

**MEMORANDUM**

To: Members of the Comprehensive Retention and Completion Task Force

(the complete list of the individuals on the task force follows the text of this memo); co-chairs: Dr. Martha Bradley-Evans and Mary Parker

Date: October 22, 2013

From: Dr. Ruth Watkins

Subject: **A Comprehensive Retention and Graduation Rate Enhancement Plan**

One of the most vital areas of focus for the campus is the retention and graduation rates of our baccalaureate degree-seeking students. In recent years, many effective efforts have been made to bring talented students to the U and to promote the success of our students through degree completion. It is the intent of this working group to develop a comprehensive, data-driven plan to help us make even greater progress in this critical area. This task force is an initiative of the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs, and will include faculty leaders from units serving undergraduates, professionals whose work bridges all aspects of the undergraduate experience, and students; the members of the task force will develop a comprehensive plan for the enhancement of our first- and second-year retention rates and our six-year graduation rates. This work will be completed throughout the academic year 2013-2014, and a preliminary findings report will be due at the end of December.

Even if we only consider the past three years, there are major demographic shifts in whom we serve. We know from research about national trends that enrollment growth will slow, demographic shifts will continue to occur, changing models will emerge for funding universities, retention and completion pressures will intensify, and we will need to innovate, create and manage new learning modalities.[[1]](#footnote-1)

A strategic plan for Comprehensive Retention and Graduation Rate Enhancement must consider our mission and core commitments, include strategic action items, and plans for implementation, evaluation and assessment.[[2]](#footnote-2) The planning process will help us set goals, align priorities with resources, work toward implementation and assessment in a coordinated way between departments and colleges, between Student Affairs and Academic Affairs, and through Undergraduate Studies and the Honors College.

The report should include the following issues:

I. Demographic Profile

* Data set: demographic profile of the students we recruit, admit, enroll, retain, graduate.
* Whom do we serve?
  + Complete demographic profile of our students
  + What trends have we seen over the past five years?
* When are we most vulnerable to losing undergraduates?
  + Year-by-year analysis.
* How do retention and graduation patterns vary by program of study?
  + How do retention and graduation patterns vary by gender? Race and ethnicity? Residency status? Entering ACT/GPA, course enrollment patterns? First generation status? Living on campus during first year?
* What retention and graduation rate data should be readily available to staff and faculty who work to enhance retention and graduation rates, including department chairs, directors, and deans?
  + How do we recommend that we make relevant data readily accessible, if it is not already available?
  + Does each department or college have an individual who is responsible for retention and graduation rates or for student success?
  + What data should be available to academic advisors who are the consistent contact in a department once a student declares a major? What can departmental advisors tell the institution about departmental barriers for students?
* How do special trends like marriage and full-time employment impact student retention and completion rates?
  + How many of our students have double majors? Triple majors? Multiple minors? How do these patterns impact progression through the system? Four-year plans?
  + How do students learn about planning their academic program as well as reevaluating it?
* What patterns do we observe in transfer student admissions, enrollment, retention and completion?
  + How do transfer students enter and move through our systems?
    - What special advising issues do they face? Student support issues?
    - How accurate are the U of U Getting Ready Guides so that students do not lose time in the transfer?

II. Retention Strategy: Holistic Admissions Process

* How does a holistic admissions process contribute to our mission, vision, and goals as an institution?
  + How does a holistic admissions process impact our retention and graduation rate goals?
  + How does our admissions process communicate the University of Utah’s purpose, identity, mission, brand, and distinctiveness?
    - How is the University of Utah promoted through marketing, recruitment, web presence? How does this impact retention and graduation rates?
  + How is our mission reflected in our programs?
  + How are our admissions, financial aid, and student-support systems based on data and integration?
    - Are our tuition, fees, discounts, and incentives sufficient to be competitive in the region? With other public universities?
    - Do our enrollment goals reflect our University of Utah Strategic Vision in terms of diversity, potential for leadership, and engagement in the community?
  + How much do we rely on our recruitment and admissions policy as our most effective retention strategy?
  + How are transfer students impacted by our admissions policies? Procedures? Support systems?
    - How are admissions strategies for transfer students communicated to academic advisors and other campus members who engage prospective students before they transfer?

III. Retention Strategies: Academic Programming

* What information is available about best practices in programs designed to enhance retention?
  + Data set: most effective retention strategies at public research universities.
    - Most effective retention strategies at the University of Utah
  + There are several campus programs designed to support student retention and academic success, at a general level and in specific academic areas. What evidence do we have of the effectiveness and impact of these programs? What do we do best?
    - Learning communities like LEAP, ACCESS, Diversity Scholars, Honors Living and Learning communities, and the Honors First- Year Experience have data which indicates that the cohort model has a high impact on retention and graduation rates. Because Block U is in its first year, we have no data yet, but it is based on the LEAP learning community model with additional student support features.
    - New cohort programs should address the moments when students and the institution are most vulnerable—at the end of the sophomore year, transferring students, students within a year of completing who drop out, for example.
    - Mandatory academic advising exists for new transfer, first-year and second-year students. Since academic advising is decentralized, is the advising process consistent for impact on retention and time to graduation? How do students and advisors describe the advising process? Are there opportunities through advising that the U of U has not engaged with to impact student success?
    - What academic programs serve transfer students? What are examples of best practices? What enrollment or retention patterns do we need to address with new academic programs?
    - How are we using technology to positively impact retention and time to graduation for student services? Are we providing mid-term grades to students and direction/resources on how to continue their success, enhance their current academic experience, or improve their experience?

1. What programs (academic, co-curricular, services, support) are designed to support student success—either specifically focused on retention, on enhancement, on engagement, on enrichment—or as one of many other qualitative elements?
   * What data shows us what is working and what is not?
   * Where do we have holes in our approach to supporting student success?
   * What does online education contribute to the University of Utah’s goals of providing a transformative undergraduate education?
     + What does data tell us about success rates in hybrid, online, or distance courses?
     + How do both TLT and CTLE prepare faculty to bring new technologies into their classrooms?
       - What data shows the effectiveness of the teaching done in new technological environments?
   * What qualitative information do we have on why students do not complete their degrees?
     + Conduct surveys at key moments in the undergraduate progression through four years that help us understand better the obstacles students face, what they hope to achieve or their aspirations, and the factors we can change to set them up for success.
   * Is there evidence that not having ready access to critical courses derails students from their degree plans?
   * Is there evidence that not enforcing pre-requisites and co-requisites across the curriculum results in derailing students from their degree plans?
   * What is the effect of unlimited repeats and withdrawals from courses having on degree completion?
   * If so, what are the bottleneck courses and/or areas? Courses that are more frequently repeated?
   * From these data about course patterns, is it possible to identify best practices in promoting retention and/or to identify gaps in our portfolio?
   * Is there a need for additional data that are not readily available?

* What are the top ten enrollment courses? What are the courses most likely to be repeated two or three times?
  + Data set: enrollment patterns in top ten courses, bottleneck courses, repeat courses.
  + What strategies would ensure that gateway courses are available to students so they can move through their programs of study in a timely manner?
  + Are courses offered at times/dates convenient or appropriate for students? Are there time overlaps? Do departments offer many courses in certain blocks which hinder students taking multiple courses in a semester?
  + What enhancement strategies can ensure that large enrollment classes include class time for small group, interactive learning, and the use of technology to cover basic course material prior to class sessions (flipped classrooms or hybrid pedagogies), and developing online courses to remove bottlenecks in the curriculum?
* What policies or procedures serve as obstacles to student success?
  + What strategies can we use to change this?
  + Which policies are sanctioned through the Regulations Library (PPM), sanctioned based on an entity outside of the University, or sanctioned by a sub-organization of the University?
* How can we better utilize student employment as a retention and completion strategy?
* How can we strengthen our approach to sponsored student programs?
  + How do we communicate with students about sponsored student programs so they understand how to engage and the possible impact?
  + What elements of sponsored programs seem to have the most impact(e.g., academic advising, set curriculum, student tables, etc.)?
* How can we enhance services for students who are academically at risk and find themselves dealing with a probationary status?

IV. Retention Strategy: Strategic Use of Financial Aid

* Data set: data about financial need, existing patterns of awarding scholarships, scholarship funds in the colleges and located centrally.
* What information do we have about financial factors that play a role in students not completing their degrees?
  + When are moments that some financial aid will have an optimal impact?
  + How can we more strategically use our scholarship dollars to support retention and graduation rates?

**IV.** Comprehensive Retention and Graduation Rate Enhancement Plan

* Based on what we discover in our analyses and discussions, what are our top ten recommendations for actions to enhance retention and graduation rates?
  + Link these recommendations to qualitative and quantitative data that we gather.
  + Consider recommendations for actions that include all facets of university life, from housing to co-curricular elements to academic advising, majors and programs, and course availability and quality.
  + Link these recommendations to the key elements of the New U Student Experience design.
    - What do students want? Is what we offer relevant to their goals and wants?
    - How do we measure up in relation to our strongest competition for the students who choose to come here or do not choose to come?
  + We may consider clustering our recommendations for action into those that should and can be addressed immediately (this year), those that can be addressed in the mid-range (next two years), and those that will require a longer range for full design and implementation (three years). Might it be appropriate to add a cost metric to this?

**Key Phases of Comprehensive Retention and Graduation Rate Enhancement Planning**

1. **Preparation** **and Data Analysis**
   1. Data collection
   2. Key performance indicators—dashboard for President Pershing
   3. Assessment of what we have and where we need to build
2. **Strategies**
   1. Strategic development
   2. Tactics identified
   3. Strategies and tactics prioritized
      * 1. What can be done this year, next year, in three years?
3. **Enrollment** **Goals**
   1. Enrollment projects
   2. Goal-setting
   3. Finalize written plan for holistic admissions
4. **Implementation**
   1. Implementation of plan
   2. Monitoring and evaluation
   3. Plan modification[[3]](#footnote-3)

Proposed process

1. Initial meeting: the committee receives the charge

* The committee divides into subcommittees that work on each of the separate items and have three basic tasks: Identify and secure principal data sets that will illuminate where we are, where we are vulnerable, where we are weak.
* Development of strategies linked to action and best practices or most effective strategies to accomplish our goals.
* Develop a plan to assess the effectiveness of the strategy
* Identification of 1st year, 2nd year, and 3rd year goals

2. The sub-committees meet monthly; the larger group meets every other month to hear reports on the progress of the whole and make adjustments.

3. Prepare a mid-year summary of activities to date.

4. Submit the plan by August 2014

**Members of the Comprehensive Retention and Completion Task Force:**

Data Team: Stacy Ackerlind, Mike Martineau, and Mark St. Andre.

Admissions: Kevin Perry (chair), Enrique Aleman, Mark Parker, Suzanne Wayment, Vicky Morgan, Mike Martineau, and Jennifer Ziarko.

Student Success: Sharon Aiken-Wisniewski (chair), Taunya Dressler, Kim Hall, Amy Bergerson, Sarah LeMire, Lori McDonald, John Nilsson, Patricia Rohrer, Stacy Ackerlind, and Alison Vasquez.

Strategic Use of Financial Aid: Lori McDonald (chair), Stacy Ackerlind, Andrea Brown, John Curl, and Mark St. Andre.

Academic Programming: Mark Parker (chair), Carolyn Bliss, Andrea Brunelle, Ruth Gerritsen-McKane, Stephen Koester, Tricia Sugiyama, Mark St. Andre, and Patrick Tresco.

Top Ten Enrollment: Peter Trapa (chair), Charles Atwood, Charles Jui, Maureen Mathison, Anthony Oyler, Diane Pataki, John Rainier, Mike Martineau, and David Strayer.

Online/Hybrid: Cory Stokes (chair), Rick Forster, Pamela Hardin, Patrick Tripeny,

Jennifer Van Cott, Mark St. Andre, and Rachel Wootton.

1. Noel Levitz, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Noel Levitz, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Phase structure in Noel Levitz, 2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)