FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

ECU Sociology Students Assist Office of Student Retention Services with Research

GREENVILLE, N.C. (Sept. 4, 2014) — Two East Carolina University sociology students worked jointly with the ECU Office of Student Retention Services and the Pirate Tutoring Center to complete internships during the 2013–14 academic year. The project was inspired by a presentation on retention rates given by Executive Director of Retention Services and Undergraduate Studies Dr. Jayne Geissler at one of the Women’s Studies Program’s “Gender to a Tea” brown-bag series. In her presentation, Geissler pointed out that retention rates are lowest among white men.

Interim Chair of Sociology Dr. Marieke Van Willigen was intrigued. So when undergraduate sociology major Tiffany Vockerodt came to her asking about an internship that would hone her research skills, Van Willigen put Vockerodt in touch with Geissler.

Vockerodt spent much of her fall 2013 internship pulling together three separate sources of data – ECU’s First-Time, Full-Time Freshman (FTFT) data; the Pirate Tutoring Center’s (PTC) data on service usage; and the Starfish Early Alert system data on flags raised by faculty. She then analyzed the data using SPSS software, also known as the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, documenting that students who received Starfish flags were more likely to seek tutoring through the PTC than those who did not. Furthermore, students who sought tutoring after receiving a Starfish flag had higher GPAs than those who did not. Also documented, was that women were almost twice as likely as men to seek tutoring, despite the fact that women were less likely to receive a Starfish alert flag.

Upon completing her internship, Vockerodt presented her work to the staff in the Office of Student Retention Services and the Pirate Tutoring Center, which included PTC director Elizabeth Coghill, who helped supervise Vockerodt’s internship. In addition, Vockerodt’s early findings were presented by Geissler at an Academic Impressions Conference in Phoenix, Ariz., on “Designing Early Alert Systems for At-Risk Students.”

After Vockerodt’s graduation in December 2013, her work was resumed by sociology undergraduate major Benjamin Wigand. In consulting with Geissler and Coghill, it was decided that the next step in the research would be to conduct focus groups and a survey with male and female students to identify factors that affect students’ responses to Starfish flags.

With the assistance of John Trifilo, ECU Starfish project manager, Wigand conducted focus groups with students enrolled in several COAD 1000 classes. A survey of all of the students in five COAD 1000 class sections also was conducted.
It was discovered that females had a more positive view of the Starfish alert system and were more likely to believe that they should seek out assistance if they received a flag. Indeed, one student stated that she “wished all faculty would use the system.”

Males had more mixed feelings about the early-alert system and were more likely to believe that they did not need assistance, even after they received a flag. Female students were also more likely than males to make other changes in attempts to improve their academic standing.

Analysis of the combined First-Time, Full-Time Freshman data found that females who received a flag and sought tutoring were more likely to be retained into their sophomore year, than females who did not seek tutoring. Also, they were more likely to return for their sophomore year than males who had received flags. Men also were more likely to return if they sought tutoring after receiving a Starfish flag. Wigand presented his work in a poster session during ECU’s 2014 Research and Creative Activity Week.

Results of the work conducted by Vockerodt and Wigand has led to the creation of a new mentoring program for incoming male freshman under the Pirate Tutoring Center. This program is directed towards males who may have trouble adjusting to college life due to certain learning disabilities and/or other personal situations.

Since graduating, Vockerodt is living in Norfolk, Va., and is employed as an institutional research coordinator at ECPI University. She is heading up a research project involving Starfish. Wigand entered ECU’s Masters in Sociology program in fall 2014.

For additional information about the Department of Sociology and current research projects, contact Van Willigen at 252-328-6883 or vanwilligenm@ecu.edu. For more information about Retention Services, contact Geissler at 252-328-4499 or geisslerj@ecu.edu, and for the Pirate Tutoring Center, contact Coghill at 252-737-2011 or coghille@ecu.edu.

###