

Strategic Planning Student Success Sub-Committee Report

March 2016

INTRODUCTION

Committee Composition. The Student Success Subcommittee of the University Strategic Planning Committee included the following members : Carolyn Denard (Chair), Erin Weston, Jeanne Haslam, Nadirah Mayweather, Beauty Bragg, Eric Braun, James Carlisle, Mary Roberts, Kevin Blanch, Ryan Brown, Jeanne Sewell, Joy Godin, and Laruen-Cryder (did not attend). We met eight times over the course of the last two months to address the charge assigned to this sub-committee. Our sub-committee report follows.

State, regional, or national/international trends that may impact your area of focus. The changing demographics of Georgia's college-aged population, the steadily increasing cost of higher education, the expanded enrollment of the first-year class at University of Georgia, the increasing need for critical thinkers in the work place, and the College's desire to continue to be an institution that offers a distinctive liberal arts education will be key factors affecting the recruitment, retention and progression of Georgia College students in the future.

Aspirational definition of a Liberal Arts Education:

In order to establish a governing aspiration for our work, the Student Success Subcommittee first sought to establish a clear definition of a liberal arts education. *Building on the classical tradition of the liberal arts and the contemporary needs of our society, a liberal arts education at Georgia College can be defined as an intentional approach to learning that enhances discipline-specific knowledge and skills with a broader contextual understanding of the connections between disciplines and their meaning and application in the larger world. A liberal arts education at Georgia College develops student-scholars who are able to think critically, communicate effectively, make connections between the disciplines and the real world, construct an engaging civic identity, and confidently enter the workplace of the future as problem solvers and thoughtful leaders. Whether scientists, literary critics, historians, artists, teachers, community leaders, business or health care professionals, students at Georgia College are better able to meet the demand and challenges of their fields by having the broad approach to learning that a liberal arts education provides.*

WORK OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

After establishing a succinct, consensus description of the kind of liberal arts education that we wish to offer at Georgia College, the subcommittee then looked at the current success indicators for students at Georgia College--graduation and retention data of the last 6 years—in order to determine where we needed to place our strategic focus to achieve greater student success.

RETENTION AND GRADUATION NUMBERS 2008-2014 (ALL STUDENTS)

Year	Cohort	Ret 1	Ret 2	Ret 3	Ret 4	Ret 5	Ret 6	Grad 4	Grad 5	Grad 6
		Yr %								
2008	1,177.00	84.11%	72.22%	65.85%	61.94%	61.34%	61.60%	39.93%	58.37%	61.26%
2009	1,206.00	85.49%	71.39%	65.26%	62.02%	60.78%	61.19%	39.55%	57.63%	60.36%
2010	1,202.00	83.11%	67.72%	62.15%	59.15%	59.73%		42.01%	57.57%	
2011	1,204.00	85.80%	71.76%	67.36%	66.20%				49.67%	
2012	1,304.00	84.74%	70.94%	67.18%						
2013	1,395.00	85.52%	68.60%							
2014	1,463.00	85.92%								

We first reviewed the data (not all included here), outlining the graduation and retention rates at GCSU from 2008-2014 the last six years, and from that data we identified key groups of students, who with appropriate focus and remedy could experience greater success at Georgia College and in so doing positively impact retention and graduation rates overall. The committee recognizes that there are other indicators of students success beyond graduation and retention rates, but because these were the indicators designated for the focus of this subcommittee, these are the two areas where we placed our focus.

Strategic Recommendations to Improve Retention:

Retention efforts in higher education generally focus on first and second years students. As of fall 2015, Georgia College has the third highest retention rate for first time freshman in the USG, at 85%. As we plan strategically for the next four years, the challenge for Georgia College will be to maintain and improve its first- year retention, and there are new and continuing initiatives—enhancing the Week of Welcome, a designated First Year Experience Coordinator, and team advising-- at the College already focusing on the greater retention of first year students. The data indicated, however, that the area where we need the greatest focus in the area of retention was on

second to third year retention, now roughly 20 points lower than the first year retention rate at 68%. In our discussions, the subcommittee concluded that the lower retention rate for second year students is the result of several factors that, with clear strategic focus, can be addressed successfully over the next four years (2020). We have outlined those factors and suggested remedies below.

Factors Affecting Second-Year Retention

1) One factor that affects the withdrawal of students at Georgia College after their sophomore year is the **“long-term desire” factor**, (often because of family and social tradition and expectations) to attend a different institution – most notably for Georgia College students who want to attend the University of Georgia and Georgia Tech. This long-term desire, nurtured by family tradition and expectations, to graduate from another Georgia college is, because it is based on affective ties, one of the most difficult areas to address as we work to improve retention for second year students at Georgia College. Many students, who did not get accepted to UGA or Georgia Tech during their first round of admissions, come to Georgia College already planning to transfer if they are admitted to these colleges later. Ironically, successful matriculation at Georgia College where students enjoy the benefits of small, attentive faculty and robust academic support and leadership opportunities often help these students improve their GPA, making them more competitive for admission the second time around at their first-choice schools. While overcoming the familial and social pressures to attend these schools is a difficult task, the sub-committee believes that we can address retention with these student by doing three things:

- a) foregrounding the strong academic and leadership advantages (quality of instruction, opportunities of undergraduate research and supplemental instruction, one on one engagement with professors, successful review and acceptance by Georgia College grads into first rate graduate and professional schools) in an effort to challenge the perception that these benefits can only be experienced at research one universities.
- b) instituting programs and class rituals that help these students develop affective ties to Georgia College that we hope would become stronger than the familial and social ties to another institution.
- c) addressing this challenge head-on by reminding students of the true advantage at being a small selective school that offers undergraduates the same – if not better educational experience than can be gained at a larger university. We can institute a proactive campaign that emphasizes the good, value-added experience of attending a small, liberal arts institution like Georgia College. This proactive

approach will be designed intervene on what is an accepted expectation that 10 to 30% of the class will transfer.

2) Another factor affecting sophomore retention is **second-tier admissions**. Students in teacher education and nursing programs must be admitted to their respective programs during their sophomore year--after their general admission to Georgia College. Many students who do not get admitted into these programs will transfer out of Georgia College. The Nursing Program, for example, admits roughly 150 students each fall who identify their major as pre- nursing. The Nursing program only admits 58 students each fall. Nearly 60 % of the entering class has to decide at the end of their second year whether they will choose another major at Georgia College, leave the College, or reapply for admission the next semester. Between 2010 and 2012, data shows that 22% to 31% of the entering class that did not get admitted to the nursing program decided to transfer to another institution. These students who transfer because they were not admitted during the second tier admission process of the Nursing Program greatly impact our second-year retention numbers (roughly 2.5 percent of the entire entering class). While the numbers who do not get into second tier programs are not as great in the teacher education program, we do lose some students who do not get admitted to their chosen program. The selectivity of these second tier admission program is of great reputational benefit to the programs and to the College, but we should to keep in mind how the selectivity of second tier admission programs will continue to impact our second to third year retention. We recommend that the following.

- a) Consider admitting these students as more general area majors --“health sciences” majors rather than “pre-nursing majors”-- so that we have the opportunity to introduce students to a variety other careers/areas in their field of interest.
 - b) Aggressive advising on alternate careers in health sciences and education so that students will be less likely to transfer if they are not admitted to the pre-professional program to which they applied. We should take their first semester here to broaden their understanding of the opportunities available in the health sciences beyond nursing.
- 3) The retention of second-year students (and sometimes juniors and seniors) is also impacted by **a lack of a clear understanding of their career goals compounded by a lack of understanding of the mission of a liberal arts college**. At GCSU, students are encouraged to choose their major even before they enter the College. The major is requested on the applications and students are grouped for registration and orientation based on the major list on the admissions application. Because they have not yet matriculated at GCSU and do not have the benefit of the expertise and assessment of our career advisors, these high school seniors are often making poorly informed choices about their career and hence their major. They also do not yet understand the skill sets

gained from a liberal arts education and thus they make their major choice almost always based on their understanding of the “job” prospects associated with the major and not based on their strengths, interests, or skills. They often will change the major once they arrive. The delay in academic progression that changing majors causes and the general frustration with a lack of understanding of what are the skills they gain from the liberal arts or what kind of “job” they want after college, contributes to the “drop outs” and “stop outs” for some students. The subcommittee believes that we can intervene on these stop-out/ drop- out numbers (roughly 9%) of an entering cohort with

- a) More aggressive advising and information sessions on the advantage of a liberal arts education and the dynamic skill sets that are gained from the kind of education we offer.
 - b) A team advising approach between career services, academic advising, faculty and peers that help students identify their strengths and have opportunities to explore the best area to use those strengths would be another way to address this challenge.
 - c) Delaying the major choice until after students have had the opportunity to discuss their online career assessment and their major interest would be the most effective way to address this problem.
- 4) In an interesting discussion about the core, the subcommittee also concluded that **the two-year structure of the University's core curriculum gives students tacit permission to leave the University after the first two years**, greatly impacting second to third year retention at many schools.. Because all USG schools accept the same core, students feel free to reassess and shop for other colleges during their sophomore year because there is no progression penalty for making the choice after they finish the core. While there are USG advantages to having a transferable core, the committee believed that Georgia College could enhance its distinctiveness by have a core that satisfies the USG requirement but also includes a greater distribution of courses over four years rather than two years. Having a core that more broadly—beyond the GC1Y and GC2Y—addresses the qualitative distinction of the liberal arts mission of the university would be a way to not only improving the core but also a way to encourage students to stay at Georgia College beyond their second year.
- 5) Finally, we believe that the **social climate of the University**, while ostensibly welcoming, has some unwelcoming pockets, particularly for students of color. Most of the climate data at this point is anecdotal, but the data regarding the retention of students of color indicate that there are some problem beyond academic progress which might be impacting second year retention for these students.

Retention and Graduation Numbers for African American Students 2008-2014

Year	Cohort	Ret 1 Yr %	Ret 2 Yr %	Ret 3 Yr %	Ret 4 Yr %	Ret 5 Yr %	Ret 6 Yr %	Grad 4 Yr %	Grad 5 Yr %	Grad 6 Yr %
2008	51.00	90.20%	78.43%	64.71%	66.67%	58.82%	62.75%	41.18%	56.86%	60.78%
2009	47.00	87.23%	70.21%	61.70%	55.32%	61.70%	59.57%	25.53%	53.19%	57.45%
2010	45.00	91.11%	66.67%	55.56%	48.89%	53.33%		26.67%	51.11%	
2011	54.00	83.33%	68.52%	66.67%	62.96%				35.19%	
2012	52.00	84.62%	71.15%	69.23%						
2013	46.00	82.61%	76.09%							
2014	67.00	85.07%								

Retention Rates for Latino Students

Year	Cohort	Ret 1 Yr %	Ret 2 Yr %	Ret 3 Yr %	Ret 4 Yr %	Ret 5 Yr %	Ret 6 Yr %	Grad 4 Yr %	Grad 5 Yr %	Grad 6 Yr %
2008	53.00	81.13%	71.70%	62.26%	58.49%	52.83%	56.60%	20.75%	52.83%	56.60%
2009	43.00	83.72%	72.09%	60.47%	58.14%	55.81%	58.14%	39.53%	55.81%	58.14%
2010	81.00	86.42%	65.43%	58.02%	56.79%	58.02%		40.74%	56.79%	
2011	59.00	81.36%	64.41%	62.71%	62.71%				49.15%	
2012	78.00	85.90%	66.67%	65.38%						
2013	77.00	84.42%	54.55%							
2014	81.00	82.72%								

While we do relatively well with first-year retention for students of color generally, the retention rates for African American and Latino students from second to third year are between 65% and 70%. With the small number of students overall, the subcommittee believes that we could intervene on this departure of the 30% or roughly 15 students who leave by

- a) reviewing programming in campus life to ensure that there is programming that also focuses on the culture and interest of the underrepresented students
- b) engaging in proactive advising, Advisors would be charged, specifically, with monitoring and addressing the broad range of issues – social, cultural educational, and financial-- that might affect the retention of this population of students more than others. In addition to their advisors, these students should be assigned a peer mentor and a career advisor during the first semester so that an entire team is working to make sure that African American and Latino students feel welcome, know what the resources are, and perform well in their classes.

- c) affirming in a variety of ways that diversity at Georgia College is a serious institutional goal.

The even greater challenge with this student population is their 4-- and 6- year graduation rate that ranges between 35% and 61%. We believe that we can improve in both the retention and graduation of underrepresented students by not only assessing and addressing climate issues, but also by

- d) making sure that students are aware of and using the resources available to students to help them achieve success: the Learning Center, the SI Program, team advising, and by
- e) recruiting more students of color overall so that these student can develop robust communities within their affinity group.

Graduation

The current four-year graduation rate at GCSU is 49.7% 4-yr, up 10 points since 2013. The six year graduation rate is 60.36, a number that has generally held steady for the past four years. While the 4-year retention rate has risen by 10 percentage points over the last two years from 39.7 percent in 2013 to 49.7 in 2015, GCSU is still far behind the top-tier COPLAC institutions where they rank 8th in 4-yr graduation rate and they rank 3rd among USG institutions. If we use top tier COPLAC institutions (SUNY- Geneseo and Mary Washington at 66% 4-yr graduation rate and 78 and 74% respectively for 6- year graduation rates), as a measure of our preeminence as a public liberal arts college, then, GCSU should strive for better performance in both its 4 and 6 year graduation rates in order to get closer to the rates of other top tier COPLAC. The Subcommittee's research suggests that there are three major areas that impact graduation rates at Georgia College: high achieving students who leave but who still graduate at other USG institutions; delayed progression because of poor academic performance, late changes of the major, or other health, social or financial reasons; and not passing legislative tests required for graduation in a timely manner.

Year	Cohort	Ret 1 Yr %	Ret 2 Yr %	Ret 3 Yr %	Ret 4 Yr %	Ret 5 Yr %	Ret 6 Yr %	Grad 4 Yr %	Grad 5 Yr %	Grad 6 Yr %
2008	1,177.00	84.11%	72.22%	65.85%	61.94%	61.34%	61.60%	39.93%	58.37%	61.26%
2009	1,206.00	85.49%	71.39%	65.26%	62.02%	60.78%	61.19%	39.55%	57.63%	60.36%
2010	1,202.00	83.11%	67.72%	62.15%	59.15%	59.73%		42.01%	57.57%	
2011	1,204.00	85.80%	71.76%	67.36%	66.20%			49.67%		
2012	1,304.00	84.74%	70.94%	67.18%						
2013	1,395.00	85.52%	68.60%							

- 1) The first area that affects our graduation rates is **the loss of high achieving students to other institution**. Because the 30% of high achieving students who transfer from Georgia College are students who go on to graduate, mostly from USG institutions, and are not “drop outs” or stop outs,” their leaving greatly impacts our graduation rate. As we seek to gain preeminence as a public liberal arts college, an important area to address will be the transfer-out rates of students we initially enroll. Because these students’ reasons for leaving are often for affective reasons (social and familial), this will be a difficult task. In order to address the needs of these students and in so doing also address a significant cause of our low graduation rates, retention initiatives will have to begin to focus on how to help students develop social, intellectual, and affective ties to the College. The subcommittee believes that addressing the “affective tie” issue by encouraging students to develop such a tie with Georgia College early in their matriculation will help to reduce the departure of the relatively large number of students who leave Georgia College each year and go on to graduate from other institutions. (See above in Retention section on ways to develop these affective ties to the institution.)
- 2) A second area that we discovered that has an impact of graduation rate is students **not passing the legislative tests in a timely manner**. Students are required to take four legislative tests (US History, Georgia History, US Constitution, and Georgia Constitution) as part of their graduation requirements. Student have four times (with one test three times) to take the test before they have to take a class instead. With only 20 students per year who do not graduate because they fail or do not take the test, focus on this area will admittedly have a small impact on overall graduation rates. But the test does delay students even if it does not prevent graduation entirely. Many students have to take the test four times. But we believe that it is an area where we can make immediate positive impact. We can
 - 1) encourage students to take the tests earlier in their career and not wait until their senior year when they have less time to retake the tests if they fail.
 - 2) Write study guides for all four tests so that students can prepare appropriately
 - c) Develop a course in the core that meets all four requirements. Georgia and US History and Constitution.
 - d) Seriously consider re-thinking this requirement and taking the steps necessary to eliminate the tests. Given our desire for national preeminence, the legislative tests that focus on one state’s history might be a barrier for students who are from another state.

3) A third area causing student to delay graduation is students **not completing 120 hours in four years**. Because students can qualify for HOPE with only 12 hours and because most of our courses are 3 credit hours. Many students take 12 hour because they believe that they will do better academically without a 14-to 15 hour class load. Research by our office of institutional effectiveness, “15 to Finish: A Good Fit for Georgia College?” [Eric Braun and Chris Ferland, 2015], suggests, however, that students who take at least 14 hours per semester benefit from the “academic momentum” brought on by the greater, consistent academic involvement required by a 14-15 hour course load. There report concluded that “the greater academic momentum created by the increased class load reduced the number of students who transfer and thus who do not graduate from Georgia College by 10%.” This research suggests that we should, through advising and consistent messaging throughout campus, encourage a “15 to Finish” campaign.

4) And, finally, a fourth areas that impacts student graduation is **delayed progression because of poor academic performance or because of social, medical, or financial challenges**. These factors can contribute to “stop out” and “drop out” among students. Of the 30% of students who leave each semester 90% go on to attend and graduate from other colleges. Nine to ten percent of this group, however, does not continue, and there is a combination of personal, social, financial reasons that contribute to the students’ lack of progression. The subcommittee believes that with proactive outreach by the Learning Center staff, academic advisors, faculty, and financial aid and psychological counselors, we could have better results keeping these students at Georgia College and helping them to be successful.

Measurable Goals and Objectives for the Future

We believe that there is no better indicator of the preeminence of a college than the quality of its instruction and the success of its students. Monitoring student progression and all of the factors that contribute to it can help ensure that students will stay at the in school and graduate in a timely manner. With the recent rise in GCSU’s four-year graduation rate, indicators are pointing in the right direction. But to achieve preeminence, wherein we are in the top-tier rankings in our state, our region, and the nation, we must improve our graduation numbers. Over the next five years, while highlighting our many successes, the University needs to focus on specific areas in order to improve our student retention and graduation rates overall. We have the resources and ideas, we just need to sharpen our focus on those areas where we can make the greatest impact. We need to act boldly, consistently, and creatively in these

focused areas to make sure that more of our students' progress successfully and graduate in a timely manner.

STRATEGIC TARGETS FOR THE NEXT FOUR YEARS

- 1. improve four year graduation rate to 55% and 6 year graduation rate to 70% by 2020**
 - a. conduct a targeted campaign for the students who indicate that they wish to transfer to another institution – info sessions with academic and career advisors, alumni, upper class students, posters, social events that provide information about the advantages of attending Georgia College. **Fall 2016**
 - b. require advisors to establish a progression and graduation check list for each of his or her advisees to make sure that they are always aware, for early intervention and alerts, of the retention and graduation status of their advisees..
Fall 2016
- 2. reduce to 0% the number of students who do not pass the legislative tests by the second try**
 - a. prepare study guides for all four legislative tests to help students who have to take these tests pass after the first or second try. Complete study guides by beginning of Spring Semester 2017.
 - b. encourage students to take the tests early in their college career – by the end of the sophomore year. Increase the percentage of students who take the legislative test by the end of their sophomore year by 10%
 - c. begin on-campus discussions with history and government departments, provost's office, and testing center to determine whether petition legislature to eliminate the test is feasible.
- 3. increase second-year retention rate from 65% to 70% by 2020**
 - a. create rituals early in the students matriculation that help them feel a qualitative connection to Georgia College
 - b. establish an annual Sophomore Assembly to encourage class bonding and to share important information about the sophomore year. **Fall 2016**
 - c. conduct a sophomore satisfaction survey of all second-year students during the second week of their first semester as a sophomores. **Fall 2016**

- d. conduct an exit interview all students who have chosen to withdraw to understand the reasons for the withdrawal so that we can intervene more quickly and more effectively. **Fall 2016**
- e. require entering students to have a conversation with faculty members in their chosen department or with career advisors before choosing their major. **Fall 2017**
- f. establish an advising team—advisors, faculty, SOAR staff-- for underrepresented students so that unique academic and social challenges can be addressed early by an effective staff acting as a team. **Summer 2016**
- g. provide annual training for academic and career advisors in more effective advising for minority students. **Summer 2016**
- h. review the core curriculum for ways to build on the first two years and add integrative and dynamic junior and senior capstones that encourage students to stay at Georgia College in order to finish. The LARP committee has already begun to develop some new curriculum initiatives. **Begin Fall 2016**