

President's Special Commission to Improve Graduation Rates

Recommendations to the President

August 2011

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Executive Summary

Report from the President's Special Commission to Improve Graduation Rates

In the summer of 2010 President Beheruz Sethna appointed the President's Special Commission to Improve Graduation Rates (the Special Commission), whose main purpose was to develop a plan to increase six year graduation rates. The following are members of the President's Special Commission:

- Scot Lingrell (co-chair, Student Affairs)
- Myrna Gantner (co-chair, Academic Affairs, COE)
- Bonnie Bar (Nursing)
- David Boldt (Economics, RCOB)
- Frank Butts (Leadership and Applied Instruction, COE)
- Jim Dillon (Psychology, COSS)
- Camilla Gant (Mass Communications, COSS)
- Ebenezer Kolajo (Institutional Research and Planning)
- Bruce Landman (Mathematics, COSM)
- David Newton (English, COAH)
- Denise Overfield (Foreign Languages, COAH)
- Cheryl Rice (Excel Center)
- Paul Rutledge (Political Science, COSS)
- Tim Schroer (History, COAH)
- Helen Steele (First Year Programs)
- Diane Williamson (RCOB)
- Duane Yoder (Computer Science, COSM)

After nearly a year of work with the Special Commission, and nearly two years of analysis studying the causes of attrition and low graduation rates, the Special Commission submits this report with recommendations to improve graduation rates in multiple areas.

The following list contains the Commission's Core Recommendations. These recommendations represent the "must do" actions that, without implementation, there is little chance of significantly increasing our graduation rate. In later sections these recommendations are further developed and defined, and additional recommendations are presented.

General Institutional Recommendations

- **General Recommendation 1:** Embed culture-building aspects in all hiring processes (i.e., position postings, interviews, etc.) to attract and select faculty and staff that fit

within, understand, and actively support the culture of success, including the belief that all students are capable of success.

- **General Recommendation 2:** Develop an institutional faculty/staff orientation program (supported and enhanced by each Division) that communicates expectations about each individual's role to understand and actively support the culture of success, and to clearly define ways that each employee can intentionally engage in activities directly related to student success in their own position.
- **General Recommendation 3:** Develop overlapping and iterative systems to identify early those students who are at risk of leaving the institution (for whatever reason), and set an expectation that whoever identifies these students, by any means, takes action by reporting the student to the appropriate intervention office/service.
- **General Recommendation 4:** Add a category on related annual evaluations and annual reports indicating the person's/office's contribution to activities that focus on or directly impact retention, progression, and graduation.
- **General Recommendation 5:** Give significant weight in the Promotion and Tenure process to academic advising and university service directly related to student success in order to incentivize more direct faculty involvement in student success outside of the classroom.

Academic Advising

- Establish an Academic Advising Advisory Board.
- Create a two-tier advising system with distinctly different roles for Professional Advisors and Faculty Mentors.
- Implement consistent advising practices across colleges, the School of Nursing, and the EXCEL Center. These practices could greatly improve the consistency and quality of academic advising.

Student, Faculty, and Staff Engagement

- Develop a campus-wide community service or volunteer program that provides local, regional, national, and international opportunities. Work with University departments to organize On-Campus volunteer experiences for groups or individuals.
- Make the Career Development program a content section of UWG 1101 class, LIBR 1101 Class, and all XIDS 2001 Class. Additionally, make Career Development a content section of each Capstone Course
- Encourage departments to offer more research-intensive seminars/courses with smaller class sizes for majors. Offer writing-intensive sections of core courses. [Note: this is related to the UWG Quality Enhancement Program].
- Set clear expectations of the level of effort needed to succeed in each class/syllabus (actually state the number of hours per week, etc.). Hold students to high expectations of preparation; enforce it in each class; create peer pressure; and use the preparation

clearly in class. (Example: KhanAcademy.com)--learning/practicing happens outside of class, then reinforced in class.)

- Imbed in the campus culture a sense of the responsibility of each student, faculty, and staff member to develop relationships to sustain our university community and sense of inclusion and engagement. Find best practices of connecting students with faculty members outside of class. Encourage this type of "service" in tenure decisions and post-tenure review.

Lowering DFW Rates in Key Courses

- For academically at-risk students (those most likely to be at risk for a D, F, or W in a specific core class or those interested in early academic immersion), the institution should develop academic orientation program over the summer to help prepare them for specific courses in the core.
- Examine specific university-wide academic policies to determine their possible effect on DFW rates.
- Develop and Require an early warning/early intervention system for new students which includes course-level early grading and assessment and mandatory reporting of student failure or non-engagement. Consider phased-in implementation by starting with High DFW courses and/or high freshman enrollment courses. (also related to the Early Alert Recommendation below)

At-Risk Student Intervention

- Redevelop UWG 1101 with appropriate academic content so that it can become part of the Core Curriculum. Additionally, the course should include a two-credit-hour class and a one-credit-hour lab. Students will earn one credit hour through participation in programs and services offered by UWG, including the EXCEL Center, Writing Center, Math Tutoring Center, and the Library. Participation in programs like the EXCEL Center's success seminars, Leadership-to-Go workshops, and service-learning projects may also be considered.
- Add UWG 1101 as a normal part of faculty load. Revise the compensation system for part-time instructors who teach UWG 1101 to reflect the funding formula which supports non-UWG 1101 courses.
- Require an early alert system in key core courses with high DFW rates. Faculty in Core courses with overall DFW rates of 25% or more would be required to provide information about the academic progress and the engagement of freshmen students within the first three weeks of the start of the term.

Reducing Institutional Barriers to Timely Graduation

- Offer more seats of foreign language classes desired by students and set aside seats/sections for new students. Develop a policy that any student needing a foreign language begin in that sequence their first term at UWG. This would require up-front resources to increase seats dramatically to get through the backlog of current students.
- Eliminate registration holds that have no academic or student safety/security implications. Require entities currently placing holds for the collection of fines to find other methods for student communication and collection.

Special Commission Report and Recommendations

The Report of the President's Special Commission to Improve Graduation Rates

In the summer of 2010 President Beheruz Sethna appointed the President's Special Commission to Improve Graduation Rates (the Special Commission), whose main purpose was to develop a plan to increase six year graduation rates.

The Guiding Vision to Increase Graduation Rates

Through Visioning Sessions and other strategic discussions, the Commission developed a set of values statements meant to guide institutional actions and decisions as we take on the very difficult task of changing institutional culture to support the outcome of increasing graduation rates. The commission thought it important to clearly articulate these values to sustain this effort and to get wide institutional buy in.

The Commission, through answering some difficult questions, is confident that the following value statements will provide guidance and vision to the efforts to increase graduation rates.

Who are we?

Liberal Arts-Based Professional Preparation is our strategic direction. We accomplish this through engaging students, faculty, and staff in collaborative learning and services which are grounded in our core values. Never content to rest on our laurels, we embrace continuous improvement as a way of life.

What are our core values?

We believe:

1. All UWG students are capable of success.
2. Timely graduation is our key indicator of success.
3. Student success is the product of shared, serious, and sustained effort of each member of the West Georgia Community (students, faculty, staff, and administrators).
4. Rigorous and challenging academic programming is the foundation of exceptional *Liberal Arts-Based Professional Preparation*.
5. Ethical, honest, and responsible decision-making defines accountability for each member of the West Georgia Community (students, faculty, staff, and administrators).

The Student Success Imperative

The belief that all students are capable of success is our overarching core value which drives every decision and action connected to retention and improved graduation rates.

ALL West Georgia students are capable of success if we:

- help students understand the role and purpose of higher education
- provide students high levels of support to achieve desired outcomes
- understand that success is the result of serious, sustained effort and hard work
- develop and maintain a developmental focus with students, always challenging them to grow beyond dependence on us.
- purposefully connect our most experienced and effective faculty with freshman and sophomore students
- help faculty to evaluate teaching pedagogies to better affect student academic success
- seek every opportunity for integration across programs and student experiences
- are purposefully progressive, intentionally seeking development and high expectations for ALL members (students, faculty, staff)
- hold everyone in the West Georgia Family accountable for living our core values and intervene when we miss the mark

Areas of Improvement

Through extensive data analysis and literature review, and the review of institutional best practices across the country, several topical areas began to emerge that, if improved, could improve the overall graduation rate at UWG. The following topics were defined through literature review, institutional analysis, and Commission discussion.

- Academic Advising
- Student, Faculty, and Staff Engagement
- Lowering DFW Rates in Key Courses
- At-Risk Student Intervention
- Reducing Institutional Barriers to Timely Graduation

Area work groups were formed and led by Special Commission members, but added to by many other interested members of the campus community. In total, 46 faculty, staff, and students participated as members of the work groups. The work groups worked through the late fall and spring to develop very bold and specific recommendations that, if adopted, will significantly improve graduation rates and further enhance our ability to become the Destination Institution called for in the President's Vision. The expanded recommendations are presented here for Presidential consideration.

Academic Advising

Members (An asterisk appears after the names of Professional Advisors):

Myrna Gantner, Chair (Academic Affairs)

Sharmistha Basu-Dutt (Chemistry, COSM)
Laura Edmonds (SON)*
Wanda Eidson (Registrar's Office)
Camilla Gant (Mass Communications, COSS)
Emily Hall (EXCEL Center)*
Kasey Hannah (RCOB) *
Melanie Hildebrandt (Honors College)
David Newton (English, COAH),
Cheryl Rice (EXCEL Center)
Sal Peralta (Political Science and Planning, COSS)
Bethany Schmelzer (COE)*
Diane Williamson (RCOB)

Overview

Charge to the committee: Study undergraduate academic advising as it is presented in the literature and as it is practiced at the University of West Georgia. Make a list of recommendations with a timeline for implementation. Recommendations should be directly linked to increasing UWG graduation rates.

The four areas for improvement address: (1) inadequate coordination of academic advising functions, (2) inconsistent practices, (3) lack of systematic and mandatory faculty professional development, and (4) understaffing.

Recommendation 1: Establish an Academic Advising Advisory Board.

Rationale: To ensure that the subsequent recommendations are carried out, we recommend the creation of an advisory board to monitor the implementation of systematic, high-quality advising practices, to assess practices with the goal of continuously improving them, and to guide the institutionalization of an effective academic advising model that influences improved graduation rates. The formation of this advisory board should be the first action taken before other recommendations are considered and/or implemented. In the future, this new advisory board might become a sub-committee of an appropriate standing Faculty Senate committee.

Recommendation 2: Create a two-tier advising system with distinctly different roles for Professional Advisors and Faculty Mentors.

Rationale: Assuming a four year degree plan and fluid cooperation between both advisors and mentors, the committee recommends the following option but would consider other options presented by the Advisory Board (recommendation 1).

Professional Advisors work with all students throughout their undergraduate program, years 1 through 4. Faculty Mentors become most active in years 3 and 4 after students have been admitted to their academic programs. Faculty Mentors work with students in a professional mentoring role, not as advisors.

Recommendation 3: Assign the three discipline-specific advisors from the EXCEL Center to meet program specific needs within the COAH, COSS, COSM and to refine their current tasks so that they are tightly aligned with the needs of the three colleges. All undeclared students continue to be served by Professional Advisors in the EXCEL Center.

1. Assign the new Academic Advising Advisory Board the task of analyzing the advantages and disadvantages of moving the discipline-specific Professional Advisors to the three colleges. Further, the board should examine the capacity of the EXCEL Center to fulfill its mission if Professional Advisors are moved to individual colleges, because these advisors are currently responsible for academic support in addition to their discipline-specific advising duties.

Recommendation 4: Implement consistent advising practices across colleges, the School of Nursing, and the EXCEL Center. Three practices could greatly improve the consistency and quality of academic advising.

1. Operationally define the distinct differences between Professional Advisors and Faculty Mentors. Implement the distinctly defined roles in the UWG advising model or models. This distinction is both substantive and practical. Professional advising relates to course selection, programmatic issues, policies, procedures, among others. Faculty mentoring relates to advice and guidance about career opportunities, graduate school, professionalization, and career development in general.
2. Operationally define a set of advising terms and processes for consistent use throughout the university, to include department websites, the EXCEL Center, and printed materials. Examples of materials to check for consistent terminology include web pages, the UWG Student Handbook, freshman advising packets, names of forms, major maps, and so forth.
3. Create a common template (common for terminology and processes only) that departments can use to develop an advising and mentoring page on departmental websites. Consistency in terminology and availability of information, not in appearance, is the goal.

Recommendation 5: Develop and implement a systematic infrastructure to support the ongoing professional development of Professional Advisors and Faculty Mentors.

1. Implementation of the recommended advising model /s will take time. Faculty who continue to advise, as well as mentor, during the transition period will benefit from training to minimize confusion and resultant advising errors. One way to provide consistent training is to build sessions (e.g., How to Advise Using WolfWatch) into regularly scheduled departmental faculty meetings.
2. After the transition period is complete, Professional Advisors and Faculty Mentors can receive just-in-time, individual support (e.g., WolfWatch) using effective faculty development models already in place on campus (e.g., using Distance Education's faculty development model or something similar).
3. Strengthen and publicize the benefits of the Professional Academic Advising Association (PAAA). Add faculty to the PAAA listserv for timely, concise advising tips.

Recommendation 6: Maximize the power of WolfWatch for academic advising.

Rationale: WolfWatch, although in the early stages of its implementation at the University West Georgia, is proving to be a valuable advising tool for Professional Advisors, faculty, and students. However, we believe that the software has capabilities that we have not yet tapped. As people become comfortable and skilled with the software, we recommend that the Academic Advising Advisory Board consult with key stakeholders to plan how best to advance use of the tool over time.

Recommendation 7: Increase student self-reliance in academic advising practices.

Rationale: The goal is to teach students to teach themselves. The committee recommends that we teach decision making skills systematically over time and require students to take on self-advising tasks incrementally in developmentally appropriate steps.

Reducing DFW Rates in Key Courses

Members:

David Newton, Chair (English)

David Leach (Math)

Duane Yoder (COMS)

Bruce Landman (COMS)

Denise Overfield (COAH)

Brandy Robinson (First Year Writing)

Maren Henry (University Writing Center)

Wendell Stone (Mass Communications)
Tim Schroer (History)
Paul Rutledge (Political Science)

Overview: The purpose of the DFW Subcommittee is to bring together faculty and administrators who are familiar with the major core areas to discuss broader (systemic) issues related to DFW rates in some core courses with multiple sections. The committee recognizes that some factors affecting DFW rates may have to be addressed at the department level since they are unique to specific courses and disciplines.

Organization: The committee divided its work into four major critical areas.

- I. Recommendations related to quantitative (statistical) analysis and qualitative analysis
- II. Recommendations external to core courses
- III. Recommendations at the department level
- IV. Recommendations at the course level

Area I. Quantitative (Statistical) Analysis and Qualitative Analysis

Recommendation 8. The committee recommends conducting a survey (questionnaire) of faculty teaching in core courses with high DFW rates.

Rationale: Faculty who teach core course are a valuable resource for understanding factors related to DFW rates in core courses. While the responses may be primarily qualitative, they will offer important perspectives about DFW rates. To accomplish this recommendation, the committee has drafted a survey instrument which can be used (or modified) for this purpose.

Recommendation 9. The committee recommends that the institution analyze more specifically the discrete differences between the three statistical categories (D, F, and W).

Rationale: While institutional analysis and discussion so far has largely framed these three categories as part of a larger group, there may be some benefit to looking more specifically at the unique factors that contribute to increases in each. This may also allow the institution to respond more successfully to occurrences of D, F, and W. These categories may require different institutional responses. For instance, there may be different intervention strategies for courses with high W (withdraw) rates versus courses with high F (failure) rates.

Recommendation 10. The committee recommends that demographic analysis of DFW rates be examined in relationship to specific core courses.

Rationale: While some demographic analysis related to DFW rates has been done, there may be some benefit to examining the performance of subpopulations of UWG students in specific core courses. Are DFW rates within a particular subpopulation occurring in all core-level courses or in specific core-level courses? If any statistically significant patterns are revealed, this might help the institution and academic departments discuss how specific core courses (or sections of a core course) could address this.

Area II. External to Core Courses (Institutional)

Recommendation 11. The committee recommends that the institution evaluate the advisement process and procedures related to placing students into core-level classes.

Rationale: Students often select (or are placed into) the wrong core class when they might have an option of selecting a different class that would provide them with a higher probability of success. For example, the Math department has noted that many students sign up for MATH 1111 (College Algebra) when they could take MATH 1001 (Quantitative Skills and Reasoning). This would require changes in core advisement and scheduling (a change in the number of seats in the core sections for these courses), but it may lead to greater success in core-level Math courses. Advisement into MATH 1111 is often related to the major that students intend to declare; however, some students might be better served by beginning in MATH 1001 and then moving into MATH 1111 if it is required for their major. Other students will not be required to take MATH 1111 at all.

Recommendation 12. The committee recommends that the institution examine the process of scheduling courses for first year students (especially those identified as at risk academically) during summer orientation and during subsequent advisement periods.

Rationale: Students often select courses or are assigned to them without being fully informed about the content of the course or the requirements and expectations for the course. They typically do not receive this information until the first week of class. For at-risk students, the institution should look at ways to educate students about the courses they will be taking and what the expectations for those courses will be. The better informed students are before a class begins, the greater their prospects for success in the class will be.

Several committee members also asked if there was any evidence to suggest that a student's "schedule" (the selection of 4-5 individual classes) could have any effect on DFW rates in specific classes. Do certain classes in the core work more effectively together in creating academic success during the first semester or year, especially among academically at risk students? Are certain combinations of classes (or even class days/times) less likely to produce academic success? Findings from the analysis will be used to improve formal advising practices which would be applied consistently across the institution.

Recommendation 13. The committee recommends that for academically at-risk students (those most likely to be at risk for a D, F, or W in a specific core class or those interested in early academic immersion), the institution develop academic orientation programs over the summer to help prepare them for specific courses in the core.

Rationale: Students need to be able to connect academic orientation to specific courses. While workshops and orientation programs that address specific study skills can be immensely valuable, students do not always connect these to the academic realities of a particular class. Giving students an opportunity to “experience” a version of a specific core class in advance—including completing some of the requirements and/or even getting a “grade”—might help students and the institution more effectively assess students’ academic needs and prospects for success. Many programs like this are currently offered at other institutions over the summer. The Office of Institutional Diversity here at West Georgia is currently piloting a program like this for the summer.

Recommendation 14. The committee recommends that the institution examine the coordination between the different academic support programs on campus.

Rationale: Staff and faculty who work in academic support of core courses—both within departments and in academic support units, like the EXCEL Center—perform an invaluable role and make a crucial contribution to the success that many students experience during their first year and beyond. However, coordination among these academic support units does not always occur. If students are experiencing problems, do they always know where to go? What kind of academic support most effectively helps students? Are their ways to integrate more effectively the instructional work in the classroom with academic support?

Recommendation 15. The committee recommends that the institution examine specific university-wide academic policies to determine their possible effect on DFW rates.

Rationale: This recommendation is associated with the work of other RPG subcommittees, such as the Institutional Barriers Subcommittee. However, the DWF subcommittee believes that some university academic policies—for example, the Grade Replacement Policy and the Withdrawal Policy—may inadvertently affect DFW rates in core courses. In their current state, both the withdraw policy and grade replacement policy may delay graduation due to students unduly withdrawing from courses (or retaking courses for a higher grade).

Area III. External to Core Classes (Departmental)

Recommendation 16. The committee recommends that departments with core courses that have been identified as having high DFW rates report periodically (at least annually) on what is being done at the department level to address DFW rates.

Rationale: The purpose of this recommendation is to improve communication, so that changes to courses or new RPG initiatives can be shared with other departments and with academic support programs across campus to help coordinate issues affecting DFW rates and to report on best practices.

Recommendation 17. The committee recommends that departments periodically review grade distribution percentages for courses with multiple sections.

Rationale: The committee believes that the periodic assessment of grade distribution will allow departments to determine if DFW rates are broadly proportional across multiple sections or if there are discrepancies among individual sections.

Recommendation 18. The committee recommends that departments discuss the role that common course frameworks might have on creating consistency in core courses with multiple sections and if this consistency can help to reduce DFW rates in certain core courses.

Rationale: Many core courses with multiple sections now have common course frameworks (English, Math, and Mass Communications, Foreign Languages, and several other departments currently have such frameworks) for the purpose of creating instructional consistency among multiple sections of the same course. The specifics of these common frameworks vary considerably across core-level courses. Some courses have requirements related to textbooks, assignments, grading percentages for assignments, grading rubrics for assignments, and/or course policies (such as attendance). These common frameworks will, by necessity, vary among different core-level courses, and it is possible that some courses do not require them at all. However, a discussion of common course frameworks should be part of the periodic assessment of core-level courses with multiple sections.

Area IV. Course Level (Internal to Course)

Recommendation 19. The committee recommends that departments periodically assess how course-specific policies (such as attendance requirements) affect DFW rates.

Rationale: While course-specific policies are typically established to improve DFW rates, they can sometimes have unintended consequences or no measurable effect on improving DFW rates at all. A periodic review of such policies will insure that these policies are meeting their objectives.

Recommendation 20. The committee recommends that departments and the institution examine ways that students are offered or directed to academic support once academic difficulties emerge in a course.

Rationale: The committee believes that there are three crucial points in an at-risk student's academic progression that need to be addressed systematically: 1) academic preparation and immersion prior to the start of the course (typically during summer orientation); 2) academic mentoring during the progression of a course; and 3) academic remediation after a course has ended and the student has received a D, F, or W. This recommendation addresses #2 above.

How can the institution do a better job of quickly identifying students as they begin to struggle in a class, and, if we are able to identify them, what should be the institution's programmatic response? Most often, this is left up to the student to simply go seek outside help, although some departments (or individual faculty) do require students to get outside assistance or tutoring when problems emerge. This open-ended process very often does not work when simply left up to the at-risk student.

If a student withdraws from a course because of academic difficulties or if a student simply is not prepared academically to complete successfully the course once enrolled in it, what should be the institution's response? If the student simply waits to take the course again the following semester or at some other later date, then the institution is missing an opportunity to help students use the remainder of the semester to work on remediation so that the student is better prepared for success in the course the next time they take it. All too often students drop a course or realize they are going to fail it, and simply go away.

Recommendation 21. The committee recommends that in certain courses diagnostic instruments or early testing could be used to clearly communicate with students about their prospects for academic success in the course.

Rationale: While the university has a policy about notifying students about their grade in a course prior to the final withdrawal date, this policy is non-specific and not always uniformly enforced. Sometimes, students do not realize that they are failing a course or that they have minimal prospects of completing a course successfully until the mid-term, after which there is very little possibility of academic remediation.

In some courses, a more structured diagnostic progress or "early warning system" might help students receive academic tutoring to help them complete a course. Or, if they withdraw for academic reasons, it might allow students to be transferred into a formal remediation process.

Recommendation 22. The committee recommends that the institution and departments examine what happens when a student receives a D, F, or W in a course.

Rationale: Being able to track and understand what students do when they receive a D, F, or W in a course may help the institution determine how best to offer academic remediation for at-risk students. Do they take the course over again? If so, when? Do they take the same professor or a different one? Is there any follow up with the student about what factors—from their perspective—contributed to the D, F, or W? Do departments or the institution offer any specific academic remediation for students in these situations? If so, how is this remediation communicated to students, and is it required or optional? Having a better understanding of these factors may help the institution devise strategies to help students once they have received a D, F, or W.

Recommendation 23. The committee recommends that the institution and departments examine the process that governs how a student retakes a course in which they have previously received a D or F.

Rationale: Different courses will require different processes here, but the committee believes there may be a benefit to creating structures that will allow the institution to respond more directly to students who have received a D or F in a course and are at risk of not progressing beyond the core. One statistic that might be useful here is to find out 1) if a student receives a D or F in a course, how long before the student takes the course again; and 2) for students who receive a D or F in a course, what percentage of those students successfully complete the course (or receive a D or F) on the second attempt.

Given institutional support, departments could examine ways to work with these students. There was no consensus among the committee members as to what model might work best. Several members suggested dedicated sections of a core course reserved for students who had previously received a D or F which, for example, might have a smaller enrollment or might be staffed by a faculty member with particular expertise in helping students with remediation. Other members suggested creating sections (again, with smaller enrollment) that would intermix at-risk students with students who had achieved success in the course. Other members suggested that students be required to participate in some form of outside tutoring or mentoring, related to the course. Other members suggested that existing models, such as the First-Year Learning Communities—could be adapted to work with at-risk students in the second semester or second year. Whichever process is identified would allow the institution to specifically target the students who are most at risk academically.

Recommendation 24. The committee recommends that the institution work toward reducing the number of students per section (enrollment caps) in core courses.

Rationale: The fewer students in a class, the more time faculty will have for personalized mentoring. This would give faculty more opportunities to address potential academic

remediation issues as the course progresses. The more that the institution does before a course begins and once a class commences, the better prospects students have for academic success. Waiting until students receive a D, F, or W only increases the risk that they will not progress beyond the core.

Reducing Institutional Barriers to Timely Graduation

Members:

Scot Lingrell, Co-Chair (VPSAEM)

James Dillon, Co-Chair (Psychology)

Denise Overfield (COAH)

Diane Williamson (RCOB)

David Boldt (RCOB)

Cheryl Rice (EXCEL Center)

Duane Yoder (COSM)

Ebenezer Kolajo (Institutional Research)

Jon Anderson (VPAA)

Donna Haley (Registrar)

Overview: This work group looked at some critical internal barriers that may be impacting student success or timely graduation. In this section the identified barrier is presented and described, and then the committee recommendation is presented for consideration.

Barrier 1: Students cannot get into introductory foreign language classes (not enough seats), or do not take the course early enough .

Recommendation 25: Offer more seats of foreign language classes desired by students and set aside seats/sections for new students. Develop a policy that any student needing a foreign language begin in that sequence their first term at UWG. This would require up-front resources to increase seats dramatically to get through the backlog of current students.

Rationale: Many students attempt to take the foreign language classes as new students or put them off until later in their tenure here. Students who want to take the Foreign Language classes early, have difficulty getting the classes because they are typically filled by continuing student prior to the new students registering. Students wait to take the classes until late, and

have to then take two full years to complete the sequence. If they fail any of the classes, it may extend their time to degree.

Barrier 2: Overall inability of students to get into sections of core courses that they need to meet core. Overall inability of students to get into sections of courses that they need in area F and major/minor requirements.

Recommendation 26: Study course demand and backlog in the Core (including Area F) and offer the appropriate number of seats to match the demand.

Rationale: Students cannot get into the seats they need to progress effectively. Currently, our average time to degree is 12.2 terms. If we could reduce that by 1/2 term, more students would be counted in our graduation rate.

Barrier 3: Many new freshmen students are failing early in the first term. Many courses do not assess student progress early enough or often enough for students to understand their deficiencies, learn appropriate study skills, and take action to rectify their situation.

Recommendation 27: Develop and Require an early warning/early intervention system for new students which includes course-level early assessment and mandatory reporting of student failure or non-engagement. Consider phased-in implementation by starting with High DFW courses and/or high freshman enrollment courses.

Rationale: Students do not know they are failing or that their strategies are not working, and therefore cannot adjust their strategies to be more effective. By mid-term it is almost too late for a student to salvage a term if there are not many grade opportunities.

Barrier 4: The University has an extremely liberal withdraw policy (unlimited) and the withdraw procedure is much too easy.

Recommendation 28: Conduct internal research to define if there is a link between high numbers of withdraws and time to degree. If so, limit the number of withdraws to encourage students to "tough it out" and make the effort to finish the class and succeed.

Rationale: Students are able to withdraw unimpeded, and therefore may take the easy route rather than working with the professor and putting in the effort to save their grade. Withdraws may contribute to extending their time to degree. Allowing students unlimited withdraws not only slows the individual student down, but then they take seats in subsequent semesters that may ultimately slow other students down. Multiple course withdrawals increase the possibility that a student will lose financial aid, which may force them to drop out, and thereby delay graduation.

Barrier 5: The University has an extremely liberal retake policy (unlimited).

Recommendation 29: Conduct internal research to define if there is a link between high numbers of retakes and time to degree. If so, consider adjusting the retake policy and find other alternatives. Course grades can/should be averaged to discourage students from taking the course multiple times.

Rationale: Possibly related to the withdraw policy, students are allowed to retake a course as many times as necessary. The last grade is the one that is posted on the student's transcript and is computed in their GPA. Students in majors where entrance is competitive or selective may be retaking courses multiple times to get a higher grade for entry into the program. Retaking courses may contribute to extending their time to degree. Allowing students unlimited retakes not only slows the individual student down, but then they take seats in subsequent semesters that may ultimately slow other students down.

Barrier 6: Department specific policies that restrict progression—(C grade, prerequisites, sequencing, course attendance, acceptance into the upper division/major).

Recommendation 30: Study departmental policies to assure they are appropriate, that they are necessary, and that they do not unduly burden students and add to their time to degree.

Rationale: Students may be slowed by many department specific policies.

Barrier 7: The University has several “bottleneck” or “gateway” courses.

Recommendation 31: Gateway courses need to be identified, and proper academic support needs to be developed to help more students succeed in these courses. When students fail these courses, they continue to retake the course, thereby taking seats that could be used by other students. If students continually fail at these courses, then they should be advised to choose another major.

Rationale: Students are being slowed in their progress towards their degree by certain "gateway" courses that are very difficult and have high D, F, and W rates. Students retake these courses over and over to get the necessary grade to continue in the major/sequence.

Barrier 8: Too many courses offered at the same time, particularly Monday and Wednesday between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. Students may need 3 or 4 classes, but then can only take 2 or 3 because of time offering conflicts.

Recommendation 32: Complete a course time demand study that looks at when courses are offered and when students want to take them. Develop a course offering strategy that

maximizes space utilization with consideration to student demand. Consider a University-Wide Classroom/Resource management tool.

Rationale: The timing of course offerings, and the coordination between academic departments, may be slowing students down due to them not being able to take enough courses because of time conflicts and overlap.

Barrier 9: The academic profile of our incoming freshman class is not at the quality that we might want, and this lowers our overall retention and graduation rates.

Recommendation 33: Complete a study that looks at the retention rates of our admitted students with the lowest academic preparation (as represented by the Freshman Index). Determine what interventions would be appropriate for this group if it has lower retention than other preparation bands. Consider a "Summer Institute" for those at the lower end of the scale to enhance their ability to succeed and be retained.

Rationale: It is neither feasible nor desirable to increase our admission standards as that would decrease enrollment and reduce the available resources for the university. Still, there is a general sense that students who are admitted at the lower end of our admission standards are not prepared and create a drag on our retention and graduation rates. It is important to intervene with At-risk students as early as possible to mediate their issues and help them succeed.

Barrier 10: One of our most successful retention measures is UWG 1101, yet it does not count towards the Core and is only an elective (so may be seen as "throwaway" credit.

Recommendation 34: After approval through the proper faculty senate committees, add UWG 1101 to the Core Curriculum. Course content must be strengthened to reflect the rigor and content necessary for a core course prior to submitting for approval.

Rationale: UWG has two courses that are similar to UWG 1101 (XIDS 2001, LIB 1101) in scope and purpose that are counted in the Core Curriculum, but UWG 1101 is not. The UWG 1101 course has been shown to benefit students, and the Retention Rate for students that have taken the course is higher than students without a First Year Experience and for those in several other FYE programs. Nearly 800 students per year take the course, and adding it to the core (with proper assessment of content of course) would not only allow students who take the course to progress towards their degree faster, but would automatically add 700+ seats to the core--thereby increasing the opportunity for students to get core seats where now the seats are somewhat limited.

Barrier 11: Far too many students who are not eligible for admission have been granted an admission appeal and then do not perform well.

Recommendation 35: Revise the Admissions Appeal process. Only appeals with truly extenuating circumstances should be considered, and then a development plan needs to be in place for students who are granted admission.

Rationale: Allowing so many questionable admissions appeals may be contributing to lower Retention and Graduation Rates. For Fall 2010, 81 students appealed their admission denial. 38 of those were granted an appeal and allowed to enroll. Only 8 of those met the conditions of their appeal and remained enrolled for the second term.

Barrier 12: Registration holds are used to stop student registration to force them to conduct University business (paying fines, returning equipment), or to take other actions that maybe unrelated to their academic registration.

Recommendation 36: Eliminate registration holds that have no academic or student safety/security implications. Require entities currently placing holds for the collection of fines to find other methods for student communication and collection.

Rationale: By definition Registration Holds pose barriers to students progressing by preventing students from registering in the first place. Many registration holds are important and valid. However, many of the registration holds are placed to force compliance with non-academic requirements such as payment of fines, return of equipment, and other student responsibilities. Research exists that shows the value of the fines and how it pales in comparison to the missed revenue from course registration. Current changes in Continuous Registration, drop for non-payment, and One Bill will make it systematically possible to eliminate registration holds for non-academic purposes.

Barrier 13: Graduation Rate, as currently defined (first time, full time, degree seeking students graduating within six years), does not communicate the breadth of possible positive outcomes that should be considered when assessing student success. We should be looking at ALL entering students (transfers, non-traditionals, and others not counted in the official definition), and we should be considering their experience at UWG and our participation in their success.

Recommendation 37: Change our current definitions of success to include College Completion of categories of students not traditionally counted in our Retention and Graduation rates. Such populations include, but are not limited to: nontraditional/adult students; transfer students; veterans; commuter students. These measures should be added to our Key Performance

Indicators and programs and services should consider their success as important as our first-time/full-time/degree seeking freshman students.

Rationale: The definitions of Retention rate and Graduation rate are not within our control to adjust. However, the national dialog on College Completion may allow us to consider other measures of success to augment these national standard definitions. For instance, we should be measuring the completion rates of EVERY student that enters UWG regardless of his/her status. Such completion rates should be part of our internal set of Key Performance Indicators, and should be communicated to outside audiences including the Board of Regents. In fact, such measures can be points of pride and used in our recruitment of students other than the traditional high school senior. Populations to consider: nontraditional/adult students; transfer students; veterans; commuter students.

Barrier 14: Professors administratively withdrawing or dropping students and not allowing Reinstatement after final drop for non-payment. Students and professors need to better understand the ramifications of withdraw decisions

Recommendation 38: Change the Administrative Withdraw policy so that the faculty member/instructor is making a Withdraw recommendation to the Registrar. The Registrar, then, will look at the student's situation in its entirety (financial aid, insurance, BOR policy, etc) and determine whether it is in the student's best interest to withdraw or remain enrolled. This does not affect the faculty member's ability to manage the student's behavior or even presence in the class--just the official enrollment status.

Rationale: The Administrative Withdraw is a tool that is used to withdraw students from classes prior to the Withdraw Failing deadline. In some instances students are withdrawn for attendance, failure to perform, or other reasons that the student might fail. Faculty do not know the ramifications of the order to Administratively Withdraw a student. Many times it is in the best interest of the student to remain enrolled in the class, even if he/she will get a failing grade. There are many ramifications of the Administrative Withdraw including such issues as financial aid (possible repayment), family insurance, and others. Faculty members cannot be expected to know all of the ramifications, and therefore may make a decision meant to help the student but, in reality, hurts the student in the end. Beyond the ramification of the student not being able to finish the course, there are many possible ramifications that lead to longer time to degree or, worse, drop-out.

Barrier 15: UWG students must take too many courses at other institutions because we either do not offer them in a timely manner, or we do not offer them at the time some students need them to graduate. This leads to delays in graduation because it takes time to transfer credits back from the other institution.

Recommendation 39: Conduct research to find out how many, and which, courses students are taking from other institutions via transient status to complete their graduation requirements at UWG. Once known, take special steps to offer those courses so that students don't have to take the courses at another institution.

Rationale: Possibly related to the lack of core seats, there is a sense that UWG students cannot get the courses they need, so they must take courses elsewhere and transfer them back to UWG to complete their curriculum. Related to that, if students are taking courses at another institution during their last term prior to graduation, it is unlikely that the student will be able to get their transcript from that institution in time for the Registrar to certify their degree prior to graduation. However, once the transcript comes in, the student is given credit for the current term, and officially graduates for that term (even if the certification is delayed).

At-Risk Student Work Group

Committee Members

Helen Diamond Steele – First Year Experience, Director (Chair)
Keri Allen – EXCEL Center, Academic Advisor
Trish Causey – Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, Assistant Dean of Students
Tisha Curry – Housing and Residence Life, Graduate Assistant for Student Conduct
Danny Gourley – EXCEL Center, Academic Advisor
Jill Hendricks – Health Services, Patient/Victim Advocate
Maren Henry – English and Philosophy, Writing Center Director
Melissa Hewitt – Counseling and Student Affairs, Practicum GA
Corey Hindman – Health Services, Patient/Victim Advocate
Jennifer Jordan – Enrollment Services Center, Enrollment/Retention Coordinator
Jennifer Maxwell – Enrollment Services Center, HOPE
Tracy Richardson – Richards College of Business, Academic Advisor
Emily Teitelbaum – Center for Student Involvement, Coordinator of Student Programs
Julie Willard – School of Nursing, Assistant Professor

Recommendation 40: Redevelop UWG 1101 with appropriate academic content so that it can become part of the Core Curriculum.

Rationale: Data shows that UWG students who participate in UWG 1101 are significantly more likely to be retained than students who do not participate in a first-year program. The committee believes that students and faculty will recognize the value of this course and take it more seriously if it becomes part of the Core.

Recommendation 41: Redevelop UWG 1101 so that it includes a two-credit-hour class and a one-credit-hour lab. Students will earn one credit hour through participation in programs and services offered by UWG, including the EXCEL Center, Writing Center, Math Tutoring Center,

and the Library. Participation in programs like the EXCEL Center's success seminars, Leadership-to-Go workshops, and service-learning projects may also be considered.

Rationale: A three-credit-hour course would foster increased academic skills and critical thinking abilities. Additionally, the three-hour course would fit better into students' schedules, and, if made part of the Core Curriculum, would move students towards graduation at a quicker pace.

Recommendation 42: Offer additional First Year Experience opportunities including freshman interest groups which may include the UWG 1101 course and an additional academic course coordinated together and with directed themes.

Rationale: Retention rates for such FYE programs as learning communities suggest that cohorts of students with similar scholarly interests are more successful.

Recommendation 43: Add UWG 1101 as a normal part of faculty load. Revise the compensation system for part-time instructors who teach UWG 1101 to reflect the funding formula which supports non-UWG 1101 courses

Rationale: To give ample attention to this course, which is an important part of UWG's RPG initiatives, instructors must be compensated at a reasonable rate. Additionally, this action will legitimize the course so that more faculty are willing to teach it, whereas now a high percentage of instructors are from the staff level.

Recommendation 44: Require early alert system in key core courses with high DFW rates. Faculty in Core courses with overall DFW rates of 25% or more would be required to provide information about the academic progress and the engagement of freshmen students within the first three weeks of the start of the term.

Rationale: If early indicators of student distress are recognized and addressed, UWG can positively impact student retention. Early identification of potential barriers, such as study skills, financial issues, and social adjustment, will give students the opportunity to address their difficulties before they negatively impact retention. Data from the first year of implementation of MAP-Works and the attendance tracking pilot programs will be available in October 2011.

Recommendation 45: Assess subpopulations of UWG students, particularly males, veterans, sophomores, and parents, to determine their needs and develop appropriate support services.

Rationale: Trends in UWG's second-year retention rates and graduation rates indicate that male students are not performing as well as female students. Also, the number of veterans enrolled in higher education is increasing nationally, and UWG's Veterans Certification Official predicts significant increases in veterans enrolling at UWG in the next several years.

Engagement of Students, Faculty, and Staff

Members:

Paul Rutledge, Co-Chair (COSS)

Scot Lingrell, Co-Chair (SAEM)

Bonnie Bar (SON)

Frank Butts (COE)

Ebenezer Kolajo (Institutional Research)

Chris Geiger (Student Involvement)

Dawn Palmer (Housing and Residence Life)

Matt Miller (University Recreation)

Overview: Student engagement is defined as the time and energy that students devote to educationally purposeful activities and the extent to which the institution gets students to participate in activities that lead to student success (Kuh, 2003). This definition helps to place accountability for engagement with both the student and the institution as partners in the engagement of students towards the ends of greater retention and graduation rates.

Although the concept of engagement as a driver of retention and graduation rates is clearly articulated in the literature, it is extremely difficult to understand at the campus/program level. UWG has adopted the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE—pronounced, “nessie”) to measure our campus’ level of engagement relative to national norms and peer institutions. The Work group on Engagement decided early on to adopt the NSSE benchmarks as valid measures and to wrap our recommendations around the **areas of the NSSE where we are statistically below our peers and/or national norms**. In all areas we seek to achieve the levels of the top 50% of engaging institutions.

Still, even with valid measures and benchmarks, it is somewhat difficult to define the actions necessary to affect the success of students. Therefore, it is difficult to develop recommendations that are clear enough to produce the desired outcomes. Admittedly, this area has the most development remaining, and it will take much discussion and planning by the committee to refine the recommendations and produce the desired outcomes.

The Recommendations are organized in several benchmark areas. Since the NSSE is well researched nationally and locally (four UWG administrations over six years), we can continue to

monitor these benchmark areas over time to measure improvement. The following recommendations are arranged by benchmark areas with specific item numbers for reference and reflect areas where UWG is statistically significantly below our peers or national norms:

Active and Collaborative Learning (ACL)

Item 1: Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussion. (NSSE Item 1a)

Recommendation 46: Develop faculty training and orientation materials (possibly including a book on encouraging class discussion) for each faculty member on campus. Offer webinar or seminar on this topic for on-going faculty professional development.

Item 2: Worked with other students on projects during class (NSSE Item 1g)

Recommendation 47: Expand opportunities for more group projects in class, possibly through learning communities or other connected learning opportunities (linked learning, living/learning communities, iServe Mentoring, etc.)

Item 3: Participated in a community-based project (e.g., service learning) as part of a regular course (NSSE Item 1k)

Recommendation 48: Expand the course offerings that are part of the iServe mentoring program for Freshmen and Sophomores by increasing the number of courses served by iServe mentoring. Encourage/Require service learning opportunities in core courses where such integration is appropriate.

Enriching Educational Experiences (EEE)

Item 4: Use an electronic medium (listserve, chatgroup, internet, instant messaging, etc.) to discuss or complete an assignment. (NSSE Item 1l)

Recommendation 49: Continue to expand faculty development and training opportunities for blended and e-core courses. Expand the use of Course Den where it is appropriate for the learning modality.

Item 5: Participating in co-curricular activities (organizations, campus publications, student government, fraternity or sorority, intercollegiate or intramural sports, etc.) (NSSE Item 9d)

Recommendation 50: Develop program that assigns each new student a Full-Time faculty/staff mentor; an upper classman mentor; and "require" involvement in one club, organization, major-based club, varsity, or intramural sport

Item 6: Encouraging contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds (NSSE Item 10c)

Recommendation 51: Be intentional about connecting recognized clubs and organizations that have as their membership diverse groups. Tie SAFBA funding to their completion of one program or social opportunity that enhances this item.

Item 7: Community service or Volunteer Work ((NSSE Item 7b)

Recommendation 52: Develop a campus-wide community service or volunteer program that provides a weekly opportunity locally, a regional or national experience each term. Work with University departments to organize On-Campus volunteer experiences for groups or individuals.

Student-Faculty Interaction (SFI)

Item 8: Talked about career plans with a faculty member or advisor (NSSE Item 1o)

Recommendation 53: Make the new Career Development program a content section of UWG 1101 class, LIBR 1101 Class, and all XIDS 2001 Class. Additionally, make Career Development a content section of each Capstone Course

Item 9: Worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework (committees, orientation, student life activities, etc.) (NSSE Item 1s)

Recommendation 54: Enhance undergraduate research opportunities; make a special effort to include students on department committees. Offer faculty development money for collaborative research that will include students as authors, something similar to or a component part of the criteria for SRAP.

Level of Academic Challenge (LAC)

Item 10: Number of written papers or reports c. 20 pages or more; d. between 5 and 19 pages; e. fewer than 5 pages (three separate items; three lengths of papers—all below national/peer norms). (NSSE Item 3c, 3d, 3e)

Recommendation 55: Encourage departments to offer more research-intensive seminars/courses with smaller class sizes for majors. Offer writing-intensive sections of core courses. [Note: this is related to the UWG Quality Enhancement Program].

Item 11: Preparing for class (studying, reading, writing, doing homework or lab work, analyzing data, rehearsing, and other academic activities) (NSSE Item 9a)

Recommendation 56: Set clear expectations of the level of effort needed to succeed in each class/syllabus (actually state the number of hours per week, etc.). Hold students to high expectations of preparation; enforce it in each class; create peer pressure; and use the preparation clearly in class. (Example: KhanAcademy.com)--learning/practicing happens outside of class, then reinforced in class.)

Supportive Campus Environment (SCE)

Item 12: Quality of Relationships with other students (NSSE Item 8a)

Recommendation 57: Imbed in the campus culture a sense of the responsibility of each student, faculty, and staff member to develop relationships to sustain our university community and sense of inclusion and engagement. Focus Student Life efforts on opportunities to develop relationships with other students--especially around diversity, inclusion, and civility

Item 13: Quality of relationships with faculty members (NSSE Item 8b)

Recommendation 58: Imbed in the campus culture a sense of the responsibility of each student, faculty, and staff member to develop relationships to sustain our university community and sense of inclusion and engagement. Find best practices of connecting students with faculty members outside of class. Encourage this type of "service" in tenure decisions and post-tenure review.

Item 14: Quality of relationships with administrative personnel and offices. (NSSE Item 8c)

Recommendation 59: Imbed in the campus culture a sense of the responsibility of each student, faculty, and staff member to develop relationships to sustain our university community and sense of inclusion and engagement. For administrative personnel and offices, this includes a special emphasis on our role to educate and develop students, and to respect students to provide exceptional customer service.

Item 15: Helping you cope with your non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc). (NSSE Item 10d)

Recommendation 60: Study the extent to which students have outside barriers to their success including, dependents, work obligations, etc. Then develop new and expand existing programs that will help them mitigate the effects of such obligations.

Item 16: Providing the support you need to thrive socially (NSSE Item 10e)

Recommendation 61: Continue the work of the Best Campus Ever committee, and embed student life and social integration into everything we do. Charge Student Affairs and Enrollment management to fulfill their obligations in the Strategic Plan.

Conclusion and Future Directions

It is with great pleasure that we send forth these recommendations to the President for consideration.

The next steps of the Commission is to develop Action Committees for each of the five improvement areas, and to begin to develop programs, services, and interventions that meet the requirements of the recommendations. The Action Committees will then be considered oversight committees that will continue to monitor the specific areas of improvement, and prepare an annual report that will inform the administration on the progress of the efforts, and will help ascertain if the specific interventions are impacting the graduation rate.

Through more than a year of organized study and work, the President's Special Commission to Improve Graduation Rates has determined that to change culture significantly enough to change the graduation rate on UWG's campus will take a tremendous amount of effort and discipline. The needed changes will occur only if we embrace these recommendations, and take bold action to actualize them such that they can have the intended effect. The Commission members, along with the numerous others involved, are committed to such effort, discipline, and bold action, and we respectfully seek Presidential direction, guidance, and support.

Reference

Kuh, G. (2003). How are we doing at engaging students? *About Campus*, 8(1), 9-16.