

WAYNE STATE
UNIVERSITY

Recommendations
by the
President's Committee
on
Undergraduate Retention

Retention
Committee
Report
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Preamble

The most fundamental mission of any university is to provide quality education consistent with national standards and to graduate students in a timely manner. WSU, however, has an additional commitment: as a “university of opportunity,” we have pledged to admit more at-risk students than our peer institutions and to provide the programs and incentives needed to help them succeed. The WSU Strategic Plan for 2006-2011 lists “excellence in teaching,” including enhancement of retention and graduation rates, as the university’s number one goal. While faculty and staff are already doing a great deal to help us achieve this goal, statistics show that we need to do more.

Retention and graduate rates are far too low for a university of our stature. WSU’s 6-year graduation rate (32%) is lower than other urban universities (41%) and universities with a similar student demographic and selection criteria nation-wide (46%). WSU is particularly low in retention and graduation of African-American students.

In addition to its ethical responsibility to meet the needs of students and their families, WSU is accountable to the State of Michigan and its citizens. As Michigan faces an economic recession and government funding for higher education declines, state universities must demonstrate their ability to graduate more students who will contribute to the revitalization of the region and the state. In short, funding depends on accountability, and WSU must increase its accountability to compete successfully for limited resources.

At President Reid’s request, a group of your faculty peers formed a task force to address these issues. Our charge was to develop recommendations to increase student retention and graduation rates. We are 31 volunteer faculty members dedicated to improving the retention of undergraduates at WSU. We have been working for the past year, conducting focus groups across campus, researching literature and best practices, and examining retention data at WSU. We recently circulated our recommendations in a University-wide survey of faculty. The remarkable response rate (406 respondents) indicates strong support for the recommendations in our final report.

The committee’s recommendations aim to improve retention for all undergraduates and at-risk students in particular. The recommendations address issues such as systemic barriers affecting retention, effective interventions, and University standards. Some of these can be easily addressed through enforcement of existing policies; others will require major investments of time and resources, as well as shifts in the academic culture at WSU. Our overriding conclusion is that student success is the responsibility of every person at WSU, from the President to the administrators, faculty, staff, and students.

We encourage you to think about how these recommendations relate to issues in your academic unit, and we welcome faculty volunteers who would like to join us in future endeavors to improve student success at WSU.

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Recommendation 1.

Make student retention a priority in the institutional and academic culture at WSU.

- Create a highly visible, central system in which retention activities are tracked, coordinated, and disseminated across academic and student affairs.
- Share knowledge from successful but fractionated efforts to improve retention across the campus.

The WSU administration is increasingly concerned about retention of undergraduates. However, most faculty, staff and students are not generally aware of the retention problem at WSU, nor are they aware of research on how to retain students. We have a number of special programs and services on campus, yet most faculty and students are unaware of them. Information needs to be coordinated and shared through a central location, and our retention efforts must be prominent and sustained. Resources to enhance retention should be easy to find for faculty and students.

The highest-performing institutions with regard to retention are characterized by having key administrators who communicate a specific vision and centralized commitment to improving retention (ACT, inc., 2004; Pell Institute, 2007a). Prominence of the issue throughout the university culture is essential. Best practices among successful universities typically include a specific location, a central retention officer, and an ongoing committee prominently labeled with "student retention" that coordinate retention-related activities across programs and personnel in order to facilitate collaboration (ACT, inc., 2004; Pell Institute, 2007a; Schmidt, 2008). Although identifying a key individual as responsible for retention is an essential step (ACT, inc., 2004), institutions cannot expect that individual to manage the retention effort alone. A standing committee that includes faculty, staff and administrative representatives reinforces the message that retention is a campus-wide responsibility, helps to track and coordinate shared knowledge among otherwise fractionated efforts across the campus, and serves in an advisory capacity for the allocation of resources (Gardner, Upcraft & Barefoot, 2005; ACT, inc., 2004). This campus-wide planning team should include a high-ranking administrator to ensure that the work and the priorities can effectively reach senior policy makers, as well as active involvement from institutional research; faculty involvement is essential to ensure broad-based interest and effective outreach to peers who teach undergraduates (ACT, inc., 2004; Gardner et al., 2005).

We believe that few of the remaining recommendations can be effective in improving retention until this issue regarding a clear, long-standing, and prominent commitment to retention is addressed.

Recommendation 2.

Facilitate the use of student retention data for self-assessment by units/departments.

- Provide training, technical support, and incentives for departments to examine their own student retention data.
- Each department should have its own retention/assessment coordinators, so that efforts reflect the priorities and academic cultures of the individual units.
- Each department should determine its own criteria for assessment of student retention outcomes.

According to Tinto (2008a), “institutional assessment is...a necessary beginning step in the formulation of an effective retention program.” Among the best practices endorsed by the Pell Institute (2007a) is that universities should “increase the use of disaggregated data in retention decision-making and program evaluation” (p. 53). Similarly, a main recommendation by ACT (2004) based on a survey of more than 1000 colleges is that colleges “conduct a systematic analysis of the characteristics of your students” (p. 19) to identify factors that differentiate students who are and are not retained. Frequent, systematic evaluation of student outcomes should take place at both the institutional and unit levels.

Powerful tools for evaluating and tracking retention outcomes are now available at WSU via the Student Tracking Advising and Retention System (STARS); however, few academic departments that serve undergraduates use these tools. In the past, WSU has identified assessment coordinators in each department, responsible for coordinating the definition and tracking of student outcome data for their unit. A return to this practice will facilitate a balance of accountability and sensitivity to differences across academic cultures within the university. Increased use of available retention data would allow departments to:

- make informed choices that are appropriate and acceptable to the academic culture of the unit;
- focus added resources on courses that draw a high proportion of at-risk students, such as supplemental instruction, early warning systems, and special learning modules;
- track retention outcomes among their students; and
- enhance collaboration with special programs on campus.

Recommendation 3.

Provide support and incentives to increase faculty involvement with undergraduates.

- Faculty engagement in retention efforts is weak because resources and rewards for improving undergraduate success are weak. Faculty would become involved in mentoring or advising programs if provided with sufficient resources and rewards to do so.
- Revise the University merit criteria to reward faculty investment in student retention.
- Offer teaching reductions and resources to faculty for mentoring learning communities, advising, and developing special programs to enhance retention.
- Require all faculty (full-time and part-time) to keep regular office hours.
- Encourage greater interactions between faculty and students outside of the classroom.

Universities often struggle with the balance of teaching and research missions. Interacting with faculty is among the most powerful ways to enhance students' academic and social integration (Pell Institute, 2007ab; Tinto, 2008a; Gardner et al., 2005), and it characterizes the institutions that are highest-performing with regard to retention (Pell Institute, 2007a; Tinto, 2008). According to Gardner et al. (2005), "faculty will have more influence on first-year student success than anyone else, or any particular program or service, so they must be encouraged to become actively engaged in first-year student success" (p. 518). Many higher-performing institutions specifically recruit and hire faculty who support the teaching mission of the institution. Research indicates that faculty reward systems for successful teaching and mentoring increase the retention of students (Pell Institute, 2007a; Gardner et al., 2005). The survey of WSU faculty strongly endorsed the concept that faculty engagement in retention efforts is weak because resources and rewards for improving undergraduate success are weak. Moreover, the survey indicated that faculty would become involved in mentoring or advising programs if provided with sufficient resources and rewards to do so. Our committee advocates a shift in our institutional culture toward objective, outcomes-driven reward for excellence in teaching and mentoring.

WSU should establish formal resources to create and maintain faculty mentoring programs. Faculty who volunteer to mentor at-risk students should be provided with ongoing opportunities for training, resources, and other support. For example, campus conferences could help inform faculty of resources that do not seem to be communicated effectively to students (e.g., special programs, Academic Success Center, Writing Center, Educational Accessibility Services) as well as best practices in retention, and reassert the institutional commitment to our teaching mission. Successful pilot programs, such as providing course reductions for faculty advising, have been implemented on our campus by individual departments. The costs for these kinds of programs should be covered at the University level, because we cannot expect Colleges and Departments to wholeheartedly support such endeavors if they must bear the expense.

Lastly, 49.1% of the faculty agreed or strongly agreed with the suggestion to form grant-writing committees among faculty to fund or enhance funding for new programs to improve retention. Although this level of endorsement does not constitute a majority, we believe it suggests that we have a substantial number of faculty who might volunteer for such efforts.

Recommendation 4.

Develop and enhance support programs to improve retention specifically for at-risk and working students.

- Create work-study learning communities to motivate students to stay in school by working to learn and learning to work in their areas of interest.
- Monitor access to after-work hours resources to ensure that services are available for working students.
- Improve marketing of resources that support student success to faculty and students, and enhance focus on student success versus failure.

WSU does particularly poorly with retention of at-risk students, in terms of both absolute criteria and relative to comparable institutions. Although we are concerned with the success of all students at WSU, we must make special efforts to ensure that those who are at high risk of failure and dropping out are especially accommodated in our retention practices.

Research shows that at-risk populations, such as low-income and first-generation college students, are as likely as other students to benefit from retention efforts provided for the general student population (Pell Institute, 2004, 2007b); however, they are often limited in the extent to which they can participate in retention resources available to them due to (a) unawareness of services available, (b) services not offered at times that are convenient for them, and (c) discomfort with possible stigmatization (Pell Institute, 2007b). Students need specific guidance regarding reasonable expectations for balancing work hours, debt burden, and course load. "Providing students with meaningful on-campus work in their field of study can help them meet their financial and academic goals" (Pell Institute, 2007b, p. 8).

Work-study positions are a highly effective method of increasing persistence, because they help to address students' financial need and enhance students' involvement and connectedness to campus events and people (Somers, 1995).

Recommendation 5.

Enhance the time and structure of orientation programs for all new students.

- Extend orientation and college success activities throughout the first year of study at WSU.
- Increase the number of new-student success courses, interest groups, and learning communities in which student participation is mandatory or high.
- Orientation programs should include explicit expectations for attendance and classroom decorum; policies for dropping courses; reasonable work-to-course-load ratios; academic integrity; explanations of prerequisites, course rotations, course schedule planning, and time management.
- Offer second-year programs to facilitate the transition to responsible independence in college life.
- Enhance marketing and recruiting for special services (i.e., academic success resources).
- Make all faculty aware of special retention services for students.
- Involve faculty in the design and implementation of first-year success programs.

According to Levitz, Noel, and Richter (1999), the most effective way to improve graduation rates is to reduce the attrition rate from the first to the second year. The decrease in retention rate from the first to the second year at WSU is substantial (e.g., an additional ~14%), and it exceeds that of other Michigan Public Universities (~8%). The first-year experience is critical to establishing academic and social skills required to persist in college, and extended orientation programs provide the most substantial return retention (Tinto, 2008b). To date, our freshmen and transfer-student orientation activities have not extended beyond a one-day, pre-registration event.

Involving faculty in the design and implementation of first-year experience programs is critical. Faculty often become concerned that "retention is code for lowering standards, coddling students" (Gardner, 2005, p. 8). The "business model" frequently associated with retention programs by administrators and staff also is aversive to faculty, because it evokes inaccurate and distasteful images of students as customers and teachers as salespersons, which degrades the integrity of the academic setting (Gardner, 2005). According to Barefoot and colleagues (2005), first-year programs to improve retention must include the support of a "meaningful number of faculty" or these programs will "inevitably suffer a kind of second-class citizenship in the academy" (p. 389). Faculty endorsement and involvement in retention programs are likely to rise substantially if they observe that their concerns and expertise are well considered.

Acclimating to the college environment is especially important to first-generation college students, who often lack knowledge about best practices for academic success, reasonable work-to-course load ratios, and balancing academic and social life (Pell Institute, 2004, 2007b). Investing in the development of strong first-year seminars, especially when linked to learning communities or integrated course blocks, may yield substantial return.

Recommendation 6.

Enhance implementation and enforcement of academic preparedness assessment and competency requirements.

- Require that all students complete placement exams for math and English before registering for courses.
- Enhance diagnostic evaluations for students who test into remedial courses (i.e., Math or English). Provide comprehensive evaluations and proactive planning to ensure that students have adequate preparation and support to pass remedial-level courses.
- Allocate resources for administration and staff to conduct research on math and English readiness skills among entering new students.
- Require all students to complete basic competencies in the freshman and sophomore years, unless specific program requirements dictate otherwise.
- Consistently enforce the 60-credit rule on declaring a major.

Early identification of academic needs and advising appropriate to those needs are essential to improve retention (Pell Institute, 2007b). Currently, WSU students may attend orientation and register for courses without having completed placement exams in math and English, and they may delay the placement exams until they plan to register for math or English. Thus, many students proceed through advanced courses in the degree program without having mastered basic competencies. This policy (or lack thereof) is a high-probability scenario for failure.

Early completion of competency requirements will help to ensure that students are prepared for advanced-level courses, and it will eliminate the potential for students to be stalled at the end of the degree program, unable to complete the basic competency requirements. Implementing a mandated placement-testing program has been listed among the top five practices having the greatest impact on student retention (ACT, 2004).

Recommendation 7.

Establish earlier cutoff dates for drop and add and enforce the Early Academic Assessment (EAA) policy.

- Require that students register by the end of the first week of classes; exceptions should be approved by the instructor.
- Establish an earlier final date for withdrawal (currently, it is the last day of classes).
- Enforce the existing policy of mandatory EAA reports in all 1000- and 2000-level courses.
- Provide adequate support for faculty responsible for EAA reporting (i.e., training and/or resources).

Earlier cutoff dates for dropping and adding courses will encourage students to make realistic and meaningful choices about their courses. Late course additions place students at a marked disadvantage at the outset of the course. Because late course additions sometimes reflect poor academic planning skills, students who add courses at the deadline are often least able to compensate for this disadvantage. Additionally, late additions can be disruptive to the learning environment for other students. Allowing course withdrawals to the last day of classes sends the wrong messages: that taking a class is a trial-and-error experience; that if things don't go well, one can always drop; and that there are no negative consequences for dropping a class after a full semester. It may also encourage wishful or "magical" thinking that a miraculous turn-around in one's grade could happen at the end of the semester, as well as misuse of the financial aid system.

Follow-up data at WSU indicate that EAA makes significant differences in student success (e.g., 82% of students given EAA report that they sought help, and those students who sought help earned higher grades than those who did not). A central problem is that too few instructors submit EAA reports, although it is theoretically mandatory to do so in 1000- and 2000-level courses. At the same time, WSU should carefully examine barriers to instructors' adherence to the policy; efforts should be made to identify adequate support for instructors responsible for EAA reporting (i.e., training and/or resources needed to submit reports in a timely manner). Opportunities to provide retention related comments on individual students beyond checking boxes for predetermined questions ought to be available to the instructor if desired.

Instructors should be encouraged to make use of the EAA system prior to the mandatory reporting deadline, if they have concerns about a student's performance (e.g., absences from class, low or failing performances on quizzes administered early in the course). Aside from the formal reporting process, instructors should be frequently reminded that early action with students who show signs of being at risk is crucial to student retention.

The concept of early academic assessment as a means to improve student success also should be supported in other ways at WSU. Instructors, especially those who teach entry-level courses, also should be informed about best practices regarding the effects of assessment in enhancing successful mastery of course requirements. For example, research shows that early and frequent testing of course material not only provides instructors with early warning of students' troubles, tests/quizzes also enhance later

retention more than additional study of the material (Roediger & Karpicke, 2006). Early warning triggers early intervention, which in turn enhances probability of success.

Recommendation 8.

Enhance the culture of student responsibility for success.

- Expand student involvement in orientation and first-year success programs.
- Raise expectations for work behavior (e.g., attendance, workload, persistence) and decorum.
- Require timely completion of competency requirements.
- Enhance expectations for contact with advising.
- Require that all students complete and maintain a plan of work on line that is approved by the student's prospective department of major studies.
- Require that all students complete annual or biannual self-assessments on the web. Include links to appropriate resources and follow through on requests for help.
- Encourage students to visit Career Planning and Placement services during their first years of college.

Students are most likely to persist in settings that expect them to succeed and expect them to take responsibility for their progress (Tinto, 2003). Achievement motivation, academic goals, and commitment are as critical to success in college as are academic skills (Robbins, Lauver, Le, Davis, Langley, & Carlstrom, 2004; Tinto, 2008). All students – but especially first-generation college students – need to learn the intellectual (not just career-related) purposes of higher education and be made aware of the expectations of the academic culture. They also need to learn how to set goals and make education a priority. It is not uncommon for WSU students to enroll in a full course load while working 30-50 hours a week or to “take a break” from school for one or more semesters. These are choices that undermine academic success and put students at risk for dropping out. Aspects of “taking responsibility” include learning to put school first; learning the rules of school (e.g., requirements for the degree, taking prerequisite courses in the proper order); recognizing when one is having difficulty and seeking help from reliable sources, including the range of student support services offered at WSU; and establishing supportive relationships with peers, faculty and staff. As Collier & Morgan (2008) note, “in addition to academic skills, university success requires mastery of the ‘college student’ role” (p. 425).

Recommendation 9.

Improve monitoring and student success in entry-level courses.

- Identify “gatekeeping” introductory courses that draw high rates of at-risk students or have otherwise high failure rates: Target resources to enhance success and skills in these courses (e.g., learning modules and learning communities, supplemental instruction).
- Reduce class sizes for gatekeeping courses by offering smaller sections and/or keeping class sizes small through supplemental teaching modules.
- Take attendance in entry-level courses to trigger early-warning advising and follow up.
- Increase engagement of instructors in best practices for teaching entry-level courses.

Entry-level (i.e., 1000-level) introductory courses frequently have low attendance and high failure rates. At this level, “gatekeeping” courses—courses with large enrollments that students must pass in order to advance in a course sequence—are critical predictors for long-term student success. WSU should focus on improving success in these gatekeeping courses, which form the foundation of students’ skills and attitudes about college.

Best practices to enhance success in gatekeeping courses include: offering supplemental learning modules that focus on building academic success skills; keeping class sizes small; monitoring attendance; early and frequent assessments (e.g., tests or quizzes); increased interaction with instructors; and assignment of full-time instructors, especially those with track records for excellence in teaching, to teach these courses.

Research indicates that “first-year college students are significantly more likely to drop out if their high-stakes ‘gatekeeper courses’ are taught by part-time instructors” (Glenn, 2008, p. A1). This effect is significantly stronger at institutions that award advanced degrees (Umbach, 2007). Inaccessibility of part-time instructors, lack of student-faculty interaction outside of class, instructors’ lack of familiarity with university resources, and inadequate university support of adjunct faculty are among the reasons cited for the phenomenon (Glenn, 2008; Umbach, 2007). No such effect of part-time versus full-time status has been observed in upper-level courses. Although increased reliance on part-time instructors for large, entry-level lecture courses provides short-term economic savings, the cost-benefit ratio of this practice must be weighed against both the primary goals of the University’s teaching mission and the overwhelming loss in revenue when students (who would otherwise enroll in many additional years of such courses) are lost to attrition (Glenn, 2008). Given that reliance on some part-time faculty is inevitable, at the very least, WSU should develop an overarching plan to maximize the effectiveness of its part-time instructors.

Other measures can be taken to improve student success in gatekeeping courses. Collaborative teaching (through integrated course blocks, for example) is one way to focus on certain skill sets and establish a smaller community of scholars for the students enrolled in such blocks. Other innovative suggestions from WSU faculty include bringing Supplemental Instruction and Academic Success Center resources into entry-level classes

to establish a direct relationship with students. Students would be more likely to be aware of and use services that are familiar to them.

Recommendation 10.

Enhance current “provisional admissions” programs and require increased commitment from students in the programs.

- Require that all academically at-risk students (i.e., students not meeting regular admissions criteria) be actively affiliated with an intensive special-admissions program.
- Require at-risk students to make student-success contracts that include attendance criteria, mandatory contact with an advisor, and participation in early-warning systems and tutoring.
- Offer non-matriculant status for students who do not meet regular admissions criteria and/or who require remedial course work below the level offered by WSU. (Non-matriculant status means that the student is not officially enrolled in a degree program.)
- Require all students who do not meet regular admissions criteria to undergo a comprehensive evaluation of their college readiness.

WSU must enhance the efficacy of its provisional admissions programs and monitoring of at-risk students, including more rigorous expectations for student commitment to their own success.

Our retention record with students in special admissions programs who do not meet our regular admissions criteria is exceedingly poor, both in an absolute sense and relative to comparable institutions. However, it is important to recognize that our retention record varies considerably across the many special programs we offer, as does the range of academic preparedness and commitment required of students who enter those programs. Related to Recommendation 1, the culture of our institutional commitment to students admitted via special circumstances must focus on objective outcomes. We need a rigorous review of our special admissions programs, greater transparency about the admissions processes, and greater accountability for objective outcomes. The admissions process for special programs must be consistent with the resources WSU offers. Additionally, we must be mindful that our efforts to focus on the success of at-risk students do not disproportionately detract from our mission and responsibilities to the general student population.

Consistent with Recommendation 8, our special admissions programs must require and facilitate the culture of student responsibility for success. Some programs at WSU incorporate best practices and require a high level of commitment from special admissions students as a condition of enrollment, including commitment contracts for attendance, advising, study skills workshops, and tutoring; successful completion of summer residential “boot camps” that require completion of developmental and general education coursework prior to formal enrollment; and frequent contact with faculty and staff. These types of requirements are consistent with best practices of high-performing institutions with regard to retention (Pell Institute, 2007ab; Tinto, 2008a). Other programs do not engage in these kinds of best practices, nor do they involve faculty as an inherent part of the program. Students accepted into all provisional programs should be made aware of the necessity of working harder and demonstrating their commitment to success, while faculty should be encouraged (through additional incentives) to work with these students

and assist in the development and monitoring of special-admissions programs.

Recommendation 11.

Monitor admissions standards.

- WSU should not encourage students with very low indicators of college readiness to enroll at WSU—perhaps wasting their opportunities for financial aid—before they are reasonably ready to succeed.
- WSU should focus our resources and efforts on students with a realistic probability of succeeding in college by reducing the number of students admitted with very low readiness for college (e.g., ACT Composite < 15 and High School GPA < 2.5).
- WSU should serve students with very low college readiness separately (non-matriculant status) from the general student population (e.g., via a college preparatory institute on campus).
- If WSU chooses to maintain an admissions policy that enrolls a large proportion of students with needs for remedial-level education, we should provide resources in proportion to that need.

No single action, including actions pertaining to admissions, will solve the retention problem at WSU. The retention committee believes that we must have a multifaceted and balanced approach that retains our identity as a university of opportunity. At the same time, we must also be realistic about which students have a reasonable chance of succeeding in our environment. The central issue is whether our mission compels us to admit all students regardless of preparation for college, or whether some minimum criteria for admission to WSU should be enforced. It is important to note that our recommendations do not call for a change in the current admissions criteria; rather, the recommendations call for fewer extreme exceptions to our current admissions criteria.

The faculty survey results strongly endorsed the view that we admit too many students who are too far from ready, and there is strong sentiment that we should focus our resources and efforts on at-risk students who have a demonstrated, realistic probability of succeeding.

Currently, WSU admissions practices are well below those reported by ACT for “open admissions” universities and below those of our “sister” schools in the Great Cities' Universities Network (formerly the “Urban 13”). Furthermore, the proportion of students enrolled with very low academic preparedness has risen sharply in recent years. For example, the Fall 2005 enrollment at WSU included ~30% students who did not meet our regular minimum admissions criteria (High School GPA > 2.75 *or* ACT Composite 21). At the lowest end of admissions, approximately 12% of the WSU enrollment were students with very low indicators of college readiness (e.g., ACT ≤ 15 or missing *and* High School GPA < 2.5). These numbers are significant, considering that our retention rate of those students is exceedingly poor: Only one in four of those students at the lowest end of admissions were retained at the sophomore year (Fall 2007).

Importantly, although reducing enrollment of students in the lowest GPA and ACT groups would help the problem—allowing us to focus resources on the at-risk students with a

reasonable chance to succeed and markedly reducing the number of students who drop out—*it will not solve the problem*, because we also lose too many students who are not in the highest-risk group.

It is the position of the retention committee that WSU should continue to admit at-risk students and serve our urban mission. However, the current number of such admissions has far exceeded our capacity to provide appropriate support, and we admit many individuals whose academic skills are too far below college entry level to succeed. The ethics of encouraging such unprepared students to take out loans to pay tuition and exhaust their eligibility for Pell Grant support is questionable. Additionally, an open-door policy stretches our resources for interventions, and we do not currently have adequate resources to focus on the students with a reasonable chance to succeed. Economically, improved success with even a small number of at-risk students on whom we can focus appropriate resources (i.e., yielding 6 years of tuition) would offset short-term revenue losses from deferring admission to students who would likely be lost to us soon after enrollment through attrition.

In response to our public discussions about these issues, a faculty colleague wrote the following statement, which summarizes the committee's position on admissions: "It is tragic to admit large numbers of very weak students when we do not have an adequate system in place for addressing their needs. There are two types of pressures that need to be resisted in fashioning a program that would meet the needs of at-risk students. First, a university needs to resist the temptation to 'solve' the retention problem simply by admitting only those students who can succeed without any special help. Second, a university needs to resist pressures to lower academic standards for a degree in order to raise the retention rate. Succumbing to either temptation means that the university does not really have a program for educating at-risk students. The key to success is to limit the number of at-risk students admitted to the number that can be given adequate remedial assistance."

Choices must be made. Given our current resources, it is not feasible to increase both enrollment and retention rates of high-risk students.

Recommendation 12.

Address the need for expert teaching of remedial-level courses.

- Hire faculty with expertise and interest in teaching remedial-level courses in proportion to the number of students needing such services.
- WSU should not offer courses that cover pre-remedial-level skills and content (i.e., below 0900-level, college entry-level) courses. Community colleges can best serve our pre-remedial needs.

Per Recommendation 11, the key to success is to limit the number of at-risk students admitted to the number that can be given adequate remedial assistance. Our teaching resources for remedial education are not adequate to meet the current demand. The survey of faculty strongly endorsed the concept that most of the WSU faculty do not have expertise in teaching at the remedial level and are understandably reluctant to do so.

There is also strong sentiment that we should not disproportionately focus on remedial education to the detriment of excellence in general undergraduate teaching or our research mission. The demand is set by enrollment; thus, the need can be addressed via a balance of increasing the number of experts in remedial teaching and enrolling the number of students who need remedial education proportionate to our resources.

Given that our remedial teaching resources are too sparse, the majority of the faculty agree that pre-remedial education is best addressed separate from our teaching mission. Some novel ideas suggested by faculty to address pre-remedial needs include an on-campus institute that trains excellent teachers and conducts research specific to enhancing success among at-risk urban students; increased collaboration with community colleges to clarify our expectations for preparedness; and enhanced outreach to local high schools.

A college preparatory institute for pre-college work may not be easily funded by tuition revenues if students are accurately classified with non-matriculant status, because certain forms of financial aid require regular matriculant status. It might be necessary to find creative ways to fund this community service (e.g., grants). However, it would address the essence of our urban mission, it would provide us with a learning laboratory to refine innovative educational approaches for such populations, as well as opportunities to evaluate the students' suitability for WSU prior to admission, and it would consequently lead to increased retention.

Recommendation 13.

Initiate an attrition follow-up program.

- Contact students who stopped out or dropped out (especially those with good GPAs).

University data collection should include information regarding reasons for stop-out and drop-out; whether students transferred to other institutions (and if so, where); and inquiries about the student's future education plans. An attrition follow-up program would serve two important purposes. First, data collected regarding reasons for stop-out and drop-out would inform our future efforts to increase retention. Second, contact with students who left school would provide opportunities to offer support to return and appropriate academic advising. At least one study found that this type of callback initiative was an effective retention tool (Karp & Logue (2002)). A database that maintains information on students who transfer within and outside the State of Michigan, as well as the timing of their transfers, would provide important information for curriculum reform and redesign.

Recommendation 14.

Enhance advising efforts and contact for all students.

- Assign all students to a specific advisor when they are admitted to WSU.
- Implement mandatory contact with advisors, with higher expectations of contact for students who are undeclared as majors or who have been identified as at-risk.
- Increase advising staff (at the University, College, and Department levels).
- Support faculty involvement in advising by providing training and resource materials for those who wish to take on these duties.
- Implement an on-line degree audit available to students, faculty, and advising.
- Provide access to an up-to-date PDF of the Schedule of Courses and student resource manual that can be downloaded by students and faculty.
- Improve processing of transfer credit information.
- Clarify general education requirements.

Effective advising is the key to effective retention efforts. According to a review by the Pell Institute (2007), proactive and “intrusive” advising is a highly effective method to improve retention. Several large-sample studies have reported that universities with high graduation rates have advising programs that monitor student performance via early-warning systems that trigger early interventions and follow up on student progress (Pell Institute, 2004, 2007). Monitored probation programs that integrate academic counseling, tutoring and academic skills resources, and faculty input yield significantly higher retention rates than academic probation alone (Mann et al., 2003). These types of programs have been demonstrated to be particularly effective for at-risk students (Karp & Logue, 2002; Mann et al., 2003; Pell Institute, 2007).

Institutions high-performing with regard to retention are often characterized by decentralized advising, utilizing professional and faculty advisors at advising centers identified within departments. At WSU, however, high reliance on this type of decentralized approach would not address the large number of our students in the “College of the Undeclared” (our large population of undeclared majors). Therefore, we should retain focus on excellent and timely advising at the University, College, and Department levels and increase the number of advisors.

Recommendations from our committee include an assignment of an advisor to students when they are admitted to WSU. Because advising efforts are often divided between the University Advising Center and the many colleges and departments, students are often confused regarding where they should seek advising. Some colleges handle advising for their programs and general education advising; other colleges rely on departments to handle program advising and on the University Advising Center for general education requirements. If students are assigned an advisor at the beginning of their career at WSU, it would clarify this issue for them. Other recommendations from our committee include mandatory advising contact for students that are undeclared or are at risk because of low academic preparedness. Students in these categories need additional assistance selecting appropriate coursework and guidance to university resources that might assist in career choice or academic resources such as the Success Center. An increase in proactive and intrusive advising on the part of the University Advising Center would mandate the need

for an increase in advising staff. It is not reasonable to expect that the current advising resources can handle this increase in work load effectively.

Faculty advising is an effective way to enhance faculty-student contact that has been shown to improve attitudes toward persistence; however, these types of programs would require adequate support, in terms of both resources and an institutional culture that values faculty and rewards contributions of this nature. Students benefit from this interaction by not only getting academic guidance, but also role modeling and mentoring. Advising is teaching, albeit in a different format. Faculty need to be trained on WSU's various requirements and policies in order for them to be prepared to take on advising responsibilities.

There are systemic issues that need to be addressed as well. We should also continue to make WSU more "user friendly" to students, faculty and staff through advising manuals and a Schedule of Classes that are easy to access and navigate. An on-line audit system would benefit students by affording them access to check on their own academic progress. It would also change the focus of advising sessions from sessions in which advisors simply check off requirements to more meaningful discussions of academic and career goals. An on-line PDF of the Schedule of Classes that is easily accessible and current would assist advisors during advising sessions. It is difficult now to get a complete picture of what classes are being offered at the university.

An easily-accessed, on-line student resource manual would also be useful. There are many rules and requirements for students and advisors to remember as they complete their requirements for a degree. There are also many resources for them to use while they are completing their college work. It would be useful to have a manual for all requirements, especially if the manual was college specific.

Timely and accurate assessment of transfer work also is essential to student success. The admissions office has greatly improved their timeline for the assessment of transfer credit; however, in many instances the transfer tables are out of date. As a result, students sometimes repeat work unnecessarily to fulfill a requirement they may have already fulfilled. It is difficult for the university to keep track of all the curriculum changes of the many schools with whom we have transfer agreements and the many schools and departments at WSU, but we need to devise a systematic method to review the tables periodically for updates.

Recommendation 15.

Enhance financial aid and financial aid advising.

- Financial aid services and information should be more accessible to students.
- During registration, provide explicit information to students about policies related to registration while awaiting financial aid.
- Provide financial advisors for students.

Financial aid advisors and information about financial aid options should be more accessible to students. Financial Aid services should consider providing telephone and email access to financial aid staff; currently, students are limited to access via waiting in line at the Welcome Center. Information available to students on Pipeline is limited.

Information from our focus groups suggests that students are often unaware or misinformed about their financial aid. For example, students may delay registration unnecessarily while they await the arrival of their funds, which then adversely affects performance in their classes. Students approved for financial aid should be identified as such in the registration system to reduce students' concerns and confusion about whether they can register while awaiting their funds.

The rules surrounding the Scholarship and Financial Aid process are complex. There are many types of awards and loans, each with different rules, and students are not always aware of all of the implications of accepting a financial aid award. Students sometimes misunderstand the types of charges the award will cover or conditions under which they must pay back an award. For example, students sometimes drop courses without understanding the consequences to their financial aid (e.g., awards with rules regarding minimum attendance for payment of funds, resulting in student debt to the University).

Financial advisors should be an important part of our retention efforts at WSU, because financial aid is crucial to many WSU students' academic success. According to the Pell Institute (2007), "the ability to pay greatly affects whether and how students interact with their college environment. . . Unmet financial need increases the work burden on students, which may limit their academic and social integration on campus as well as their persistence to degree." Financial advisors not only assist students in finding, applying for, and tracking financial aid, but also encourage them to enroll in work-study programs, assist them in budgeting and managing student debt, help them balance work and school, and assist in developing a long-term plan that demonstrates the economic value of a college degree.

Recommendation 16.

Increase the use of peer mentoring and tutoring.

- Enhance special programs that employ peer mentors.

Research supports the effectiveness of peer-assisted academic support, especially in introductory “gatekeeping” courses (see Pell Institute, 2007). Positive interaction with peers and faculty is among the strongest predictors of retention and successful learning outcomes (Kuh et al, 2005; Tinto, 2003). Additionally, studies indicate that peer mentors benefit academically from the mentoring experience (Good, Halpin & Halpin, 2000).

Some of the ideas proposed by the retention committee include providing tuition credits or work-study jobs for students who complete a specified number of hours in peer tutoring or leadership in learning communities, and providing Honors College students with service hours through peer tutoring.

Conclusion

The President’s Faculty Committee on the Retention of Undergraduates believes that implementing these recommendations will have a significant positive effect on the retention rates of WSU’s students over the short and long terms. Regular assessments of our progress and the creation of a standing committee on retention will also help to facilitate a culture that promotes success for all students enrolled at WSU. Although these efforts will require considerable commitment and resources, the input we gathered from our peers via focus groups and our survey indicates that the will among the faculty to make these changes is present. Long-term implementation and success of these recommendations depends on University leadership among the administration, faculty, staff, and students of Wayne State University.

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