

## Academic Safety Net

More first-time freshmen will receive guidance from university mentors

**A** TRIAL PROGRAM THAT PROVIDES faculty and staff mentors to some first-time UL Lafayette freshmen will be expanded for the Fall 2007 semester.

It was created last fall to give academic support to 100 students who did not meet guaranteed admission criteria. Those students were allowed to enroll after receiving permission from a university committee that reviewed their applications for admission by exception. (There are a variety of circumstances that make an applicant eligible to appeal, such as graduating with a high school equivalency diploma or from a non-accredited high school.)

Success of the mentoring program is measured by grade point averages, number of course credits earned and percentage of students who returned for the Spring 2007 semester.

Grade point averages of the 100 students with mentors were almost as high as the GPAs of students who met the university's regular admissions requirements.

According to UL Lafayette's Registrar's Office, the average GPA of students in the mentoring program was 2.48 after the fall semester. Students admitted by regular admissions posted an average GPA of 2.52.

The average GPA of students who did not meet admissions requirements – and did not participate in the mentoring program – was 2.05.



Willie Ricks Jr., left, was paired with UL Lafayette Dean of Students Edward Pratt. They try to meet once a week to share a pizza and talk about Rick's progress and options.



Dr. Nancy Ortego, left, an instructor in the College of Nursing and Allied Health Professions, volunteered to serve as a mentor for first-time freshman Keydra Thomas. The College of Nursing has a separate, ongoing mentoring program that provides guidance and support to students seeking nursing degrees.

Mentored students, on average, earned 12 hours of credit, while students meeting admissions requirements averaged 13 hours. Students who did not meet admissions requirements, and did not participate in the mentoring program, acquired an average of 10 hours of credit.

"These numbers show that the mentoring program is having an impact on these students," said Jennifer Hightower, executive director of UL Lafayette's Office for Campus Diversity. She is administrator

of the program, which evolved from one sponsored by the university's Black Faculty and Staff Caucus.

Dr. Steve Landry, UL Lafayette's vice president for Academic Affairs, said 92 percent of the first-time freshmen who had mentors returned for the Spring 2007 semester. "Our hope is to build on the program's success and expand it by increasing the numbers of participating faculty and staff," he said.

Dean of Students Edward Pratt was a mentor to Willie Ricks Jr. of Houma, La.

"The program allows for students to have an immediate attachment to the university, as well as a person who cares about their success. They have direct access to information, someone to bounce ideas off of, someone to clarify things that may be confusing for a first-time freshman," Pratt said.

Ricks and Pratt have some common interests, such as football. Both played the game in high school; Pratt went on to play for USL, now known as UL Lafayette.

Ricks said his mentor has provided valuable information about UL Lafayette, as well as extracurricular activities and student groups, such as its Pre-Professional

Society. As a result, Ricks recently decided to major in biology and is considering the possibility of applying for medical school in the future.

The pair meets every Tuesday, over a pizza, to discuss Ricks' progress. Now a second-semester freshman, he is taking courses which, upon successful completion, will produce a total of 16 academic credit hours. A 12-hour course load is the minimum required for classification as a full-time student, while 18 hours is considered to be a taxing course load.

Pratt said he is convinced that Ricks wants to succeed. "He does not want to let himself down, nor does he want to let his parents down; I think I add to that list."

The dean of students is optimistic about Rick's academic performance this spring. "He is determined, motivated and confident and he will do well."

Ricks said he wants to set a good example for his 15-year-old brother. "Everything I do, he does. So if I stay away from drugs, stay off the streets and finish college, that will be what he wants to do. I am in college for him," he said.

Dr. Stephen Knouse is head of the Department of Management in the B.I. Moody III College of Business Administration. In addition to serving as chair on the college's diversity committee, he has worked on diversity issues as a consultant to the U.S. Department of Defense.

"A lot of times, people think of diversity simply in terms of race and ethnicity. But diversity can mean other things, too," Knouse said.

Like UL Lafayette's dean of students, Knouse has something in common with the first student he is mentoring in the trial program, Caleb Kestner. Knouse served in the U.S. Air Force. Kestner is a 22-year-old U.S. Marine veteran.

"In fact, Caleb's very first question was, 'How do I get in touch with the Veterans Administration to get my GI Bill money?' I was able to help him with that. I've had experience



Dr. Stephen Knouse, left, and his mentee, Caleb Kestner, are both military veterans. Knouse served in the U.S. Air Force; Kestner is a former U.S. Marine.

with the VA," Knouse said.

Kestner earned a 4.0 GPA for his first semester as a university student.

"Being in the military, I think he has much more self-discipline than a typical 17- or 18-year-old just coming out of high school would," Knouse said.

The mentoring program was structured to dovetail with the students' freshman orientation class. So, there were recommended times during the semester for mentors to meet with their charges.

"But Caleb took it upon himself to check in with me every couple of weeks. He'd tell me what grade he got on a test," Knouse said. The mentoring program was valuable because it gave Kestner access to a specific person on campus who was particularly interested in his student experience, he added.

Knouse has volunteered to serve as a mentor in Fall 2007 for another first-time freshman admitted by committee. He said he would especially like to help out another student who is a fellow military veteran.

"Ideally, I think we should be doing this with all of our students, but with an enrollment of over 16,000, we simply don't have enough faculty and staff to go around." ■



Jennifer Hightower, left, executive director of UL Lafayette's Office for Campus Diversity, is administrator of the trial mentoring program. During the Fall 2006 semester, she served as a mentor for Noelle Ventroy, right.