

Columbus State University Retention, Progression and Graduation Rates Improvement Plan Task Force Report

Step I. Analysis of Retention and Graduation Rates

Both retention and graduation rates of first-time full-time students at Columbus State University have improved in recent years. The institution-specific and system-wide retention rates for the 2003 cohort were 71.33% and 76.69%, respectively. The institution-specific graduation rate for the 1998 cohort was 26.35% and the system-wide rate was 32.46%. In context of retention and graduation rate trends tracked from 1983-2005 by ACT, CSU ranks among the highest rates of retention from freshman-to-sophomore year, but among the lowest in graduation rates.¹

The following cohorts of full-time, first-time students were analyzed by the Task Force: males/females, students by ethnic origin, by age group, students living in campus housing/off-campus housing, students from local area/outside of local area, students with learning support needs and without, students by breakdown of high school GPA's and by SAT scores, students by declared major, by types of financial aid received, by participation in Freshman Learning Communities, by date of admission (before/after July 1), by enrollment in elective academic support courses (e.g., College Success), by first-term college GPA and by grades in freshman English and mathematics courses. We also studied recent results of our NSSE institutional survey.

After our preliminary data analysis, the Task Force conducted focus group interviews with students from cohorts which appeared particularly vulnerable: non-traditional students and students employed more than 19 hours per week. The focus group findings revealed the significance of good advising, of the role of individual motivation and personal commitment in persistence toward degrees, and of the importance of targeted programs for non-traditional students. The focus groups also made clear that policy-level obstacles to progression and graduation included CSU's current squeeze for available seats in all levels of courses and a high level of frustration related to the Regents' Test, which students perceive as undermining process-related practices in writing instruction.

Finally, the Task Force recognized that CSU's heavy reliance on part-time faculty to teach core courses, particularly in English and mathematics, makes an appreciable impact on the freshman experience.² Academic Affairs committees are currently addressing facets of this personnel issue at CSU, which we expect to result in recommendations for more full-time faculty hiring and better support for part-time faculty.

¹ "Information for Policymakers, What Works in Student Retention? National Collegiate Retention and Persistence to Degree Rates," ACT, Inc. (<http://www.act.org/path/policy/reports/retain.html>), 2004.

² "A study by the authors reveals a statistically significant negative relationship between a freshman's first semester level of exposure to part-time faculty and second semester retention," from "Guest Column: The Effects of Part-Time Faculty on Student Retention," Timothy Schibik and Charles Harrington (handout at RPG workshop, Oct. 20, 2005).

Particularly noteworthy findings of our study included:

- ❖ Students admitted well in advance of the beginning of the term were retained at a much higher rate than those admitted just before the term began (almost 10% more for the 2004 cohort).
- ❖ The high school GPA continues to be a better predictor of success than do SAT scores. Students with a high school GPA above 2.5 are retained at a much higher rate than those below this grade point level.
- ❖ Non-traditional students are consistently retained at a lower rate than traditional students.
- ❖ 2004 NSSE results reveal that 34% of first-year students and 38% of seniors at CSU work more than 20 hours per week, a significant finding both in the percentage of students who work and in the amount of time they devote to this extracurricular employment.

These factors strongly associated with higher retention rates (admittance prior to July 1 of entering year and high school GPA above 2.5) seem related to the higher retention of students who successfully enroll in and complete their first-year English and mathematics courses, and those who begin college with a HOPE scholarship.

The factors strongly associated with lower retention rates (non-traditional status, heavy commitment to work outside of school) seem to correlate with the steep drop in second- and third-year retention rates.

The data from these cohorts suggested factors directly associated with higher rates of retention:

- ❖ Students who successfully complete core English and mathematics courses their first semester are much more likely to return their second and subsequent years than those who are not successful in these courses and those who do not take these courses their first term of attendance.
- ❖ Students whose first term GPA is above 2.0 are retained at a much higher rate than those below this level.
- ❖ Students awarded the HOPE scholarship are retained at a higher rate than those not receiving this award. It was noted that for students returning for a third and fourth year, there was no appreciable difference between those who retained the HOPE award and those not retaining this award.
- ❖ Students without learning support requirements are retained at a higher rate, with an institution-specific rate of 73.24% and a system-wide rate of 79.41% for the 2003 cohort.

The data from other cohorts suggested factors directly associated with lower rates of retention, and ultimately, graduation:

- ❖ Retention rates between the second and third year drop another 15-17% and appear to be consistent across categories.

The data from some cohorts suggested factors which do not seem to be significant for rates of retention, but should continue to be monitored:

- ❖ There does not seem to be an appreciable difference in retention based solely on ethnic background. We attribute this result to CSU's increasingly welcoming and diverse campus environment.
- ❖ There is a noticeable difference, however, in first year retention rates between African-American *females* and African-American *males* (73% vs 58% for the fall 2004 cohort), although this difference diminished after the second and third year.
- ❖ Students living in campus housing are retained at approximately the same rate as those who commute to campus. A similar finding was observed for students enrolled from outside the local geographic area compared to those who reside in the local service area.

Finally, some data was determined by the Task Force to be inconclusive at this time:

- ❖ Preliminary data seems to indicate that students participating in Freshman Learning Communities were retained at the same rate as non-FLC freshmen. This component of the Freshman Year Experience was implemented Fall Semester 2004 and will continue to be monitored for its effectiveness.
- ❖ Retention rates based on academic discipline vary from year-to-year, making it difficult to draw conclusions. Students who had not declared a major are generally retained at a lower rate than those with declared majors, but this data varies among cohorts.

Step 2. Program Evaluation

Courses Providing Academic Support

CSUS 1105, "Learning to Learn: Adult Re-entry," is a refresher course in reading, writing, and math for non-traditional students who are thinking about coming to college or returning to college. Student evaluations and focus groups suggest that this course is very positively received and deserves stronger promotional support from the university.

CSUS 1106, "College Success," is a course required of all learning support students. The content covers study skills and areas of assistance provided on campus. Focus group results suggest that special sections of the course targeted to non-traditional students would be valuable.

ITDS 2735, "Life and Career Planning," is designed to help students consider those career choices and related factors contributing to satisfaction and happiness in life. Undeclared majors are specifically encouraged to enroll in this course, which includes an emphasis on goal-setting and self-management.

UNIV 1105, "Strategic Learning," introduces students to the processes that underlie effective learning and has them apply a variety of learning strategies to the subject matter in their core classes. The course has not attracted a large enrollment, but deserves attentive assessment.

Findings and recommendations

- ❖ While each of these courses are currently evaluated with the use of student surveys, the courses as a set should be assessed annually for effect on retention and progression
- ❖ UNIV 1105 and CSUS 1106 should be evaluated for possible combination, since the content of each seems potentially reinforcing
- ❖ Sections of College Success should be designated and offered as non-traditional student sections

Centers Providing Student Services

Tutorial support:

The Center for Academic Support and Student Retention houses several programs including the Office of Disability Services, advising for learning support students, and the Office of Tutorial Services, which includes free mathematics tutorial services for students enrolled in learning support and core curriculum courses at the University Math Lab. The lab employs ten to twelve tutors who service approximately 100 students per week. Student evaluations, which are distributed after the midterm each semester and are available online, have indicated that students perceived tutoring services as helpful and positively impacting their grades in mathematics courses.

The Writing Center provides free tutoring for writing assignments in a variety of disciplines, and assists students with preparation for the writing section of the Regents' Test. Peer tutors draw upon students' own knowledge to enhance and extend their practices of writing. Focus groups indicated that the Writing Center is a key academic support service on campus.

Advising Support:

The Center for Academic Advising was created as a result of CSU's recent Freshman Year Experience initiative. Early indications suggest that the Center is

providing a valuable and much-appreciated safety net for undeclared students and students considering a change-of-major.

The **College of Education Services and Field Experiences Office (SAFE)** provides an array of services to undergraduates such as, advising, information on the Praxis examinations, Hope scholarship and COE scholarship information, field experiences within a Partner School Network, placement in student teaching, and assistance with certification paperwork and processing. Through our student centered services, the University has identified data that recognizes the SAFE Office's contribution to the retention rate of COE students that has been slightly higher than the retention of overall CSU students.

The major role of the **D. Abbott Turner College of Business Student Services Center** is to assist students and faculty with the advising process and serve as a resource for academic and institutional information. Student Services has been effective in becoming a centralized point of contact for business majors who have academic questions or concerns such as problems with registration, petitions for transfer credit, major changes, GPA concerns, and preparing for graduation. The effectiveness of the DATCOB Student Services Center is demonstrated by the number of students who contact the center daily with questions or concerns.

Social and Personal Support:

The **Adult Learning Resource Center** is a gathering place for non-traditional students. Focus groups singled out the ALRC as a program/service that was critical in keeping them enrolled at CSU and persisting in their degree goals.

The **Counseling Center** supports student success through workshops on relevant topics such as Time Management, Decreasing Stress, etc., through career counseling and help with choosing majors, and through one-on-one counseling to help students cope with personal crises and meet academic demands. Focus groups specifically mentioned the Counseling Center as a key campus service for addressing both personal and academic issues.

The **Career Center** connects students with career options and community opportunities through career information, employment contacts and experiential education opportunities. Focus groups indicated an interest in developing "bridge" organizations on campus which would connect recent graduates with upper-level students in the disciplines and serve as a networking and information-gathering resource.

Findings and recommendations

- ❖ Tutorial support services in particular deserve increased funding, since these services form a critical safety net for at-risk students in core courses
- ❖ While some campus support centers are already measuring effects on retention, the Task Force recommends that all centers begin assessing their retention effect, both separately and as a combined group
- ❖ Centralized coordination of assessment of student support centers should be handled by the offices of the VPAA or VPSA or by an individual appointed for this task

Special Programs and Policies

Retention through Orientation, Advisement and Registration (ROAR) is required for all new CSU freshmen. Students transferring from another institution are encouraged but not required to attend. Students may select

from three types of orientation programs (Residence Life, Freshmen, and Non-Traditional/Transfer) in which they will meet other new students, find out about campus resources, academic policies, procedures, academic myths and expectations, meet with an advising team, and register for classes. Student surveys are collected at the end of orientation.

In spring 2005, the first phase of implementing **mandatory mathematics placement testing** required approximately 180 students to pass a standardized exam in order to enroll in Pre-Calculus courses without taking the prerequisite course, College Algebra. The effectiveness of the testing will be assessed by comparing the Pre-Calculus grades of current students meeting the prerequisite to those placed into courses through testing and by examining trends in productive grade rates in the course over the last five year period. If preliminary results indicate a positive impact on student success in mathematics, placement testing will be phased in for all core mathematics courses.

Freshman Learning Communities have been in place at CSU since 2004.

Clusters of freshman level courses are tailored by faculty to a particular topic or theme. A group of 24 first semester students is enrolled in the same sections of three freshman classes – two core courses and one section of College Success.

Freshman Convocation welcomed the incoming class of 2009 to CSU's scholarly community: recognizing incoming freshmen, celebrating their enthusiasm for learning, and encouraging all in attendance to reflect upon the meaning of a college education. CSU Freshman Convocation is intended to be a formal ceremony which serves as a "rite of passage." Our keynote speaker for this initial convocation was Dr. Emory J. Alexander, a 1974 alumnus of Columbus College with an associate's degree in nursing, who has become a prominent local surgeon, businessman and citizen.

Servant Leadership, CSU's undergraduate leadership development program, awards stipends to competitively selected students. Beyond taking Servant Leadership Seminars, the students are also required to complete extensive community service and to serve as mentors to "at-risk" children. The retention rate, since its inception in 1999, is at 78%, and the graduation rate is at 67%.

"W" notification policy means that course withdrawal at CSU is assisted by technology not only in simplifying the process, but also in encouraging faculty to intervene; any time a student submits an online request to withdraw, an email notification is sent to the course instructor, who can then mediate with the student before replying to approve the request.

Early Alert Program This effort to assist students to succeed before withdrawing or failing a course depends upon voluntary faculty referrals of students, who are then contacted by an advisor and may elect to seek consultation for referral to other campus services (tutorials, counseling). The program has not received enough participation in its first few years to be fairly assessed, but deserves increased promotion.

MAP/MRO Program As evidence of the institution's commitment to minority students, the institution included the Minority Advising Program as a component of its First Year Experience® Program (FYE). The charge from the VPAA was to develop a first year experience unique to the needs and culture of the CSU campus. MAP programs were evaluated by attendance, interest of attendees, relevance to student issues, and anecdotal comments. Program coordination has been somewhat fragmented in recent years. It is recommended that one individual,

whose main responsibility is MAP/MRO, be held accountable for the delivery of this program.

Findings and recommendations

- ❖ The Task Force recommends that all special programs and policies begin to be assessed for their retention effect, both separately and as a combined set of strategies
- ❖ Centralized coordination of assessment of special programs and policies should be handled by the offices of the VPAA or VPSA or by an individual appointed for this task

Student Satisfaction Surveys

ACT Entering Students Survey

Collects a variety of demographic, background, and educational information shortly after students enter CSU. Survey also includes an assessment of Enrollment Services. Administered fall 1998, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005. Recent results revealed that entering students perceive CSU as not selective in its admissions criteria, and not especially demanding academically.

ACT College Outcomes Survey

Assesses enrolled students' perceptions of the importance of, progress toward, and college contribution to a variety of college outcomes; assesses satisfaction with selected aspects of CSU programs and services. Administered spring of even numbered years. Recent results rated the quality of academic advising at CSU as "good" (over 70% of responses), but rated the availability of courses in the major as "fair/poor" (over 50% of responses).

Survey of Students Enrolled in Online Courses

Assesses satisfaction with support services for students enrolled in eCore and other courses offered online. Administered spring 2003 and 2005 at Testing Center when students take mid-term exams.

Student Academic Support Services Survey

The items in this survey were designed to gain a better understanding of Student awareness and use of academic support services available to students at Columbus State University. Administered odd numbered years.

National Survey of Student Engagement

Allows assessment of academic and social factors contributing to students' overall satisfaction in college. Administered spring 2004 and 2005. Recent results revealed the disappointing finding that 34% of first-year students and 38% of seniors at CSU work more than 20 hours per week. Respondents also reported doing relatively little writing as part of academic assignments [29% percent of first-year students were never assigned papers more than 5 pages in length; 31% of first-year students and 40% of seniors wrote fewer than 5 short papers or reports (under 5 pages)].

Findings and recommendations

- ❖ The Task Force recommends that the information gathered by these instruments be systematically used to assess and improve current practices on campus. Our Quality Enhancement Plan proposal for the SACS Review process provides one possible method of addressing increasing the academic engagement of students.

Step 3. Plan for Retention and Graduation Improvement

Based on our analysis of current RPG rates, our plan addresses the at-risk populations of late-admit (after July 1) students, students entering college with less than a 2.5 high school GPA, non-traditional students, second-year students, male students (particularly African-American), and working students. The plan also addresses the particular needs of students in core English and mathematics courses. The Task Force proposes the following plans, which depend upon shared responsibility for planning and implementation among administrators, faculty and staff.

Initiative One:

Admissions Deadlines and Standards Restructuring

Goal: to improve retention rates of late-admit students; to improve retention rates of all students

Strategy: policy change of *final application deadline of July 1* for fall semester enrollment of first-time students

Strategy: raise admission standards to phase-in minimum high school GPA of 2.3 by fall 2007 and 2.5 by fall 2008

Initiative Two:

Collaborative Student Learning Centers for English, mathematics and other core course disciplines

Goal: to improve progression rates of second- and third-year students; to improve retention, progression and graduation rates of non-traditional, working, and African-American male students

Strategy: The Task Force recommends increasing the number of second- and third-year students employed in on-campus positions in Student Learning Centers such as the University Math Lab and the CSU Writing Center. We can make the most of successful campus services already in place by increasing financial support to these Centers, while encouraging faculty in other core course disciplines (sciences, social sciences, foreign languages) to develop their own collaborative Student Learning Centers.

Strategy: The Task Force stresses the importance of actively recruiting and rewarding academically successful second-year students, male students (particularly African-American), and non-traditional students as peer tutors. Current faculty directors of the Writing Center and Math Lab, as well as faculty from other core course disciplines, should design student recruitment and training plans in accordance with best practices in the development of peer tutoring programs.

Strategy: Peer tutors in Student Learning Centers must be paid at competitive rates and/or offered extra perks in order to attract student workers to on-campus employment

Goal: to improve the retention rates of at-risk freshmen, defined as those students with less than a 2.5 high school GPA and/or a first-semester college GPA below 2.0; to improve success rates of all freshmen in core English and mathematics courses

Strategy: Core course faculty should design incentives and/or requirements for visits (prior to course withdrawal, for example, or in conjunction with a particular exam or assignment) in order to ensure that services are well-known and used by freshmen.

Strategy: Student Learning Centers should reinforce current intervention strategies for at-risk students (i.e., Early Alert Program) and center directors/chairs should propose new intervention strategies related to academic policies (repeat withdrawals, repeat failures) as well as increase overall faculty understanding of and participation in student referral services.

Strategy: Enlarged and well-supported collaborative Student Learning Centers, while increasing the amount of academic support provided for first-semester freshmen, should be equipped with a coordinated system of academic software (such as Accutrack®) in order for adequate and centralized assessment of services.

Initiative Three:

Enhancing Campus Culture at Columbus State University

Goal: Strengthening student identification with the unique culture of the University and Class progression (First-year/Freshmen, Second-year/Sophomore, etc.)

Strategy: Expand and develop on-campus student employment programs (student assistants, work-study students) with increased funding to engage students in university community and provide coherence and structure for on-campus work. Special attention should be given to recruiting at-risk student populations.

Strategy: Support Freshman Convocation as a CSU tradition by allocating financial support and resources of personnel adequate for annual planning.

Strategy: Sponsor new programs as “milestone” events for students in their second and third years, such as “Sophomore Night at the Symphony” (or

another fine-arts based event at Columbus State's RiverCenter Theater, home of our Schwob School of Music) or "Junior Jamboree at Cougar Field" (picnic and baseball home opener, with winners of 2004 NCAA National Championship).

Goal: Strengthening student identification with Major Programs and Departments

Strategy: Encourage a department-based group advising model at the start of each fall term to enhance collegiality among students and faculty, increase student understanding of curricular changes and requirements, and offer opportunities for faculty to promote special student programs and opportunities.

Goal: Assess improvements in campus culture and environment for effect on progression and graduation rates

Strategy: Use NSSE survey and findings to evaluate the success of these engagement initiatives. Future surveys should over-sample to be able to assess at the department level.

Strategy: Oversight of these initiatives should be coordinated by an individual or committee named by the offices of the VPAA and VPSA.

Initiative Four (long-term planning):
Summer Start Option

Goal: to improve retention rates of students entering college with less than a 2.5 high school GPA

Strategy: new program proposal of summer start option, to consist of one Learning Support course and one section of College Success for students entering with Learning Support requirements