

**Office of Academic Affairs**

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MEMORANDUM TO: Campus Community

FROM: Dr. Lori Gonzalez  
Provost & Executive Vice Chancellor Academic Affairs

DATE: January 31, 2013

SUBJECT: Finish in Four

As you may know, the University of North Carolina (UNC) Board of Governors is adopting new accountability measures for campuses. Some of the measures convey the expectation that more of our undergraduate students will complete their degrees in a timely manner. These expectations have been articulated, for instance, in the first draft of the UNC Strategic Plan, "Our Time, Our Future: The UNC Compact with North Carolina":

*Set Degree Attainment Goals Responsive to State Needs ... To meet UNC's share of these statewide degree attainment goals, UNC must focus on improving graduation rates ... Action Steps to Improve retention and graduation rates:*

- 1. Implement the student success initiatives, created by the Faculty Assembly and recommended by the Academics First Steering Committee, that are designed specifically to increase retention, student success, and timely degree completion. These include, for example, early warning systems and standards for increased grade point requirements for satisfactory academic progress.*
- 2. Increase number of courses offered in the summer to help narrow the degree completion gap of underrepresented students and reduce time to degree for all students.*

In addition to the action steps stated in the draft UNC Strategic Plan, the UNC General Administration has been working collaboratively with campuses to establish performance metrics that will be used in funding allocations, based upon our ability to show progress towards those metrics. Among those metrics are our freshman retention rate, freshman four-year graduation rate, transfer four-year graduation rate, freshman six-year graduation rate, and degree efficiency.

Even though the UNC Board of Governors is placing new emphases on these performance indicators, graduating students in a timely manner is the right thing to do. Students who graduate in four years save money and have lower debt. Obviously, this renewed emphasis does not mean that every student will graduate in four years. But, if we can provide intentional curriculum development and advising, purposeful programming, and the right type of student service support, then more students *can* graduate in four years.

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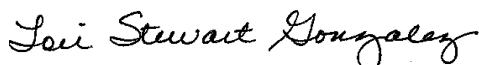
Our collective efforts to this point have been positive, resulting in an improvement in our four-year graduation rate to 44.1%, a gain of 5-7 percentage points over the past few years. In addition, we have already put in place many important new initiatives to improve retention and graduation, including developing four-year plans for each degree program through program prioritization; implementing MAPWorks and DegreeWorks; increasing expectations of students through more rigorous academic policies; and reviewing our general education curriculum. These efforts, along with the future implementation of other best practices, will make our strong university even stronger.

For the above reasons, I charged a reading group to review relevant literature and research best practices related to having students “finish in four.” During the summer of 2012, Library faculty members assisted the group with the literature review, and interviews were conducted with peer institutions. The group has compiled a digest of best practices as a resource for further consideration, and they have done this work admirably. Our next step is to work together as a campus community to determine which of these best practices fit Appalachian and will help our students achieve more, which in turn will raise our already relatively high retention and graduation rates.

As the report indicates, existing campus working teams will have the responsibility of reviewing the best practices outlined in the report of the “Finish in Four” Reading Group. The existing campus working teams associated with each best practice are highlighted in red next to each main topic on pages 5-8. When the existing campus working teams have completed their reviews to determine whether the best practice fits at Appalachian, they will make recommendations to me or other appropriate stakeholders (e.g., AP&P, General Education Council, Dean’s Council, and Faculty Senate), and we will move toward implementation of programming, policies, and initiatives.

Thank you, in advance, for the contributions that you may make to these efforts.

Sincerely,



Lori Stewart Gonzalez, Ph.D.  
Provost & Executive Vice Chancellor

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# Finish in Four

Final Report and Recommendations

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In May, 2012 Dr. Gonzalez identified a cross section of campus to come together to form a reading group to identify the very best researched methods to increase retention, persistence, and completion rates among Appalachian State University students. She challenged this group to think broadly and not consider what has been done in the past or how we do things now; but rely upon the research. This group became the Finish-in-Four reading group.

Members of the reading group chose a sub-group: retention, persistence, or completion. The work of each sub-group was to identify relevant literature and researched best practices that lead to high rates of retention, persistence, and completion. These best practices were shared across sub-groups at discussion meetings. Next, the sub-groups found institutions that had implemented a best practice to contact and hear anecdotal evidence of 'lessons learned'. The work of this group has been compiled into a digest of best practices providing a possible path forward for all Appalachian students to persist and complete their degree in a timely manner.

The Finish in Four reading group may be finished, but we all like to think of this time as a new beginning--an opportunity to move ASU in a new direction as well as celebrate and renew our strengths and what is working! By steeping ourselves in the research we were empowered to think creatively beyond the bounds of what 'may or may not' have worked in the past, as well as establishing each group member as an 'expert' in the best practices and research of retention, persistence, and completion. We were also reminded that many of the best practices identified are already in place on campus. Therefore, articulation of these best practices should not result in an 'overhaul' of current policies, practices, or programming; but rather minor adjustments.

The retention group included Jamar Banks (Center for Student Involvement & Leadership), Nikki Crees (Orientation), Phil Lewis (Transfer Articulation), and Kendal McDevitt (Wellness Programs). The retention sub-group, more so than others, found that Appalachian has a strong history of implementing best practices. Additional best practices that could be incorporated at Appalachian include a more comprehensive approach to engaging students on campus, implementing the Alcohol EDU (NC State) program, and finally flipping the question, "Why are you leaving ASU?" to "Why are you *staying* at ASU?"

The persistence sub-group comprised Susan Davies (Enrollment Management), Shirley Harris (University Advising), Teri Lockwood (Academic Affairs), Kathleen Lynch-Davis (College of Education), and Heather Langdon (IRAP). The committee passionately felt that we should 'go and see' what is working on other

campuses. Best practices include increased student engagement on campus and with faculty, sophomore residency and sophomore bridge programs, experiential learning (providing experiences for students to increase the likelihood they will persist), and implementation of interventions for students on academic probation.

The completion sub-group included Judy Haas (Student Conduct), Sharon Jensen (Career Development), Martha Marking (College of Fine & Applied Arts), Norma Riddle (Library), and Mike Mayfield (Academic Affairs). The group noted that a strong university culture is important in supporting students to complete in four years. This includes sharing data with all departments to better understand the areas where students hit roadblocks. Additional best practices included the use of summer school as a strategic tool to help with timely student completion, pairing career development with advising (impacting major selection), and a recommendation that a follow-up research project be completed reviewing 'time/credit to degree' within each department at Appalachian.

While each sub-group identified a set of best practices unique to the specific needs of retention, persistence, and completion there were a number of central themes that emerged across the entire Finish in Four Reading Group. These central themes should be prioritized for consideration (see Chart of identified best practices).

## Chart of identified best practices:

Retention	Persistence	Completion
<b>Shared by all Three Sub-Groups</b>		
Culture of ‘High Expectations’/Persistence	Culture of ‘High Expectations’/Persistence	Culture of ‘High Expectations’/Persistence
Institutional Policy Review	Institutional Policy Review	Institutional Policy Review
Advising	Advising	Advising
<b>Shared by at Least Two Sub-Groups</b>		
Increased involvement on campus	Academic/Social Connectedness	
Faculty Engagement in Orientation	Faculty -Student Interactions	
Early ID of Academic ‘At Risk’	Interventions for Academic Difficulty	
	Major Selection	Major Selection/Changes/Time to Graduate
	Financial Aid/Incentives	Lower Debt increases completion
<b>Unique to Each Sub-Group</b>		
Alcohol/Drug Policy	Peer Mentors	Summer School
	Family Involvement	Online or hybrid courses to improve access and success
	Experiential Learning	Continued Research
	Sophomore Programs	
	Transfer Students	
	Students with Disabilities	

## **Institutional Policy Review –Student Achievement Team**

Throughout most of the research, recommendations for institutional policy review were made repeatedly.

- Create Institutional policy and advising to cut the incidence of withdrawals and repeats
- Examine policies related to access to higher education, student readiness, affordability, and unrepresented populations
- One report specifically recommends review of the following policy:
  - Credit hours required for a degree
  - Credit hours accrued by students to earn a degree
  - Online and hybrid courses
  - Dual and early college enrollment
  - Review policies related to transfer students to ensure smooth transition

## **Culture of “High Expectations” and Culture of Persistence - Student Achievement Team**

By stating our expectation of continuous enrollment toward the four-year degree from the beginning, and developing programs and policies that support progression toward the degree, students understand they are expected to stay at Appalachian and complete their degree in four years.

- Have students sign a four year pledge upon first enrolling
- Ensure that every academic major program has a four year plan
- Pursue a progression rate policy that includes GPA and number of credit hours
  - i.e., First-year credit generation-make sure students end their first year of enrollment with 20 or more additive credits
- Create an “Office of Retention” or hire a director or coordinator for programs that focus on retention and persistence
- Create ways to involve parents/families as partners in their students’ persistence to the degree
- Remind students and families about the tuition surcharge throughout enrollment
- Identify and re-engage students who stopped their education near completion of the degree they were seeking or when eligible for another academic degree.
- Examine two programs identified to re-engage students: Non-Traditional No More directed by the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE) and Project Graduate sponsored by the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education.
- Ongoing communication and collaboration across campus

## **Advising - University Advising Council, NACADA Consultant Review**

“Good advising may be the single-most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience.” Institutions should have a solid academic advising program and follow a developmental model. There should be good training for academic advisors. There should be enough academic advisors, so their caseloads allow more time for each student throughout the semester.

- Identify at-risk students and provide increased advising support
- Ensure that academic advising is aligned with career services
- Review the NCSU First Year College as a model for advising undeclared majors
- Expand University College Advising personnel to meet best practice for caseload
- Be more intentional about transitioning students from University College Advising to advising in the major
- Explore best practices and develop a model for upper-class advising in their majors
- Develop a more centralized website for student advising
- Consider hiring a comprehensive coordinator for advising to oversee best practices in advising at all levels
- Advising for targeted populations such as first-generation students
- Ensure that academic advising is aligned with career services (i.e., organizationally through reporting lines)

## **Academic/Social Connectedness - University College, Hubbard Programs for Faculty Excellence**

Students are more likely to persist when there are programs to help them feel connected to the institution. It is important to understand there should be a balance of academic and social engagement. Students who are highly engaged academically may not necessarily persist if they are not socially engaged. According to one article, “Living on campus provides more opportunities to be engaged in academic and social activities and interact with faculty and students, subsequently resulting in a higher likelihood of persistence in college.”

- Provide an involvement center and heavily market involvement options: The Center for Student Involvement and Leadership could “package” their services in an enhanced manner (Ex: appetizers, main courses, desserts).
- Continue to support and develop Residential Learning Communities

### **Faculty-Student Interactions and Engagement - University College, Hubbard Programs for Faculty Excellence**

Intentional faculty-student interactions help students feel more connected to the institution and their academic major. When students perceive an institutional commitment to their success (culture of commitment to student success), the likelihood of persistence increases. ("High impact learning experiences" is a great phrase from one article.) Faculty-student interactions outside of class are particularly important (see experiential learning below, these are closely related).

- Encourage retention-friendly interactions with students that encourage them to ask for help and work to open up services to make them friendly.
- Support faculty in delivering innovative instructional practices for millennial students that is student-centered or that encourages active learning, teaching that is current with scholarship or industry, and the use of updated technology relevant to the classroom.
- Invite faculty members to participate in the new student orientation. The orientation should do more to encourage incoming students to interact with faculty by making use of office hours and making appointments.
- Revisit the departmental meetings during summer orientation
  - Ensure dynamic faculty presentations to generate interest and enthusiasm for major programs
  - Model the JMU program which hires faculty to meet with students in the summer to facilitate this process

### **Interventions for Academic Difficulty - Student Achievement Team**

Intentional advising for these students is important: Discuss how they are doing, goal setting, and study habits. Required and intrusive advising, and other programs for students in academic trouble, promotes persistence. Institutions with well-developed programs for students on academic probation include Western Carolina University and Virginia Commonwealth University.

- Identify at-risk students and provide advising
- At Western Carolina University, first semester freshmen and transfers whose cumulative GPA is between 1.0 and 1.99 at the end of their first semester may only return to the university if they choose to participate in the "Learning Contract" program. This program includes a requirement to return early spring semester for special programming, academic advising that includes setting realistic goals, and making plans to obtain those goals.
- At Virginia Commonwealth University, freshmen and sophomores with 24 or fewer earned credit hours are placed on academic warning/probation (less than 2.0 GPA) and may take the UNIV 102 MINDSET course. This course includes developing an individualized program of study and helps "students identify reasons for their academic difficulties and learn a new MINDSET (defined as habits and attitudes) for achieving academic success." Degree-seeking students are not permitted to enroll in more than 13 credits while on academic probation.
- Institute Supported Entry Assessment: Supported Entry Assessment identifies students who are most likely to be at risk (20-25% of incoming students). These students are then required to take a "support seminar" that involves a "pod" of students from their Degree English Requirement (DER) class. This seminar meets for one hour every week and works on the DER course as a group with a faculty mentor. This process will contribute to student success, retention, and increased faculty-student engagement in the student's first year.
- Update the Academic Good Standing GPA policy:
  - All students must maintain a 2.0 to be in academic good standing at Appalachian State University

### **Major Selection - University Advising Council, Career Development**

Students are more likely to persist when they are able to select the appropriate major early. "Degree program satisfaction affects student motivation, which indirectly impacts student habits, academic integration, and study progress."

- Orientation to the major/school upon declaration creates a better transition from general advisor to the major advisor
- Students are more likely to connect with majors in which they can see a direct connection between their major and career choice
- Host an annual majors fair for students
- Develop programs that help students select the appropriate major for them; involve career services
- Declaring a specific major by end of the second year leads to quicker graduation rates and higher gpa's



### **Time to Degree/Graduate** - Dean's Council, Associate Deans Enrollment Management Team

Institutional strategies cited to improve time-to-degree include:

- Guarantee time-to-degree promising students will be able to register for required classes and not be closed out of them
- Encourage college credits earned in high school
- Employ technology and distance education in courses
- Increase course offerings in summer school
- Offer financial incentives for finishing in 4 years
- Manage class seats in order to meet student needs
- Monitor students' progress
- Improve advising
- Address issues involving transferability of courses
- Examine enrollment management procedures for current and projected majors
- Examine seats management procedures

### **Financial Aid/Incentives** - Enrollment Management, Financial Aid

Review potential financial aid programs or incentives for students, including sub-populations and demographic groups, keeping in mind that student debt beyond \$10,000 reduces the likelihood of completion.

- Some institutions are providing financial incentives for finishing in four years
- Give tuition rebates to students who 'finish on time'
- Use the tuition surcharge as an impetus for persisting and finishing
- Increase Work Study (financial aid) opportunities
- Assign students to departments and/or work, based on their interests and/or major/career choice

### **Alcohol/Drug Policy** - University College, Student Development

Evidence-based alcohol programs, policies, and interventions have been successful in improving persistence rates.

- Implement active sanctions for alcohol/other drug violations: Institute a Two-Strike Policy (though the data was unable to clearly demonstrate a link between this policy and a decrease in alcohol/drug violations and/or increase in retention)
- Implement AlcoholEdu (NCSU)
- Implement active sanctions for first time alcohol offenders

### **Peer Mentors** - University College, Student Development

Peer mentors and peer leaders help students see someone "like them" who has been successful in college.

- Utilize peer mentors for programs; most programs can benefit from peer mentors
- Target sophomores as mentors for freshman to help with sophomore engagement and to combat the "sophomore slump"
- First Year Seminar courses have used peer mentors successfully

### **Family Involvement** - Retention Coordinator, Family & Parent Services

Students are more likely to be successful when families "understand how college works" and families have high expectations of their students (essentially, that they will finish college). Also, for students who are particularly connected with their family and are homesick, providing experiences in college that mesh with the student's family/cultural experiences and values can contribute to student success.

- View families as partners and engage them as partners
- Send parents a survey or questionnaire of early engagement questions, so parents can discuss concerns with students (Examples: Are you making friends? Are you going to class? Tell me about your classes.)
- Send letters about the "sophomore slump" to families
- Design outreach programs for parents through an Office of Retention in collaboration with Parent and Family Services

### **Experiential Learning** - University College, Student Development

These experiences help students with major selection and in feeling more connected to the institution and the world around them. There tends to be high satisfaction among students who have these experiences.

- Experiences can include service learning, undergraduate research, internships, field experiences, and study abroad
- Experiential learning should be incorporated very early in student experiences to assist with major and career selection

### **Sophomore Programs - Retention Coordinator**

Sophomores may feel, after a first year full of attention, that during their second year they are “pushed off a cliff and told, ‘Now learn how to fly.’” More research and best practices are being published on the Sophomore Year Experience and the “sophomore slump.” Some characteristics of the “slump” include losing focus, no connection to the University, housing issues, and being second-year freshmen. Programmatic initiatives for sophomores may include welcome back events, the opportunity to assist and welcome new freshmen, and a common sophomore course which includes common elements and attendance at events.

- Develop a Sophomore Year Experience, specifically a Sophomore Summer program (modeled after the OHU, former program). This program needs to be connected to majors.
- Ohio University has offered a Sophomore Summer Program which serves as a “bridge” between the freshman and sophomore year. Students complete six credit hours of coursework which is complemented with career development and social programming.
- Lewis and Clark College addresses transitional issues during college by sending letters to parents at the end of the first year/start of the second year to describe the “sophomore slump.”
- Use Sophomores as peer mentors
- Provide on-campus housing for all second year students

### **Transfer Students - Transfer Advisory Board, Enrollment Management, Student Development**

Transfer students need services that are specific to their needs. Some institutions have a “transfer student center” or a “one stop” for transfer students. The center can include assistance with course articulation, academic advising, advice on major selection, and a “commuter lounge.”

- Develop intentional focus on transfer students to help them succeed
- Create a transfer Student Center that consolidates currently offered services and resources for transfers into one location; reorganize existing resources
- Continue to support and develop Residential Learning Communities for transfer students

### **Students with Disabilities - Office of Disability Services**

Ensure that students with disabilities also feel connected, academically and socially, to the institution. One article suggested that students do not identify themselves as needing disability services due to the stigma. The suggestion was to design self-determination workshops, self-advocacy training, assistive technology, faculty and staff development, and a universal design for instruction techniques to empower students with disabilities to achieve greater social access as well as academic access.

- Supportive Education Program (SED) for students with psychiatric disabilities
- Increase awareness of Disability Services resources among all students and faculty.

### **Summer School/Online or Hybrid Courses – Summer Sessions, possibly a “Summer School Task Force”**

Students attending summer school after the freshman year had increased completion.

- Strategic enrollment management can move sections of high demand courses into summer terms.
- Use creative online and hybrid courses to improve access and success
- Offer credit-bearing internships in summer terms
- Engage in other creative initiatives that will also smooth out the utilization of institutional resources over what has become an “academic calendar year.”

### **Continued Research - Retention Coordinator and IRAP**

Thorough research on persistence should be conducted to understand persistence on campus. Examples of research endeavors might include an examination of persistence rates by major through graduation, a study of major students changing majors, a profile of persisters, and characteristics of the “sophomore slump”.

- Conduct Exit surveys of students who leave the university
- Identify barriers to persistence
- Research programs that diverse populations find address racial/diversity issues (all students should feel welcome)
- Research sub-populations that do not persist
- Ask why students stay rather than why they leave
- Make site visit to James Madison University (a peer institution with an exemplary retention rate)