

Retention to Graduation

Student Success in South Carolina

Introduction

Every year thousands of students withdraw from postsecondary education without completing a degree or certificate program. Many more of them would persist and succeed if colleges and universities deliberately and strategically re-designed themselves to promote greater student success, according to State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) report – More Student Success, A Systemic Solution.

South Carolina has raised students' reading achievement in the early grades since 2005, but it needs to work harder to raise college graduation rates and other measures of education progress, a Southern Regional Education Board report shows. The in-depth report outlines the state's progress on the SREB *Challenge to Lead* Goals for Education.

Although South Carolina's high school graduates enroll in college at a higher rate than other U.S. graduates; and in 2006, 59 percent of students (full-time degree-seeking freshmen students) entering the state's four-year public colleges and universities in 2000 graduated within six years - exceeding the national average of 53 percent (see Table 1 below), the report stated that the state needs an even higher graduation rate in order to build a highly skilled work force and fuel economic growth.

Table 1.

	"Freshmen"	"Sophomores"	1- Year Retention Rate	Graduation Rate			
	Fall 2000 <u>Enrolled*</u>	Fall 2001 <u>Enrolled**</u>		South Carolina			National
	(1)	(2)		<u>4-Year</u>	<u>5-Year</u>	<u>6-Year</u>	<u>6-Year</u>
	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)		
SC Public Senior Institutions	12,485	9,803	78.5%	35.7%	55.1%	59.1%	53.3%

* Column 1 - Fall 2000 First Time, Full Time, Degree-Seeking Freshmen

** Column 2 - Fall 2000 First Time, Full Time, Degree-Seeking Freshmen retained in Fall 2001 at the same institution

Retention to Graduation: Affecting Factors

Data¹ have shown that graduation rates are impacted by a variety of factors that are external to the University, as well as internal and institutional. Students' economic circumstances (financial needs/support), number of hours of off-campus work per week, and family obligations are important factors impacting academic progress and time-to-degree. Studies have shown that one of the most important factors affecting retention and graduation rates is the level of student achievement in preparing for college during high school (e.g., high school GPA; SAT or ACT scores, college preparatory credits earned; AP or IB courses completed; credits for additional academic electives; extracurricular accomplishments; etc.). However, there are factors affecting graduation rates that can be impacted by the institution. Below are some of those factors:

- Academic Support (tutoring, linked courses, identification of at-risk students, advising structure and availability, study groups, course availability, performance feedback, student handbook, program-level, program orientation)
- the existence of and strength of support programs for new freshmen (e.g. First-Year Experience Initiatives) and at-risk students
- Institution's Retention Programs/Academic Preparedness² (Academic integration and preparation are primary features of many models of retention. Research shows that between 30 and 40 percent of all entering freshman are unprepared for college-level reading and writing and approximately 44 per-cent of all college students who complete a 2- or 4-year degree had enrolled in at least one remedial/developmental course in math, writing, or reading. And,

- Campus Climate². While researchers agree that “institutional “fit” and campus integration are important to retaining college students to degree completion, campus climate mediates undergraduates’ academic and social experiences in college. Minority and low-income students inadequately prepared for non-academic challenges can experience culture shock. Lack of diversity, with regard to income and race/ethnicity, in the student population, faculty, staff, and curriculum often restrict the nature and quality of minority students’ interactions within and out of the classroom, threatening their academic performance and social experiences.

Why is Student Success Important and Why Increase the Number of Students Graduating from College?

- Because not completing a 2-year or 4-year college education has dramatic financial implications to the individual as well as the state.
 - *South Carolina has a big stake in the success of students. State taxpayers invest over \$ 893 million annually into the State’s higher education systems. This represents an investment of approximately 13.3% of the State’s General Fund. Millions more in federal financial aid are spent to support college students. But increasingly this is not enough. So students and families spend millions more to pay for college fees, room, board, books and transportation costs required to attend college—often racking up considerable debt.*
- Because higher education is the primary instrument for breaking the cycle of poverty.
- Because higher education enriches the state by lowering social services costs (welfare, Medicaid, aid for dependent children, law enforcement, etc.) and increases the tax base.
- Because U.S. students from the top quartile of family income have an 11 times greater chance of earning a college degree than students from the lowest quartile.

¹California State University, Northridge Graduation Rates Task Force Report, 2003

University System of Georgia (USG) Guidelines for 2005 Retention/Graduation Rate Plan Report

²Part I. Barriers to Student Retention and Success on College Campuses, *Dr. Watson Scott Swail*