STANDING COMMITTEES

Academic and Student Affairs Committee

Student Retention Initiative

INFORMATION ITEM

This item is for information only.

BACKGROUND

The projects that compose the Retention Initiative stem from the recommendations made by the Retention and Graduation Rates taskforce at the University of Washington, Seattle campus. The taskforce was charged by then Provost Ana Mari Cauce with developing a set of recommendations for improving retention rates of undergraduate students on the Seattle Campus. These projects were designed to help a particular subset of the undergraduate population continue to make satisfactory academic progress towards their degree.

The two projects that will be highlighted during the presentation will be the Reinstated Student Pilot and the Outreach to Stop Outs and Non-Graduates. The Reinstated Student Pilot is an initiative to help students succeed upon their readmission to the UW. The pilot relies on strategic collaborations among different units throughout the university. The goal is to help students improve academically so they can continue to make satisfactory academic progress towards a degree.

The Outreach to Stop Outs and Non-Graduates is a collaboration with a Undergraduate Academic Affairs, Office of Minority Affairs & Diversity and different academic departments. The Stop Out Outreach identifies pre-major students that have not enrolled at the UW and hopes to reconnect with them to facilitate their return to the UW. The Outreach to Non-Graduates identifies students who are close to graduation but are no longer enrolled at the UW. The goal is to help these students complete any outstanding academic requirements so that they can graduate from the UW within a timely manner.

These projects are the responsibility of the Manager of Student Success within the Division of Student Life.

Attachments

1. UW Undergraduate Retention and Graduation: Executive Summary, OEA Report 14-01
2. Biographical Information for Felipe Martinez, Ed.D.
UW Undergraduate Retention and Graduation: 
Executive Summary

Catharine Beyer, Angela Davis-Unger, Nana Lowell, Debbie McGhee, Jon Peterson 
June 2014

"I struggled to stay motivated. Had really bad study habits. Lived in a horrible environment. Was alone, no support group, friends or family. Didn't feel like I fit in anywhere. Academic struggles. Depression for about one year." —Former UW student

Purpose of the Study

The six-year undergraduate completion rate for public colleges and universities in the U.S. averaged 59% in 2011 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2014). In Washington State, the average six-year completion rate has been about 69% for several years. According to UW Planning and Budgeting records, the UW’s six-year graduation rate has averaged 81% since 2005. Even though the UW has an excellent graduation rate, we recognize that improving completion rates is a value to U.S. and Washington State economies, to families and individuals seeking knowledge and upward mobility, and to students who have been admitted to the UW and want to succeed here.

Therefore, the UW Retention and Completion Study (UW RGS) was conducted on behalf of the Provost’s Office by the Office of Educational Assessment (OEA) in Undergraduate Academic Affairs (UAA). The study’s focus was limited to the UW’s Seattle campus. The purposes of the study were 1) to learn which groups of students are more likely to leave the UW than others, 2) to understand more about why those students leave from their own point of view, and 3) to identify strategies for intervening in future students’ decisions to leave.

Methods

The UW RGS gathered and analyzed data from four sources:
- Conversations with 63 staff members and administrators about retention efforts on campus.
- Analysis of the relationships of demographic and academic variables (as predictors) and yearly retention and graduation status (as outcomes) using multiple logistic regression techniques.
- OEA researchers used graduation and retention tables from the Office of Budgeting and Planning (OPB) to identify 56,271 students who entered UW Seattle as undergraduates between Spring 2005 and Winter 2012, and we examined the following variables for these students, obtained from the UW student database: sex, race/ethnicity, citizenship, residency, entry type (first-time first-year vs. transfer), first in family to attend college, Pell Grant eligibility, high school GPA, SAT scores, transfer GPA, UW GPA in the first year.
- A survey of 10,555 former students who had left the UW without graduating since 2004, which focused on their reasons for leaving. A total of 1,763 students (17%) completed the survey.
- Analysis of questions on an all-student survey (SERU) conducted in 2014 at the UW on why students who had considered leaving the UW had chosen to stay.
Findings

Community Conversations

A list of the retention efforts at UW (Appendix B) shows that retention efforts at the UW are decentralized and extensive across the Seattle campus. Those with whom we spoke pointed out that the information they have about students, particularly for some groups of students, is limited, and they would like better ways of gathering information on student populations and linking it to the student database. Furthermore, they suggested that the UW continue to explore aspects of retention that were not within the scope of this current study. These aspects included how UW policies (such as financial holds on registration, course withdrawal, credit/quarter limits, emergency loan pay-back, and hardship withdrawal policies) affect retention and completion, as well as information about the retention and completion of graduate students.

Existing Data

Analysis of existing data revealed the following:

- Differences in retention rates by first-generation status are not apparent until other demographic variables are controlled, which suggests that there are complex mechanisms underlying the relationship between first-generation status and college outcome.

- Part-time enrollment negatively affects not only the likelihood of persisting, but also the likelihood of graduation.

- The six-year graduation rates for Native American, African American, and Pacific Islander students lag behind those of other ethnic groups by up to thirteen percentage points.

- There has been a widening gap between the graduation rates of PELL recipients and their peers that is unrelated to other factors such as ethnicity or first-generation status.

- The average first-year UW GPA among graduates (3.24) was significantly greater than the average GPA for non-graduates average (2.61). First-year UW GPA predicted the outcome even after controlling for a student’s incoming GPA, and there was a significant difference between the average UW GPA of graduates and non-graduates among all demographic groups.

Survey of Leavers

The survey responses of former students clearly showed that the leaving process is usually complex. Students most often reported more than one reason for leaving, and often two or three reasons interacting with each other brought about students’ decisions to leave. The most frequently-given reasons that students gave for leaving in both fixed and open-ended responses included:

- Emotional distress/depression; health and well-being
- Financial reasons
- Quality of the academic experience (classes too big, not learning much, not getting money’s worth)
- Not doing well academically; problems with grades or credits
- Social isolation
- Issues related to major (couldn’t get into engineering or nursing; didn’t have the major I wanted at UW)
- Felt unwelcome here/bad personal experience here

In addition, students provided many suggestions for what the UW might have done to prevent them from leaving. The most frequently-given suggestion was to provide more support for students in a variety of ways.
Survey of Students Who Considered Leaving and Decided to Stay

Although about one in every five students who enters the UW leaves without graduating, more than one in every four students considers leaving but decides to stay. Those who considered leaving reported the same reasons for leaving that the students who actually left reported. The differences between those who stayed and those who left appeared to be that students who stayed have 1) a sense of being supported, especially by family, in their push to complete their undergraduate degrees, 2) the ability to wait the hard time out and/or take some small steps to help resolve the issue, and 3) perhaps the ability to conduct a cost-benefit analysis, weighing how much trouble it might be to leave against how hard it is to stay.

Recommendations

We offer the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Disseminate findings from this study widely throughout UW Seattle, particularly to the individuals and groups who participated in the community conversations and others engaged in retention efforts. Our hope is to inform ongoing work and to generate questions for further analysis and future study.

Recommendation 2: Hire an individual with the responsibility for coordinating retention efforts campus-wide and leading efforts to identify and resolve issues that relate to baccalaureate completion at UW Seattle. According to an ACT (2010) survey completed by chief academic affairs officers at 1,107 colleges and universities, including 258 public four-year universities, most (69.4%) of the public four-year institutions reported that there was a person on their campuses responsible for the coordination of retention programs. The individual with the responsibility of centrally coordinating retention efforts would conduct or coordinate interventions with students who are identified by this study as at risk for leaving and to design interventions such as those described in Walton and Cohen (2011) and Tough (2014).

Recommendation 3: Convene a task force to work with the individual responsible for coordinating retention to review findings from this report and construct a strategic plan for retention at UW-Seattle. The explicitly stated goal of the task force would be to increase the six-year graduation rate beyond 81% and to identify clear, evidence-based objectives that may be established and pursued with that goal in mind. Based on the findings of this study, the task force should consider the following:

- The effects of all forms of financial aid on retention and ways to increase work-study opportunities
- Ways to provide students with additional information about depression and anxiety related to college and to ensure that timely access to counseling is available for students seeking help for both major and minor depression
- Methods for improving the retention of underrepresented minority students, part-time students, and out-of-state students, whose retention rates are lower than those of others
- Methods for identifying and intervening with undergraduates whose UW GPAs fall below 2.6 in the first year
- Ways to help students have realistic expectations about typical academic experiences at UW and to enlist their parents in helping them in times of academic difficulty
- Approaches to ease students’ feelings of social isolation, especially in their first two years at UW
- Ways to help those monitoring and assisting special populations track those populations
- The effects of current UW policies on retention, including financial holds on registration, course withdrawal policy, credit and quarter limit rules, emergency loan pay-back policy, hardship withdrawal
Recommendation 4: Consider retention issues related to graduate and professional students at UW Seattle, and collaborate with UW Bothell and Tacoma on retention matters in ways that are useful to them.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the big and small, direct and indirect ways everyone who works at the UW is working to help students complete their degrees. The effort noted in the table in Appendix B, which represents only a portion of the retention work on campus, is laudable and contributes significantly to the UW having excellent first-year retention and six-year completion rates.
Felipe Martinez, Ed.D.
Manager of Student Success
Division of Student Life

Dr. Martinez is a higher education professional with over 10 years of experience developing programs that focus on student engagement, retention and leadership development. His research interests include, access to higher education, educational equity, globalization and the experience of first-generation college students within the university setting.

When creating support programs, Dr. Martinez utilizes a strengths-based approach to nurture student development and success. He has taught graduate students in the College of Education and currently works as Manager of Student Success at the University of Washington. In this role, he manages a portfolio of projects that aim at increasing the university’s overall graduation rate.