has established a new office on the Plaza that amalgamates key retention services such as:

New office to assist student involvement and success (OASIS)
Christine Holmes – Nuts & bolts
• Accommodation/residential services
• Careers
• Employment
• Student Loans and
• Scholarships (all varieties)

Previously each of these key retention services for students were housed in different locations. Essentially the OASIS will be a “one stop shop” supporting student life and be a focus point for improving student experience and hopefully assisting with the fight against attrition. The OASIS would not operate in isolation from other key service providers in this area like Counselling and Learning Assistance and in fact the OASIS may be a central delivery point for some other services. The Health, Counselling and Disability services will continue to be provided out of the Student Support Centre in Shop 1 on the Plaza.

The OASIS will operate out of the existing Residential Services which is located in Shop 6 on the Plaza and work will be carried out during the 2006 mid-year break to completely refurbish the OASIS accommodation. The phone number for OASIS will be the current Residential Service number 6620 3220. The OASIS will be fully functional for the commencement of O Week on 13 February and it is envisaged that a virtual OASIS will be developed on the SCU Website to assist external students and students at other campuses.

The OASIS will have a student lounge/reception and self-help area with computer, phone and fax facilities to help students access career and employment opportunities through Career Hub, SCU’s web-based information and management portal that provides an electronic communication hub between students and recent graduates and the Career Service providing information that is useful in job seeking and career planning.

Dr Jonathan Munro
Manager, Student Support Services.