

**Final Report
University System of Georgia
Task Force on Graduation Rates
August 5, 2004**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Chancellor created a University System Task Force on Graduation Rates in February 2004 and charged it with developing a five-year plan to bring the System at least to the national average in graduation rates, and for becoming a national leader with respect to graduation rates in the longer-term future. In March 2004, the Task Force designed and distributed a questionnaire to University System of Georgia (USG) institutions aimed at gathering information on factors that contribute to graduation and retention as well as determining programs and interventions that might affect them. Almost all of the institutions listed students' lack of preparation for college as a problem. However, the factors of poverty, demography, and poor preparation do not seem sufficient to explain the low graduation rates at USG institutions, because there are other states with similar profiles that have higher graduation rates.

Many people assume that student characteristics rather than institutional practices are what drive graduation rates. Student characteristics have a significant influence on retention and graduation rates. However, there are also large differences in graduation rates among institutions that serve similar students. Moreover, high performance isn't limited to overall averages, some colleges and universities are much more effective in serving specific groups of students. The conclusion is that institutional practices can make a profound difference in retention and graduation rates.

Many USG institutions enroll significant numbers of part-time students and transfer students. The overall system average for six-year graduation rates is seven to eight percentage points above the institutional system average. In addition to ensuring increased success for freshman students, we need to provide a better environment for transfer students.

Our report makes recommendations on institutional practices and policies that should lead to increases in retention rates for first-year and subsequent years, culminating in dramatic increases in six-year graduation rates. We **recommend** that USG use the six-year graduation rate as the standard measure for bachelor degrees in keeping with national norms.

We **recommend** a set of principles on institutional practices and we **recommend** that all institutions develop a plan for improving their disaggregated retention and six-year graduation rates by implementing these principles. Our recommended principles collectively incorporate the conditions for effective student learning and we give examples of successful practices throughout the report.

1. Retention and increased graduation rates will be the shared responsibility of all facets of the institution.
2. Institutions must demonstrate their intent to improve overall retention and graduation rates by regularly and systematically collecting, reviewing and analyzing reliable data - focus should be on disaggregated data with intent to narrow the gaps among ethnicity and sex groups. First-year through third- or sixth-year retention rates should be monitored and assessed.
3. A wide variety of academic programs and support services and proactive interventions should be provided.
4. Institutions should positively address those populations most vulnerable to drop-out, stop-out or failure.
5. An academic advising plan should be developed that includes at least the three prongs:
 - a. Offer training sessions for faculty and full-time advisors that emphasize advising as more than simply scheduling. Developmental advising has a positive impact on retention.
 - b. Provide rewards and recognition for advising. Emphasize advising as teaching and develop a program that recognizes and rewards outstanding achievement in advising.
 - c. Conduct continual assessment on the effectiveness of advising.
6. Rules/policies that might potentially delay graduation should be examined and modified – both at the institutional and System level.

7. Quality of academic offerings should be examined to ensure a high level of intellectual work is required of students and there are high expectations for all students.
8. Quality of campus climate should be examined to ensure a positive learning environment exists for all students.

We **recommend** that each institution develops procedures to follow students who transfer to them, then analyze data to develop strategies for enhancing transfer student success. Many of the institutional practices recommended for support of freshman students should provide increased success for all students.

We **recommend** that the University System Office (USO) require annual progress reports on disaggregated retention rates for years one through five and on disaggregated six-year graduation rates. Further, we provide a set of rubrics for self assessment by institutions and we **recommend** that rubrics be used by institutions to monitor their progress on implementation of principles and results. We **recommend** that the USO support institutions on a regular schedule to use the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) or the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) as a means of monitoring improvement of student learning and collegiate quality.

We **recommend** that institutions develop stronger relationships with feeder high schools to help narrow the gap in expectations between high school and college.

INTRODUCTION

The Chancellor created a University System Task Force on Graduation Rates in February 2004 and charged it with developing a five-year plan to bring the System at least to the national average in graduation rates, and for becoming a national leader with respect to graduation rates in the longer-term future. Presently, the national six-year average is at 54.0% and the System institutions are at 43.5%. These data are based on the 1997 cohort of entering freshmen. Creating a more educated Georgia requires that the University System of Georgia (USG) increase its graduation rate.

Nationally, slightly more than half (21%) of all departures in first-time full-time freshmen occurred during the first year. An additional 10% of departures occurred during the second year, with another 9% occurring during third and subsequent years. For USG, institution retention shows loss of 31.9% during the first year, followed by 18.5% during the second year, then subsequently 10.3%. Why do USG institutions retain and graduate students at a consistently lower rate than external institutions?

There are many factors other than academic preparedness that contribute to student persistence – what are these factors and how can we overcome the barriers they present? While poverty, demography, and poor preparation are factors, they do not seem sufficient to explain the low graduation rates at USG institutions, because there are other states with similar profiles that have higher graduation rates.

Many people assume that student characteristics rather than institutional practices are what drive graduation rates. Students at more selective institutions do graduate at higher rates than those at less selective institutions. Further, there are large graduation rate gaps between low-income and high-income students and the majority of black and Latino students don't complete their degrees in six years. However, there are also large differences in graduation rates among institutions that serve similar students. Even after controlling for a host of possible factors that might influence graduation rates, including students' SAT scores, institutional mission, financial resources, degree programs, size, and location, some colleges and universities far outperform their peers. Moreover, high performance isn't limited to overall averages, some colleges and universities are also much more effective in serving specific groups of students. The

conclusion is that institutional practices can make a profound difference in retention and graduation rates¹.

Our report makes recommendations on institutional practices and policies that should lead to increases in retention rates for first-year and subsequent years, culminating in dramatic increases in six-year graduation rates. We **recommend** that USG use the six-year graduation rate as the standard measure for bachelor degrees in keeping with national norms².

We **recommend** a set of principles on institutional practices and we recommend that all institutions develop a plan for improving their disaggregated retention and six-year graduation rates by implementing these principles. Further, we provide a set of rubrics by which institutions can monitor their progress on implementation of principles and results.

Presidents at four-year institutions are currently evaluated annually on System-wide first-year retention rates and institutional six-year graduation rates. Presidents at state and two-year colleges are currently evaluated annually on three-year institution-specific associate degree graduation rates plus transfer rates. In addition, we **recommend** that the University System Office (USO) require annual progress reports on disaggregated retention rates for years one through five and on disaggregated six-year graduation rates. We **recommend** that rubrics be used by institutions to self-monitor their progress on implementation of principles and results. A short description of rubrics is given in Appendix I.

We **recommend** that the USO support institutions on a regular schedule to use the National Survey of Student Engagement³ (NSSE) or the Community College Survey of Student Engagement⁴ (CCSSE) as a means of monitoring improvement of student learning and collegiate quality.

Since most institutions have large numbers of transfer students, we **recommend** that each institution develops procedures to follow students who transfer to them, then analyze data to develop strategies for enhancing transfer student success. Many of the institutional practices recommended for support of freshman students should provide increased success for all students.

Since under-preparedness of students for college is a significant factor noted by most institutions, we **recommend** that institutions develop stronger relationships with feeder high schools to help narrow the gap in expectations between high school and college.

CAMPUS QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES

In March 2004, the Task Force designed and distributed a questionnaire⁵ to USG institutions aimed at gathering information on factors that contribute to graduation and retention as well as determining programs and interventions that might affect them. Thirty institutions replied to the questionnaire, providing a variety of information about retention/graduation rates, factors affecting retention, and programs aimed at increasing retention and graduation rates.

There is a significant change in culture in USG institutions with the gathering of data. The Chancellor required institutions in October 2002 to set and monitor retention goals. Most institutions are now

¹ Kevin Carey <http://www2.edtrust.org/NR/rdonlyres/11B4283F-104E-4511-B0CA-1D3023231157/0/highered.pdf>

² For example, the Common Data Set uses the 150% rule by requesting six-year graduation rate for bachelor degrees and three-year graduation rates for associate degrees.

³ <http://www.iub.edu/~nsse>

⁴ <http://www.ccsse.org>

⁵ Appendix II

actively engaged in enrollment management, whereas that was the exception rather than the rule when the 1997 freshman cohort entered our institutions. Most schools have drawn on existing data, generated either internally or by the USO, to examine trends in retention and graduation, focusing on rates and demographics in order to establish goals and identify high-risk students.

Almost all of the institutions listed students' lack of preparation for college as a problem, and retention measures commonly include establishment of learning centers to improve students' academic skills and initiation of various freshman programs to enhance students' practical abilities to cope with the demands of college level classes.

The following perceived reasons were most frequently cited for low graduation rates:

- Transfer prior to graduation, due to both curricular considerations and population mobility
- Conflicting demands of school, work, and family responsibilities, resulting in frequent stop-out
- Financial issues, especially loss of a HOPE scholarship
- No original intention to graduate

In addition to learning centers and freshman programs, measures most frequently cited for improving retention were special attention to high-risk students, refinement of advising practices, and promotion of activities outside the classroom.

CONDITIONS THAT SUPPORT STUDENT LEARNING

Research points to five conditions that support student learning⁶. The first is high expectation. The second is an environment of academic and social support. The third condition for student learning is feedback - students are more likely to succeed in settings that assess their skills, monitor their progress, and provide frequent feedback, especially immediate and continuous feedback. Fourth as a condition for student learning is involvement, with the first year of college being especially critical. The final condition is relevance - deep learning arises when students engage in knowledge in ways that they perceive as meaningful.

NSSE³ has similar five key clusters of activities that research studies show are linked to desired outcomes in college. These clusters are 1) Level of academic challenge; 2) Student-faculty interactions; 3) Active and collaborative learning; 4) Enriching educational experience; and 5) Supportive campus environment. NSSE bases its work on research⁷ that is unequivocal that students who are actively involved in both academic and out-of-class activities gain more from the college experience than those who are not so involved.

PRINCIPLES

Our recommended principles collectively incorporate the conditions for effective student learning.

1. Retention and increased graduation rates will be the shared responsibility of all facets of the institution.
2. Institutions must demonstrate their intent to improve overall retention and graduation rates by regularly and systematically collecting, reviewing and analyzing reliable data - focus should be on disaggregated data with intent to narrow the gaps among ethnicity and sex groups. First-year through third- or sixth-year retention rates should be monitored and assessed.
3. A wide variety of academic programs and support services and proactive interventions should be provided.

⁶ Vincent Tinto, *Establishing Conditions for Student Success* [http://www.wmin.ac.uk/eau/wpm\\$5de1.pdf](http://www.wmin.ac.uk/eau/wpm$5de1.pdf)

⁷ Ernest T. Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini, *How College Affects Students: Findings and Insights from Twenty Years of Research* (1991) Jossey-Bass

4. Institutions should positively address those populations most vulnerable to drop-out, stop-out or failure.
5. An academic advising plan should be developed that includes at least the three prongs:
 - a. Offer training sessions for faculty and full-time advisors that emphasize advising as more than simply scheduling. Developmental advising has a positive impact on retention.
 - b. Provide rewards and recognition for advising. Emphasize advising as teaching and develop a program that recognizes and rewards outstanding achievement in advising.
 - c. Conduct continual assessment on the effectiveness of advising.
6. Rules/policies that might potentially delay graduation should be examined and modified – both at the institutional and System level.
7. Quality of academic offerings should be examined to ensure a high level of intellectual work is required of students and there are high expectations for all students.
8. Quality of campus climate should be examined to ensure a positive learning environment exists for all students.

STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING AND IMPLEMENTING PRINCIPLES

1. **Retention and increased graduation rates will be the shared responsibility of all facets of the institution.**

There is little direct causal link between a particular strategy and improved retention rates. Multiple strategies need to be ongoing on a regular basis. Some strategies involve students learning firsthand how experts think about and solve practical problems by interacting with faculty inside and outside the classroom. Other strategies involve faculty and staff in academic and career advising. Student services staff provide for enriching cultural, social and educational experiences. Library faculty and staff help connect students with local and global information resources. Facilities/physical plant staffs help create and maintain a clean, safe and secure environment that can encourage student achievement.

For example, Georgia Southern University notes that numbers of students talk about the beauty of the campus as one of the reasons they came to the institution and as a point of pride and continued satisfaction once they become students. Classroom instructors know how important the appropriate environment--air control, cleanliness, appropriate acoustics, for example--are for the comfort, satisfaction, and maximum performance of both the student and professor. Additional amenities such as call boxes are also important to maintain the safe and secure environment that both students and parents find critical.

At Elizabeth City State University [see #2 below], there is a culture of commitment on campus. Every person, from the chancellor to the groundskeeper, is committed to the success of students. Their campus leadership advisory panel has representatives from every part of campus – deans to housekeepers. Every one is aware of the importance of helping students be successful.

There are multiple people and units responsible for retention of students. Everyone on campus has an investment in improving retention and graduation rates.

2. **Institutions must demonstrate their intent to improve overall retention and graduation rates by regularly and systematically collecting, reviewing and analyzing reliable data - focus should be on disaggregated data with intent to narrow the gaps among ethnicity and sex groups. First-year through third- or sixth-year retention rates should be monitored and assessed.**

Students at more selective institutions graduate at higher rates than those at less selective institutions. Six-year overall graduation rates for the 1996 first-time freshman cohort are 69 percent, 56 percent, 44 percent, and 35 percent for highly selective, selective, moderately selective, and less selective institutions,

respectively⁸. Further, there are large graduation rate gaps between low-income and high-income students and the majority of black and Latino students don't complete their degree. For example, bachelor's degree six-year completion rates for 1995-96 freshmen from their first four-year institution are African American 41 percent, Asian 64 percent, Latino 41 percent, and White 59 percent; by income – 77 percent high-income and 54 percent low-income.

We need to be aware of retention and graduation rate gaps among our own student populations and set goals for narrowing the gaps as well as setting goals for increasing the overall retention and graduation rates. These data should be assessed and reported annually to USO. Processes should be capable of evaluation for effectiveness and improvement.

There are institutions nationally, that are much more effective in serving specific groups of students.¹ For example, SUNY Binghamton – a “highly competitive” doctoral and research institution with an undergraduate population of 10,000, of whom 12 percent are members of underrepresented minority groups – has a 6-year graduation rate of 79 percent with African-American graduation rate of 77 percent. The median rate for Binghamton's closest peers is 70 percent and 59 percent for their African-American students.

At Elizabeth City State University, a Historically Black Institution with a student body of 2,000, of whom three-fourths are African American, the six-year graduation rate is 53 percent for all students and 60 percent for African American students in 2002. In contrast, the median graduation rate for comparable institutions [“less selective baccalaureate or masters-granting institutions with fewer than 5,000 undergraduates] is 39 percent for all students and 37 percent for African American students.

East Carolina University (NC) has a six-year graduation rate of 54 percent for all students and 60 percent for minorities. The median rate for its peers is 41 percent for all students and 32 percent for minorities.

At UC-Riverside, whose racially diverse student body of over 13,000 students is 23 percent White, 22 percent Latino, and 41 percent Asian, the overall graduation rate is 66 percent, 15 percentage points better than the median rate of 51 percent among 33 peer institutions. The median graduation rate for Latino students at those peer schools is 39 percent. By contrast, success at UC-Riverside is equally distributed – 65 percent White, 67 percent Asian, and 68 percent Latino.

A number of institutions nationally have experienced significant improvements in six-year graduation rates in a five-year time frame. For example, the University of Florida has increased its six-year graduation rates from 64 percent in 1997 to 77 percent in 2002; At Weber State University (Utah), six-year graduation rates improved over time from 31 percent in 1997 to 45 percent in 2002.

We further need to be aware that second through sixth years require attention as well as the first year. As noted in the Introduction, for USG, while institution retention on average shows a loss of 31.9 percent of students during the first year [for the 1997 cohort], there was significant continuing attrition of 18.5 percent of the original cohort during the second year, and another 10.3 percent in years three through six.

3. A wide variety of academic programs and support services and proactive interventions should be provided.

The key to retention and subsequent graduation is the ability to create academic programs and support services that are proactive in nature. In addition, students should have a variety of options available to them, not a one-size-fits-all approach. In addition to a retrospective analysis of student cohorts as given in

⁸ Highly selective- SAT above 1,100; Selective- SAT 1,045-1,100; Moderately selective- SAT 990-1,044; Less selective- SAT below 990

#2 above, institutions need to implement a data-driven early warning system that could intervene with specific students before they become statistics. Another aspect of this principle is given in #5 below where a student tracking system is discussed.

Many USG institutions now have some type of first-year experience for freshmen students. Examples are Freshman Learning Communities (FLCs), Freshman Year Experience (FYE), Freshman Seminars, and/or UNIV1000 (courses that enhance the college experience by providing students with skills that they may need to be successful in college but are not necessarily taught in the core curriculum – focus is on active learning strategies and student development issues). This type of experience appears to contribute to increased first-year retention rates. Even without many such programs in place, one-year retention rates for full-time, first-time freshmen at USG institutions have risen monotonically over the past six years from 68.2 percent for fall 1997 cohort to 73.9 percent for fall 2002 cohort. One implication is that the six-year graduation rate of 43.5 percent for the fall 1997 cohort should rise by five to six percentage points for the fall 2002 cohort. However, nationally, the trend is also monotonically upwards, so it is likely that the 10.5 percent gap between the current national and institutional system average will be narrowed but not closed without additional intervention.

Kennesaw State University has a First Year Experience program of long standing that was selected in 2003 by the Policy Center on the First Year of College and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) to participate in a project called “The Foundations of Excellence for the First-Year Experience.” As a result, Kennesaw’s “Foundations of Excellence” Task Force has been required to produce extensive monthly reports on every aspect of the first year experience. Specifically, they are measuring effectiveness in recruiting, admitting, housing, orienting, supporting, advising and teaching new students. They are also asked to make programmatic improvements that will increase student learning, success and persistence to graduation with the goal of becoming a national benchmarking institution for other schools wanting to improve their first-year experience programs.

Learning communities should enable students to frame meaningful academic and social connections between what otherwise would be discrete experiences, and those that enable students to engage in communal, interdisciplinary, multi-voiced conversations about what is known. In contrast, most students, especially during their first year, are “isolated learners”; i.e. their learning is disconnected from that of others. Just as important, students typically take courses as detached, individual units, one course separated from another, in both content and peer group, one set of understandings unrelated in any fashion to the content learned in other courses. Courses have little academic or social coherence, and offer little in the way of relevance to today’s students.

At Georgia State University, one of the more effective programs in increasing retention has been the Freshmen Learning Communities coupled with an orientation course, Atlanta involvement (service learning), and linkages across courses. Students in FLCs show significantly higher retention rates (7-8 percentage points) and higher scores on the NSSE than those not participating. Each FLC of 25 students has a theme and involves five linked courses. The students take the courses together, although in some courses the students might be in a large section with non-FLC students. One of the courses is GSU1010, a 3-credit college experience course. Faculty members who teach in the five linked courses meet periodically to discuss integration of issues across the courses.

It is probably not sufficient to offer isolated UNIV1000 courses. Higher retention appears to result when several courses are linked or, if a single course, then the course should be focused on a major theme. It is also not clear that requiring all students to participate in FLCs or FYE would be beneficial. Most institutions rely on voluntary participation in teaching the courses by faculty and staff. Requiring participation of all students might place too great a strain on available teaching resources. However, a

voluntary approach might miss the students who need it most. It is likely that students who choose to be a part of this program will be those who are achievers, students who want to give themselves an added advantage. It seems that those at risk may be the least likely to choose this option. Perhaps placement tests or other types of assessments could be used to identify those likely to benefit from the orientation benefits provided by the first year experience.

As examples of academic support services, a Learning Center could provide assistance in writing, mathematics, studying and academic reading, and academic counseling. A Peer Tutorial Program could provide tutoring in a variety of disciplines. Housing staff and advisors can provide services for students living in the residence halls.

The University of Georgia's Division of Academic Enhancement provides a wide variety of academic support services and proactive interventions that are effective in increasing retention. Examples include: The Milledge Hall Learning Center provides assistance in writing, mathematics, studying and academic reading, and academic counseling. The Peer Tutorial Program provides tutoring in a variety of disciplines, including mathematics, statistics, chemistry, physics, foreign languages, and business-related courses such as economics and accounting. The Division's Satellite Office in Brumby Hall also provides academic support services for students living in the residence halls. These services include tutoring, academic counseling, workshops, and collaborative activities with housing staff and advisors.

Savannah State University has developed a Center for Teaching, Learning and Academic Support as an organized response to the identified needs of students for assistance in the areas of writing, mathematics and advisement. The Center includes such programs as the ReWrite Connection, the Math Lab, and the Academic Advising & Mentoring Program.

Gordon College placed more emphasis on in-class writing with more rigorous grading in English 1101-1102, and provided release time each semester for two English instructors to work with students in a writing center. The division also implemented a pilot program of on-line courses in Writing and Reading to increase availability of remediation for students failing the Regents' Test. The Humanities Division added the latest edition of the Weaver software to the Writing Lab to aid students in Learning Support Reading and English as well as other review and remedial work. Following these changes, Gordon's Regents' Test pass rate for first time test takers increased from 56.7 percent in spring 2001 to 73.6 percent in spring 2002.

Academic counseling can be provided for students having problems with test anxiety, motivation, procrastination, career choice, and other issues related to academic success. Peer mentoring programs, where peer leaders are upperclassmen that work with groups of 15-20 freshmen, can aid in retention. Alternatively, peer leaders can be used to provide supplemental instruction in gatekeeper courses – courses that are significant barriers to students' progress through the curriculum.

4. Institutions should positively address those populations most vulnerable to drop-out, stop-out, or failure.

High-risk students exist at all institutions. In Georgia 76 percent, and nationally 75 percent, of adults do not have a college degree. Students whose parents who do not have a college degree are more at risk than those whose parents have a degree. Institutions identify high-risk students in two ways, by demographic characteristics and by academic performance. Several institutions have minority advising programs, and four reported TRIO grants that target first generation college students.

At Georgia College & State University, D or F grades in Area A courses just before midterm are used to identify students in difficulty. Students receive a letter from the Academic Assistance Office, signed also

by the Director of the Center for Student Success and the Dean of Liberal Arts & Sciences. This letter goes to the student's home address, and asks the student to contact his/her professor and/or advisor for advice and direction. Some departments/schools identify a special advisor to work with these students and those students whose GPA falls below 2.0. A course on learning strategies that students may take to help them with study skills is offered. Tutoring is also available. In addition, the Office of Student Affairs serves as a clearinghouse for high-risk student indicators for both faculty and Residence Life staff; whenever there is a concern about students whose behaviors suggest a risk factor (e.g., late or absent for classes, signs of alcohol abuse or depression, disruptive behavior in the residence hall) Student Affairs personnel are contacted and they follow up with the student.

A third of the respondents to the Questionnaire⁵ identifies high-risk students using midterm F and sometimes D grades and actively seeks to offer counseling and assistance to those students. Several institutions reported targeted advising programs for students on academic probation.

Institutions should develop a plan for 'high-risk' students to include strategies such as:

- Use placement tests (including a writing sample) to identify 'high-risk' students in English, mathematics, and reading. Recommend UNIV courses for this population of students in addition to whatever Learning Support classes may be indicated. We note that the SAT will include a writing component in the near future.
- Identify students who are not doing well in 1000- and 2000-level courses at mid-point in a semester
- Email all freshmen who go on probation at end of fall semester – offer academic support services to them
- Limit high-risk students to 12 hours or four academic courses each semester

5. An academic advising plan should be developed that includes at least the three prongs:

- **Offer training sessions for faculty and full-time advisors that emphasize advising as more than simply scheduling. Developmental advising has a positive impact on retention.**
- **Provide rewards and recognition for advising. Emphasize advising as teaching and develop a program that recognizes and rewards outstanding achievement in advising.**
- **Conduct continual assessment on the effectiveness of advising.**

Although a direct, causal connection between advising and retention has yet to be established, it appears that academic advising exerts a significant impact on student retention through its positive association with the following variables that are strongly correlated with student persistence: 1) student satisfaction with the college experience, 2) effective educational and career planning and decision making, 3) student utilization of campus support services, 4) student-faculty contact outside the classroom, and 5) student mentoring.⁹

In response to the Questionnaire⁵, several institutions reported mixed impressions regarding their success in academic advising, and seven institutions reported special attention to academic advising as part of their retention programs. In a few cases, advising for students with undeclared majors was carried out by an advising center.

⁹ Joe Cuseo "Academic Advisement and Student Retention: Empirical Connections and Systemic Interventions" <http://www.brevard.edu/fyc/listserv/remarks/cuseoretention.pdf>

Findings from national advising surveys, conducted regularly for the past 25 years by American College Testing, point to four elements as being essential to successful academic advisement programs: 1) Formulation of an advisement program mission statement that clearly articulates the meaning and purpose of academic advising; 2) Provision of sufficient incentives, recognition, and reward for effective academic advising; 3) Established criteria for the recruitment, selection, and deployment of academic advisors; and 4) Substantive orientation, training, and development of academic advisors. In addition, in order to continually improve our advisement services, we need to continually assess the effectiveness of our advising programs.

There are several successful Academic Advising programs that have been recognized by the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) in the past few years as being outstanding programs: IUPUI, University of Alabama-Birmingham, University of Texas at Austin, Fox Valley Technical College and Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College are a few examples.

Academic advising potentially impacts three classes of students – freshmen, transfers, and continuing students. Thus, it can impact retention rates in years one through six. The following strategies should be considered:

- Provide for academic advisement of all freshmen and sophomores every semester
- Provide ongoing identification of “high risk” students within academic disciplines and provide follow up assistance to identified students
- Develop a system so that an academic advisor can pull up a screen for each of his or her advisees that would show a list of potential warning indicators, and if some number of those indicators were flagged, call that student in to discuss the situation and direct her/him to the right places for help. Potential warning indicators include poor mid-term grades, excessive absences from class, etc.

As a follow up to Kevin Carey’s article¹ to uncover why some institutions are much more successful than their peers in graduating students, researchers¹⁰ at the Education Trust interviewed administrators at some of the campuses. One key finding that was common to a number of institutions was the development of a student tracking system. For example, the University of Florida gives a tremendous amount of credit to its Universal Tracking System.

“We require that students immediately declare a major, although students can certainly change it. But we want them to begin thinking about what shape their college career will take. From there the departments are expected to be very clear about what specific courses students should take and when to be considered making minimum progress toward that degree. We want students to know the progress they must make in their major. It’s very proactive.

And because this is tied to the course-taking, we are able to track students and notify them when they are not making progress toward a degree within that major. So the students who aren’t taking the classes when they need to be are called in during the semester by their advisers. An adviser discusses what is going on with the students and reminds students about the importance of making progress toward degree. And if a student seems to be struggling in the courses, the adviser works to get them help and remind them about the many academic support services offered. The second time a student is flagged for not seeming to make minimum progress, the discussion is about the appropriateness of that major. Is this a really good fit for the student?

The other side of the equation is a commitment from the university to make sure the courses students need to make progress are available to them and that they will be able to get a seat in that class. It’s fairly

¹⁰ Jan Somerville and Holly Stepp – private communication June 2004

intuitive (even though it took us a long time to get it) that if we know which classes we expect students to take and when we want them to take them, we can actually match our course offerings to that.”

Similarly, other institutions such as East Carolina University and Elizabeth City State University credit good tracking systems and four-year plans for degree programs instead of degree checklists for their stellar results in student success relative to their peers.

6. Rules/policies that might potentially delay graduation should be examined and modified – both at the institutional and System level.

There might be a number of policies and/or practices at the institutional level that impede the progress of students towards timely graduation. For example, some institutions require completion of Areas A-F of the core curriculum before students can take courses in the major. Further, there is variation in the number of hours of residency required before a degree can be awarded.

Augusta State University's campus retention committee has recently recommended that all academic units be directed to review their curriculum to ensure that all requirements for a degree can be completed in the evening within any six-year period. Such a review includes ensuring multiple opportunities for course completion or substitution so that the failure of a student to take or successfully fulfill the requirements for one class does not significantly delay degree completion.

Many capable students are trying to do entirely too much--they are working full-time and insist on registering for 12-15 and occasionally 18 hours of courses. This leads to both an inordinate number of "W" grades, as well as poor grades in those courses in which they do stay enrolled. Institutions should consider a policy that limits the number of withdrawals permitted. For example, nationally some institutions limit withdrawals to 3 courses for freshmen and one each for sophomores, juniors, and seniors.

Likewise, at the System level there are policies that can impede a student's progress toward graduation. For example, rules that specify how a course may count across the core, as well as other policies, should be examined.

Since many students work and attend classes in the evening, institutions should examine their course scheduling to ensure that all requirements for a degree can be earned in the evening within any six-year period. Institutions should consider offering a limited number of high demand classes that meet one day per week.

Institutions should examine periodically their curricula for navigational barriers such as unnecessary pre-requisites for courses.

7. Quality of academic offerings should be examined to ensure a high level of intellectual work is required of students and there are high expectations for all students.

Tinto⁶ and NSSE³ indicate that high expectations for students and level of intellectual work required of students are important conditions that promote student learning. Also, Tinto⁶ finds that deep learning arises when students engage in knowledge in ways that they perceive as meaningful. Through Centers for Teaching & Learning, institutions could encourage faculty to include more active learning strategies in their courses.

Institutions should engage experienced faculty in teaching its gatekeeper courses. Elementary and secondary schools have been criticized for providing their most vulnerable students, poor and minority

children, with fewer well-qualified teachers¹¹. Higher education institutions follow similar patterns by frequently providing least experienced instructors in introductory courses. Further, institutions should provide extra support for students in gatekeeper courses.

At Georgia Tech, some professors are using active learning strategies to engage students in their learning. For example, cooperative and collaborative learning is about providing opportunities for students to learn in different ways that are often more powerful than simply lecturing. Simple cooperative and collaborative activities can fit into any course.

Institutions should examine their curricula for coherence and clarity of expectations. Learning outcomes for required courses should be clearly connected to learning outcomes for programs.

Writing-intensive courses in the discipline are one of the hallmarks of institutions that are found to have higher than predicted graduation rates and higher than predicted student engagement scores.

George Mason University is one of the institutions listed in *US News & World Report* for its writing-in-the-discipline program. The university ranked high in this category in large part because of its Writing Across the Curriculum Program, which encourages faculty members to include writing assignments in courses of all academic disciplines to better prepare students for life after college.

In addition, another hallmark is courses with practical applications, where a focus is on key ‘abilities’ to communicate, analyze situations, solve problems, and apply values consistently.

8. Quality of campus climate should be examined to ensure a positive learning environment exists for all students.

It is important to provide a supportive environment for a diverse student body that includes different ethnicities, age, geographic origins, sexual orientations, socioeconomic levels, and gender. In their responses to the Questionnaire⁵, six institutions promoted involvement in out-of-class activities in recognition of a need to foster a bonding between student and institution. In residential colleges, such activities were oriented toward opportunities to interact with faculty outside of class. At least one commuter institution has sought to build a more active program of extracurricular activities as a way of integrating students into the institutional community.

Most institutions have a Minority Advisement Program (MAP). This program is voluntary for students and provides each student who selects it with a student mentor (MAP sponsor) who provides valuable advice and a listening ear when needed. The program also offers social programming designed for the entire group. For students in a MAP program, their GPAs, retention and graduation rates are consistently higher than minority students who do not take advantage of the program.

For non-traditional students, one institution provides a combination lounge/study area and an adjacent child care area. The child care area is staffed only on a limited basis, but it provides some assistance to parents who typically have limited means. In addition, an Academic Success Center instructor advises the Non-traditional Student Organization.

NSSE³ emphasizes student-faculty interaction as an important contributor to a strong learning environment. Examples of out-of-class personal contact include question-and-answer sessions, pizza

¹¹ National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, *No Dream Denied: A Pledge to America’s Children, Summary Report* (Washington, D.C.: NCTAF 2003)

parties with majors, lunch with the instructor, faculty fireside chats, chew & chat, etc. Institutions could recognize student-faculty interaction in allocation of faculty development funds.

Indiana University Purdue University at Indianapolis (IUPUI) is one of the institutions listed in *US News & World Report* for excellence in service learning. At IUPUI, the Center for Service and Learning seeks to make service a distinctive part of the educational culture at the institution. Its staff assists faculty in developing, implementing, and improving a service learning class, which engages students in community service experiences as part of an academic course, enhances their learning through reflection activities, develops greater appreciation of the discipline, and promotes civic responsibility.

Another hallmark of institutions that are found to have higher than predicted graduation rates and higher than predicted student engagement scores is an emphasis on social responsibility – community service and service learning.

TRANSFER STUDENTS

While the national and state focus is primarily on six-year graduation rates for full-time, first-time freshman, many USG institutions enroll significant numbers of part-time students and transfer students. Ease of transfer within the system through ease of transferability of the core curriculum is both a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing for students but a curse for some institutions if they are judged by institutional retention rates and graduation rates. The overall system average for six-year graduation rates is seven to eight percentage points above the institutional system average.

In addition to ensuring increased success for freshman students, we need to provide a better environment for transfer students. Each institution should develop procedures to follow students who transfer to them, then analyze data to develop strategies for enhancing transfer student success. Transfer students are not amenable to ‘Freshman Learning Communities’ or other first-year experiences – they have already had the introduction to college and study skills courses. Also, it is more difficult to design learning communities for transfer students who are generally ready to be immersed in their major courses. Institutions should meet with focus groups of transfer students to determine their issues and devise mechanisms for support.

CONTINUING P-16 AGENDA

While poverty, demography, and poor preparation are factors, they do not seem sufficient to explain USG low graduation rates, because there are other states with similar profiles that have higher graduation rates. Nevertheless, poor preparation of students is a constant theme in the responses from the campuses to the Questionnaire³. Under-preparedness is a much bigger issue than remediation of deficiencies in writing, mathematics, and reading. On many campuses in the state, the only students who have a vehicle for assistance are Developmental Studies or other Learning Support students. In addition, students who bring relatively good writing, mathematics, and reading skills to college continue to experience failure. Many students are unprepared for the rigor of coursework in college and lack the study strategies to meet course demands. They lack critical thinking and problem solving skills since most high school curricula focus on memorization over higher level processing skills of analysis, synthesis, and application. Under-preparation for college is significant and might be different from other states; for example, Georgia and South Carolina are always at the bottom of rankings of SAT scores by state. Despite our SAT scores being at the very bottom of the states, our students graduate high school with high grades, many of them with the 3.00 averages needed for HOPE scholarships. Thus, our secondary schools appear to be setting low expectations for students, and students earn high grades despite low levels of achievement and low standardized test scores.

The new Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) being developed by the State Department of Education that will probably be adopted in 2004 by the Board of Education should go a long way to narrowing the gap in expectations between high school and college. Much better alignment of curricula in high school and college together with increased emphasis on skills and attitudes for learning in high school could alleviate much of the under-preparation apparent in current students. Further, there should be better alignment among high school graduation tests, college entrance examinations, and college placement examinations.

Institutions should develop stronger relationships with feeder high schools to help narrow the gap in expectations between high school and college. Institutions should request and make more effective use of the High School Feedback report that is sent annually by USO to high schools and school districts. In particular, institutions should partner with P-12 schools in clearly conveying academic skills needed for first-year college-level work, without remediation and in collaborating with schools to prepare students for college success.

RUBRICS FOR IMPROVEMENT OF GRADUATION RATES

We recommend that the institutions use the following rubrics to conduct periodically a self-diagnosis to help themselves improve retention rates:

I Principles:

I 1 Retention and increased graduation rates will be the shared responsibility of all facets of the institution.

0 = Insufficient evidence provided to make a judgment

1 = Retention and graduation efforts supported by institutional leaders

2 = Retention and graduation efforts supported by institutional leaders and administrative support staff

3 = Retention and graduation efforts supported by institutional leaders, administrative support staff, and faculty leaders

4 = Retention and graduation efforts supported campus-wide through Academic Affairs faculty and staff interacting with students both in the classroom and outside to promote deeper levels of learning, student services staff providing enriching cultural, social and educational experiences, Library faculty and staff helping connect students with local and global information resources, and facilities/physical plant staffs helping create and maintain a clean, safe and secure environment that can encourage student achievement

I 2 Institutions must demonstrate their intent to improve overall retention and graduation rates by regularly and systematically collecting, reviewing and analyzing reliable data - focus should be on disaggregated data with intent to narrow the gaps among ethnicity and sex groups. First-year through third- or sixth-year retention rates should be monitored and assessed.

0 = Insufficient evidence provided to make a judgment

1 = Retention and graduation data analyzed at least annually, but not disaggregated

2 = Retention and graduation data analyzed at least annually, disaggregated for first-year through third- or sixth-year retention rates, and at least one strategy analyzed to narrow gaps

3 = Retention and graduation data analyzed at least annually, disaggregated for first-year through third- or sixth-year retention rates, and some strategies analyzed to narrow gaps

4 = Retention and graduation data analyzed at least annually, disaggregated for first-year through third- or sixth-year retention rates, and multiple strategies analyzed to narrow gaps

I 3 A wide variety of academic programs and support services and proactive interventions should be provided - one size does not fit all students or all campuses.

0 = Insufficient evidence provided to make a judgment

1 = Few academic programs and support services are provided and are mainly targeted to freshman students

2 = A number of academic programs and support services are provided for freshmen and transfer students

3 = A number of academic programs and support services and proactive interventions are provided and assessed for effectiveness for freshmen and transfer students

4 = A wide variety of academic programs and support services and proactive interventions are provided and assessed for effectiveness for freshmen and transfer students

I 4 Institutions should positively address those populations most vulnerable to drop-out, stop-out, or failure.

0 = Insufficient evidence provided to make a judgment

1 = Few academic programs and support services are provided and are mainly targeted to freshman 'high-risk' students

2 = A number of academic programs and support services are provided for 'high-risk' students

3 = A number of academic programs and support services and proactive interventions are provided and assessed for effectiveness for 'high-risk' students

4 = A wide variety of academic programs and support services and proactive interventions are provided and assessed for effectiveness for 'high-risk' students

I 5 An academic advising plan should be developed that includes at least the three prongs:

-Offer training sessions for faculty and full-time advisors that emphasize advising as more than simply scheduling. Developmental advising has a positive impact on retention.

-Provide rewards and recognition for advising. Emphasize advising as teaching and develop a program that recognizes and rewards outstanding achievement in advising.

-Conduct continual assessment on the effectiveness of advising.

0 = Insufficient evidence provided to make a judgment

1 = An academic advising plan is under development

2 = An academic advising plan has been developed and is regularly assessed for effectiveness

3 = An academic advising plan has been developed that includes training sessions for faculty on academic advising and is regularly assessed for effectiveness

4 = A comprehensive academic advising plan has been developed and is regularly assessed for effectiveness

I 6 Rules/policies that might potentially delay graduation should be examined and modified – both at the institutional and System level.

0 = Insufficient evidence provided to make a judgment

2 = A few rules/policies that might potentially delay graduation have been examined and appropriate modifications made

4 = A comprehensive examination of rules/policies that might potentially delay graduation has been made and appropriate modifications enacted

I 7 Quality of academic offerings should be examined to ensure a high level of intellectual work is required of students and there are high expectations for all students.

0 = Insufficient evidence provided to make a judgment

1 = Some academic programs are examined for level of intellectual work and appropriate modifications applied

2 = Many academic programs are examined for level of intellectual work and appropriate modifications applied

3 = Most academic programs are examined for level of intellectual work and appropriate modifications applied

4 = All academic programs are examined for level of intellectual work and appropriate modifications applied

I 8 Quality of campus climate should be examined to ensure a positive learning environment exists for all students.

0 = Insufficient evidence provided to make a judgment

1 = Social campus climate examination is under development

2 = A limited plan to ensure quality of social campus climate for some groups of students has been developed and implementation is underway

3 = A plan to ensure quality of social campus climate for all groups of students has been developed and implementation is underway

4 = A plan to ensure quality of social campus climate has been developed and is regularly assessed for effectiveness for all students

II Results:

We recommend that the System use the following rubrics to monitor each institution's progress towards improved retention and graduation rates:

II A. More freshman students succeed to second year

0 = Insufficient evidence provided to make a judgment

1 = Retention rates to second year for first-time full-time freshman cohort are increasing each year

2 = Retention rates to second year for first-time full-time freshman cohort are increasing by more than 2 percentage points each year for all disaggregated groups

3 = At least 80% first-time full-time freshman cohort are retained in second year and retention rates are increasing each year for all disaggregated groups

4 = At least 90% first-time full-time freshman cohort are retained in second year and retention rates are increasing each year for all disaggregated groups

II B. More freshman students succeed to third and subsequent years

0 = Insufficient evidence provided to make a judgment

1 = Retention rates to third and subsequent years for first-time full-time freshman cohort are increasing each year for years

2 = Retention rates to third and subsequent years for first-time full-time freshman cohort are increasing by more than 2 percentage points each year for all disaggregated groups

3 = At least 70% first-time full-time freshman cohort are retained in third year and retention rates are increasing each year for all disaggregated groups

4 = At least 80% first-time full-time freshman cohort are retained in third year and retention rates are increasing each year for all disaggregated groups

II C. More transfer students succeed to second and subsequent years

0 = Insufficient evidence provided to make a judgment

1 = Retention rates to second and subsequent years for transfer cohorts are increasing each year for years

2 = Retention rates to second and subsequent years for transfer cohorts are increasing by more than 2 percentage points each year for all disaggregated groups

3 = At least 70% of transfer cohorts are retained to second year and retention rates are increasing each year for all disaggregated groups

4 = At least 80% of transfer cohorts are retained to second year and retention rates are increasing each year for all disaggregated groups

APPENDIX I**Rubrics Primer**

A rubric¹² is a set of scoring guidelines for evaluating an activity – in this case a principle or progress towards a goal. Rubrics answer the questions: By what criteria should performance be judged? Where should we look and what should we look for to judge performance success? What does the range in the quality of performance look like? How should different levels of quality be described and distinguished from one another?

A rubric is a scoring tool that lists the criteria for an activity. Criteria are generally characteristics or indicators of performance relative to the desired outcome.

A rubric is a scoring guide that differentiates, on an articulated scale, among a group of sample behaviors or evidences that are responding to the same prompt. A good rubric also describes levels of quality for each of the criteria, usually on a point scale.

When institutions use rubrics regularly to judge their own work, they begin to accept more responsibility for the end product.

¹² The word “rubric” derives from the Latin word for “red”. It was once used to signify the highlights of a legal decision as well as directions for conducting religious services, found in the margins of liturgical books – both written in red.

APPENDIX II

**Questionnaire Prepared by the USG Graduation Rates Task Force
March 5, 2004****Questions to Campuses:**

1. What types of major studies of retention and graduation have you done in the last five years? What are the results/lessons learned from studies/changes in retention efforts that you have conducted? Please share the results with the task force.
2. What is your perception of the reasons that your graduation rates are not higher? Are there empirical data to support your perception?
3. What interventions/support do you provide to students that you consider are effective in increasing retention rates?
4. Name at least one similar institution to yours from outside USG that has significantly better retention and graduation rates than your institution – similar refers to characteristics of undergraduate students, e.g. selectivity of institution; similar percentages of residential, full-time students; similar location [urban, rural, suburban]; small/large numbers of transfer students; and similar mix of traditional/non-traditional undergraduate students.
5. Name at least one institution similar to yours from within USG that you consider to be a comparator for retention and graduation rates.
6. Have you developed "early warning signs" to identify students who may be or who prove to be at risk? If so, describe them and any interventions you make that are effective.
7. Nationally, on average, of the students that leave the college of initial enrollment, almost half leave during the second year and beyond. With the exception of UGA and Ga. Tech, most institutions have significantly lower retention rates beyond the first year than their national counterparts. What factors play a role in departure of those students who have successfully weathered the trials of the first-year college experience at your institution?
8. Do you interview or survey non-returning students? If so, do you find the survey useful? What are the major reasons students leave?
9. Academic issues and problems (how many and why students do not succeed academically). Does Learning Support (LS) go far enough? If the goal of LS is to prepare students for success in English, math, and limited other Core courses, what then? Is that enough? Is under-preparation for college significant enough (and different enough from other states) that students cannot overcome it? Do you have proactive programs and intervention strategies for working with probation students and those who return after a first dismissal? If so, describe them.
10. Four-year institutions: Many students transfer – how prepared are they? How successful are they after they transfer?
Two-year institutions: Few students who are prepared for transfer actually do transfer – why?
11. Advisement: What is the quality, effectiveness, and student perception of advising on your campus? How do you know? Is timing of declaration of major a factor in retention?

12. Financial issues: Are students able to fund a degree? What are the patterns for your students on HOPE scholarship? If they lose their scholarships, do they drop out? Are they taking fewer hours to protect their scholarships?
13. Do you have a "freshman experience" program? If so, do you evaluate its effectiveness in improving student retention and graduation? If yes, please describe.
14. Do you regularly assess campus climate? If so, please describe.