

UNIVERSITY SYSTEM OF GEORGIA

TEAM FOR IMPROVING

RETENTION AND GRADUATION RATES

A University System of Georgia Task Force Report

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	3
I. RETAINING THE FRESHMAN COHORT: FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE INITIATIVES	6
II. BEYOND THE FIRST YEAR: IMPROVING PROGRESSION AND GRADUATION RATES.....	10
III. SHARED RESPONSIBILITY: DEPARTMENT/DIVISION RETENTION PLANS.....	14
SUMMARY	17
<u>Appendices</u>	
Appendix A. Final Report - University System of Georgia Task Force on Graduation Rates.....	18
Appendix B. Course Redesign.....	19
Appendix C. Supplemental Instruction.....	21
Appendix D. Undergraduate Peer Mentors.....	22
Appendix E. Recommendations for Analysis, Monitoring and Accountability	23
Appendix F. Estimated Costs.....	25
References.....	26

INTRODUCTION

Increasing the retention, progression, and graduation (RPG) rates of students is critical to the mission of the University System of Georgia (USG) and to the State of Georgia. The USG established a University System Task Force on Graduation Rates in February 2004, and “charged it with developing a five-year plan to bring the System at least to the national average in graduation rates, and for becoming a national leader with respect to graduation rates in the longer-term future.” (The URL for this full report is available in Appendix A.) In 2005-06, USG institutions analyzed RPG rates, evaluated existing programs, and set targets for improvement. In November 2006, a USG Team for Improving Retention and Graduation Rates was appointed to create a comprehensive RPG plan for the USG, develop indicators of program intensity, pervasiveness, and quality for all institutional RPG activity, and define a resource allocation process or model designed to move resources to where they have the most impact. In their deliberations, this team considered the recommendations of the Task Force on Graduation Rates and built upon them. Clearly, the University System of Georgia is committed to enhancing RPG, but is challenged by the diversity of System institutions. USG institutions differ widely in size, mission, resources, history, and student characteristics. The academic preparation, maturity, economic background, goals, and family support of students also vary dramatically. The complexity of this challenge, however, does not relieve individual institutions of their responsibility to effect improvements. Enhancing RPG in permanent and meaningful ways will require thoughtful and consistent attention over a period of time and must be a shared responsibility. While each System institution has some unique characteristics, USG institutions are similar in more ways than they are different. Moreover, they share characteristics with institutions in other states which have succeeded in improving RPG.

As a preface to any recommendations about improving retention and graduation rates, it is important to recognize the critical role that campus culture plays. The primary emphasis must be on developing a culture that is both challenging and supportive for students and that creates an environment which fosters student learning. The 2005 American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) Report, *Student Success in State Colleges and Universities: A Matter of Culture and Leadership*, emphasizes the vital role campus culture plays in retaining and graduating students. The AASCU study selected 12 extremely diverse public institutions that shared one major commonality: each of them had higher-than-expected graduation rates. The institutions ranged in size from 3,800 to over 13,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) students and included comprehensive and research universities, urban and rural institutions, and two historically black institutions. While the sample did not include two-year institutions, it is believed that the conclusions of the study are applicable to two-year institutions as well.

The study underscored the importance of culture and strong leadership in improving retention. While many of the institutions had a number of retention programs and practices in place, these programs were not unusual. In fact, many institutions with far less impressive RPG rates had identical programs, such as first-year experience (FYE) programs, advisement, and learning communities. Retention and graduation rates cannot be fixed by adding yet another isolated program or one more service, as noted in the report’s preface: “. . . simply finding a ‘best

practice' somewhere and 'plugging it in' is unlikely to be effective" (p. 4). When addressing RPG, institutions must look first to their unique culture.

The AASCU study isolated three critical cultural elements that can serve as the foundation for plans to improve RPG. The first element, **high expectations** (i.e., the level of academic rigor), refers to the pervasive attitude present on these campuses that all students can succeed—reinforced by a wider culture that is not content to rest on past successes, but rather seeks continuous improvement. The study further notes that high expectations go hand-in-hand with a high level of support for student success. For example, support services might link need-based financial aid with specific interventions for students who are at risk. High expectations extend to faculty and staff as well. There is an unusually high level of genuine concern and demonstrated faculty commitment to student success on each of these campuses. Such commitment to students must not be confused with “handholding” or watering down the curriculum. On the contrary, high expectations that are linked to a high level of support ultimately build students’ sense of personal responsibility for their achievement.

The second element that characterizes these successful institutions is their ability to engage students and to promote a sense of **belonging**. One of the most common features on these campuses is the inclusive sense of “family” where students feel welcomed and share a strong sense of belonging. As the work of Nancy Schlossberg aptly notes, it is essential that students feel that they “matter” to someone on campus. The retention literature supports this conclusion.

A third factor that distinguishes these campuses is a strong **sense of purpose**. The institutions’ missions are seen less as a written document and more as a shared belief system on the part of faculty, staff, and administrators with a common sense of purpose focused on student learning. This shared sense of purpose is consciously reinforced in the hiring process. It also leads to strong collaborations between academic and student affairs since both divisions adhere to the common purpose.

Beyond these three critical elements of an institution’s culture that support RPG initiatives, the AASCU report provides guidelines for how campuses choose and implement good practices. It articulates four conditions which increase the likelihood of success in specific student success programs—they should be **intentional** (carefully thought out, well supported by the institution, proactive, and at times mandatory), **integrated** (rather than an unrelated, seemingly random collection of interventions and practices), **collaborative** (involving people from both academic and student support departments), and **academic** (integral to the teaching and learning process).

Campuses that share these three elements of culture are far more likely to retain, progress, and graduate their students. This USG Team report recommends several best practices to improve RPG, including the development of a strong institutional culture.

The USG Team for Improving Retention and Graduation Rates concluded their work with four recommendations:

1. All USG institutions must have a first-year experience program.
2. All USG institutions must have a system in place which ensures adequate upper-division course availability for students.
3. All USG institutions must have a Student Employment Office.
4. Each academic department (or division) must have an action plan for improving student retention which addresses target areas for improvement as delineated in this report.

In addition, the Team recommends that institutions approach each of these recommendations analytically, using information to routinely evaluate existing programs, identifying major findings from the analysis, and using the findings to improve the next cycle. Through sustained analysis and linking strategic goals to budgeting, change is most likely to occur.

Specifics on these recommendations are noted in the following pages of this report.

I. RETAINING THE FRESHMAN COHORT: FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE INITIATIVES

Perhaps the greatest challenge to enhancing retention, progression, and graduation rates lies with the first-year student. As the largest percentage of students leave college after the freshman year, this further underscores the need for attention to freshman students to succeed in a collegiate environment. Pascarella & Terenzini (1991) note that the common thread woven throughout many theories of retention is that “persistence and thereby educational attainment are largely a function of the student’s fit or match with the college environment” (p. 387). At the onset, students, parents, faculty, high school guidance counselors, and admission professionals should encourage students to attend colleges that best suit their needs. Even if the initial fit is good, students experience challenges during their first year of college and need help in adjusting to the college environment.

Your First College Year (YFCY) survey, administered by the University of California, Los Angeles, Higher Education Research Institute, [<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/yfcy/>] provides revealing data regarding the academic and personal development of students during the first year of college (Keup & Stolzenberg, 2004). Some of these findings indicate that first-year students:

- spend too little time studying and witness a corresponding decline in grades;
- categorize their academic experiences as non-engaging and irrelevant;
- do not use formal curricular and academic support structures; and
- neglect to take advantage of faculty and academic advisors as support resources.

These YFCY findings provide a partial explanation for the ACT statistic that over 25% of freshmen in the nation do not return to college their sophomore year (ACT, 2003). In the USG, the percentage of non-returning students is slightly larger, 27 percent.

To counter these trends, the freshman year should be engaging, with strong and robust academic and student support systems. The National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina describes the term “first-year experience” as a comprehensive and intentional approach to the first college year (Hunter, 2006). The RPG Team has identified the implementation of first-year experience initiatives as an effective practice to improve retention. **It is strongly recommended that first-year experience initiatives be implemented at each USG institution.** The Team recognizes that the components of FYE initiatives will vary from institution to institution.

Examples of First-Year Experience Initiatives

Acting on these findings will involve more than implementation of a single program, course, or event. Campus resources and culture will influence the design of first-year experience initiatives. The initiatives to consider may include:

- Advising
- Common Reading Programs

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- Common Course Sequences
 - Convocations
 - First-Year Seminars
 - Learning Communities
 - Mentoring
 - Orientation
 - Peer Leaders
 - Summer Academic Programs
 - Service Learning/Civic Engagement
 - Supplemental Instruction

These program initiatives are among those cited by authors who worked on a project sponsored by the Policy Center on the First Year of College. In this study, 13 colleges were identified as “Institutions of Excellence” that provide an outstanding first-year experience for their students. The initiatives listed above were found to contribute to excellence in the students’ first year (Barefoot, Gardner, Cutright, Morris, Schroeder, Schwartz, Siegel, & Swing, 2005). Narrative descriptions of the “Institutions of Excellence,” available on the Policy Center on the First Year of College website, provide models that can be adapted to fit specific institutional cultures (<http://www.fyfoundations.org/overview.aspx>).

To monitor System status and progress on first-year experience initiatives and understanding of freshman experiences, the following must be implemented:

1. Conduct an inventory of USG first-year experience (FYE) programs.

- a. The USG should create a survey to collect FYE program information and identify a USG staff member to manage this project.
- b. The USG should administer an online survey to all institutions on FYE programs to identify:
 - i. Campus FYE program(s) and reporting structure
 - ii. Plans under development for implementation of FYE initiatives
 - iii. Type of program (name, mission)
 1. Number of students affected
 2. Whether it is mandatory
 - iv. Are special interest groups utilized (living/learning communities, freshmen)?
 - v. Impacts on RPG, student learning, or other outcomes
 - vi. Evidence to support the program’s impact

Estimated cost: Survey creation=\$2,500; Survey administration=\$5,000; Survey analyses =\$5,000

SUB-TOTAL estimated costs = \$12,500

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- 2. Replicate the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Community College Survey on Student Engagement (CCSSE) in FY08** (also recommended in the USG Task Force Report on Graduation Rates—see Appendix E); identify funding for FY08 and inform institutions. Establish a three-year cycle for institutional planning on the test. NSSE and CCSSE provide a path for institutions to survey freshmen and seniors.
- a. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is designed to obtain information nationwide about student participation in programs and activities that institutions provide for their learning and personal development. The results will provide an estimate of how undergraduates spend their time and what they gain from attending college. Survey items reflect behaviors by students and institutions that are associated with desired outcomes of college.
(http://nsse.iub.edu/html/quick_facts.cfm)
 - b. The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) instrument provides information on student engagement, a key indicator of learning and, therefore, of the quality of community colleges. The survey, administered to community college students, asks questions that assess institutional practices and student behaviors that are correlated highly with student learning and student retention. (<http://www.ccsse.org/aboutccsse/aboutccsse.cfm>)

SUB-TOTAL estimated costs for FY08 from USG = \$200,000

- 3. Conduct an inventory of USG mid-term grade collection processes focused on freshmen.** Such a process may be used to trigger institutional intervention when a student is at risk of academic failure.
- a. The USG should create a survey to collect mid-term grade collection information and identify a USG staff member to manage this project.
 - b. The USG should administer an online survey to all institutions on mid-term grade collection processes to identify:
 - i. Campus mid-term grade collection process(es) and reporting structure
 - ii. Plans under investigation or review for implementation of mid-term grade collection
 - iii. When was the mid-term grade collection(s) initiated?
 1. Number of students affected
 2. Required for all students? Only reported for certain grades received in courses?
 - iv. Process to share information with students
 - v. Type of student intervention used based on information collected
 - vi. Timeframe for follow-up with students after grades are collected
 - vii. Impacts on RPG
 - viii. Evidence to support the program's impact

Estimated cost: Survey creation = \$2,500; Survey administration = \$5,000; Survey analyses = \$5,000

SUB-TOTAL estimated costs = \$12,500

These three actions will provide insight on institutional progress toward understanding FYE initiatives, as well as gaining systematic, formal feedback from and about students.

Section I, TOTAL estimated costs = \$225,000

II. BEYOND THE FIRST YEAR: IMPROVING PROGRESSION AND GRADUATION RATES

Retaining the first-year student is only one step toward improving overall retention, progression, and graduation. How can we ensure that these students, once retained, continue to progress steadily toward degree completion? Within the University System of Georgia, departure rates for sophomores and juniors are almost as high as those exhibited by freshmen. Clearly, it is imperative that institutions identify the reasons behind these high levels of attrition and create the appropriate support mechanisms and intervention strategies necessary for these students to succeed. Appendix E (items 3, 4, and 5) suggests areas that might be explored to isolate reasons for departure.

One factor that may slow a student's progress toward degree completion is adequate upper-division course availability. **Upper-division is defined here** as courses appropriate to the second year or beyond at two-year institutions and as junior/senior year courses for four-year institutions. When program or major courses are unavailable, students may be forced to enroll concurrently in courses designed to be taken in sequence, making it even more difficult for the student to succeed academically. Other students may have to wait one or two semesters for the course to be offered again, which delays the student's progress toward degree completion. Given the System emphasis on four-year graduation, this delay takes on added significance (<http://www.usg.edu/linkages/jul06/>). **It is recommended that each institution undertakes a study of upper-division course availability on its campus to determine if particular courses have low successful completion rates and if particular courses have a high demand rate and low availability. Each campus would then put into place a system which ensures upper-division course availability based on these data.** The next section of this report, **Shared Responsibility: Department/Division Retention Plans**, suggests possible intervention strategies that could then be employed to alleviate this problem (see item 3-**Students have difficulty scheduling required courses**).

Estimated cost: Staff support at each institution for data analyses and report generation = \$7,500

Monitoring system/path for per semester review and strategic planning/decision-making = \$5,500

SUB-TOTAL estimated costs for all USG institutions = \$455,000 (\$13,000 per institution)

In a similar manner, gatekeeper courses may impede a student's progress toward degree completion. While programs should maintain high academic standards in fundamental courses, this does not preclude the development of appropriate intervention strategies and support mechanisms to help students succeed academically and persist in courses that traditionally have high failure rates. **It is recommended that institutions identify core courses with high failure rates.** Again, possible interventions are recommended in the next section of this report, **Shared Responsibility: Department/Division Retention Plans** (see item 1- **A high DFW Rate**).

Estimated cost: Staff support on each campus for data analyses and report generation = \$7,500

Monitoring system/path for per semester review and strategic planning/decision-making = \$5,500

SUB-TOTAL estimated costs for all USG institutions = \$455,000 (\$13,000 per institution)

Finally, the number of hours students work may contribute to low retention, progression, and graduation rates. Interestingly, not all work commitments are necessarily detrimental to a student's progress toward degree completion. Research has shown that on-campus student jobs can favorably impact a student's persistence in a degree program. Given this information, institutions may be able to help students by providing assistance in finding appropriate on-campus employment. **It is recommended that institutions explore the feasibility of establishing a Student Employment Office to oversee on-campus employment efforts, if one is not in existence.**

Estimated cost: Staffing (Coordinator or Director plus Student Workers or Graduate Students on appropriate campuses) = \$55,000; Facilities, Equipment and Technology needs may be available through other existing program needs.

SUB-TOTAL estimated costs for all USG institutions = \$1,925,000 (\$55,000 per institution)

To monitor System status and progress on progression efforts and patterns of progression toward graduation or attrition, the following must be implemented:

1. Conduct an inventory of USG on-campus Student Employment Offices.

- a. The USG should create a survey to collect information on on-campus Student Employment Offices or coordination of student employment and identify a USG staff member to manage this project.
- b. The USG should administer an online survey to all institutions on student employment programs to identify:
 - i. Campus student employment offices or program(s) and reporting structure
 - ii. Plans under investigation or review for implementation of a Student Employment Office or program
 - iii. Type of program (name, mission)
 1. Number of students affected
 2. Is there a fulltime or part-time coordinator/director?
 - iv. Are off-campus employment opportunities included?
 - v. Identified impacts on RPG
 - vi. Evidence available to support the program's impact

Estimated cost: Survey creation = \$2,500; Survey administration = \$5,000; Survey analyses = \$5,000

SUB-TOTAL estimated costs = \$12,500

2. Define progression as a term within USG.

- a. Academic progress by hours (an identified range, not necessarily related to classification)
 - i. First year to second year as opposed to freshman to sophomore year
 - ii. Second year to third year as opposed to sophomore to junior year

Estimated cost: Staff participation = existing staff in place

SUB-TOTAL estimated costs = none

3. Use the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC),

<http://www.studentclearinghouse.org/colleges/Tracker/default.htm>, to identify data outside of USG (Georgia private institutions/out-of-state institutions) for more in-depth understanding of USG RPG patterns (progression/attrition). Currently almost all USG institutions are member-participants in the NSC, although not all may have designated funding for use of Student Tracker.

- a. The System Office should initiate an effort to secure funding for a Student Tracker for all USG institutions.
- b. Utilize NSC data every three years to determine trends in student enrollment following USG attrition.
- c. Identify ongoing funding.

Estimated cost: FY07 Costs from USG = \$16,500

SUB-TOTAL estimated costs for FY08 = \$18,000

4. Examine current issues that may impact System-wide discussions, as well as institutional efforts for RPG. Such examinations require focused and in-depth study and research, with a commitment of personnel attached to this initiative to insure progress on research.

- a. Identify a USG staff person to manage project(s) as identified.
- b. Review past system studies to determine if research should be updated with a focus on RPG.
 - i. Academic failure, at-risk students
 - ii. Financial Aid patterns
 - iii. HOPE and need-based aid
- b. Issues for additional research considerations on *individual* campuses:
 - i. Impact of Fixed for Four on RPG (USG guaranteed tuition plan)
 - ii. Track retention and graduation rates by major, disaggregated by freshmen and juniors (also review guidelines in the USG Task Force Report on Graduation Rates)
 - 1. For six-year graduation rates, track by cohort.
 - a. Cohort based on initial declaration of major—shows individual student progress and retention at end of first year
 - b. Cohort based on major as students reach junior standing—provides evidence of progress in major
 - 2. Provide data for fall semester cohorts.

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- iii. Identify risk factors. Provide researchers informed on methodology.
 1. Develop from data, surveys, feedback from students
 2. Identify how intervention is accomplished
 3. Explore if factors can be flagged in Banner for tracking and follow-up

Estimated cost: Staff support from USG for data analyses and report generation = \$15,000; Staff support at each institution for data analyses and report generation = \$15,000
SUB-TOTAL estimated costs = \$540,000 (USG = \$15,000; all System institutions = \$525,000 (\$15,000 per institution))

These four efforts may provide insight on USG commitments to understand progression or attrition of students, as well as students who work while seeking to obtain a degree.

Section II, TOTAL estimated costs = \$3,405,500

III. SHARED RESPONSIBILITY: DEPARTMENT/DIVISION RETENTION PLANS

Key to the success of these intervention strategies and retention and progression efforts is that “Retention and increased graduation rates will be the **shared responsibility** of all facets of the institution.” This principle was one of a set recommended in the Report of the USG Task Force on Graduation Rates (see Appendix A). Academic Departments or divisional programs, as major facets of an institution, have a responsibility for student success in their majors and also, if applicable, for student success in core curriculum courses. Departmental retention plans also improve programmatic quality and build stronger academic communities. **It is recommended that all departments develop a plan for improving student retention.** [Note that throughout this section, ‘department’ includes “division” as appropriate for some institutions]. The USG Guidelines for Retention/Graduation Rate Plan Report, May 2005, provide steps to guide and to inform institutional discussions in addition to recommendations and strategies noted in the USG Task Force on Graduation Rates Final Report.

In constructing their retention plan, academic departments should consider the same questions that institutions are being asked by the USG Board of Regents, specifically: “Why are retention and graduation rates [in this program] at their current level? What plans are you putting in place to improve the rates?” There are numerous initiatives already in place at the department level across the University System of Georgia on which units may choose to build. Following are several initiatives for institutions to consider.

To monitor System and institutional status and progress on departmental rates, the following must be reviewed and appropriate strategies considered.

Target Areas for Improvement of Departmental Retention Rates

- 1. Departments may have courses with a high rate of grades with D, F, or W (DFW).**
 - A high DFW rate generally means that departments have to offer more sections of the course to accommodate repeating students.
 - Which, if any, department courses have high DFW rates? (This analysis should include both service (Core) courses and courses in the major.)
 - What are the norms for your discipline for courses with high DFW rates?
 - What are your target DFW rates and timeline for improvement, if improvement is necessary?

Interventions that have proven helpful:

- Redesigned sections of the course—see Appendix B
 - *Estimated cost: Systematic review and course redesign of ten courses over a three year period using National Center for Academic Transformation model.*
 - *SUB-TOTAL estimated costs for all USG institutions = \$700,000*
- Implemented more active learning strategies in sections of the course
- Provided supplemental instruction—see Appendix C
 - *Estimated cost: per Peer Mentor per fiscal year = \$2,400; total cost would depend upon number of courses and Peer Mentors per institution*

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- Provided undergraduate peer mentors—see Appendix D
 - *Estimated cost: per Peer Mentor per fiscal year = \$2,400; total cost would depend upon number of courses and Peer Mentors per institution*
 - Implementation of course assessment methods to provide feedback on what is working well and what is not
- 2. Students begin the major without a clear understanding of its expectations.**
Possible interventions:
- Investigate the possibility of a 1-credit ‘professionalism’ course.
 - Consider an ‘Orientation to the major.’
- 3. Students have difficulty scheduling required courses or commonly-used electives.**
Possible interventions:
- Offer courses at times convenient to your major (e.g., working students are likely to require courses in the evening).
 - Offer additional sections of courses to meet course demand. Once again, recall that course demand can be reduced through improvement in DFW rates.
 - Provide students with a two-year plan of course offerings (especially if required courses or popular elective courses are not offered every semester).
- 4. Students feel a lack of “community.”**
Possible interventions:
- Link required or common elective courses to create cohorts of majors.
 - Establish or revitalize First-Year Learning Communities.
- 5. Students perceive that the institution does not care about their progress.**
Sometimes excellent students fail to persist because they perceive that the institution cares little whether they continue. The “institution” is most likely perceived as the “department” by most students.
Interventions that may be helpful:
- Survey students and respond to issues that are significant in their responses.
Useful information can be gleaned from NSSE/CCSSE data, exit surveys, satisfaction surveys, etc.
 - Determine which student majors have not registered during the initial weeks of early registration, and contact them through the academic department office. Students who are trained and scripted may provide support to contact these majors via telephone.
 - Advisement centers can send emails or emessages to students who have not registered in a timely fashion.
 - Establish an academic department listserv to provide students a mechanism for communicating questions directly.

Estimated cost: Staff support at each institution for data analyses and report generation = \$7,500
Monitoring system/path for per semester review and strategic planning/decision-making = \$5,500
SUB-TOTAL estimated costs for all System institutions = \$455,000 (\$13,000 per institution, varies based on number of projects identified per institution from listing)

Recommendations for Other Institutional/Divisional Units

While the most visible efforts to address retention, progression, and graduation rates will emanate from Academic Affairs and Student Affairs, other divisional units also play an important role. The following list suggests ways that these units may support RPG initiatives:

Information Technology

- Evaluate and enhance the college/university website to be user intuitive
- Review all business processes that provide technology support for student services

Advancement Units

- Review marketing materials to ensure the intended message is communicated;
- Review marketing strategies to ensure the intended message is appropriately disseminated;
- Implement an alumni mentoring program where alumni team(s) with institutional career services professionals mentor currently enrolled students;
- Work with departments to determine internship requirements and facilitate contacts with alumni; and
- Solicit donations to a scholarship fund to support high ability, need-based students.

Business/Finance Units

- Establish a Student Employment Office under Human Resources (see Section II, Employment Office);
- Address deferred maintenance issues to improve campus facilities (addressed through USG Major Renovation and Repair Guidelines); and
- Review all business processes that impact registration, book purchases, food services, as well as other student support services in these units.

Estimated cost: Staff support at each institution for project support = to be determined per institution based on projects

SUB-TOTAL estimated costs = to be determined per institution

Support from departments and units throughout the campus strengthen and enhance the efforts to provide programmatic support and intentional interventions to the students.

Section III, TOTAL estimated costs = \$455,000

SUMMARY

To achieve the University System of Georgia's goal of improving retention and progression as well as raising graduation rates to the national average by 2010, institutions must first understand the reasons behind student attrition. Analysis and systematic review of institution-specific empirical data on RPG will better inform what types of interventions are needed and will allow institutions to direct finite resources strategically. In addition to the Team's recommendations in this report, Appendix E (items 3, 4, and 5) incorporates recommendations for potential areas for analysis, monitoring, and accountability that may provide insight and help institutions identify possible reasons for student attrition. Appropriate intervention strategies may then be determined and implemented using best practice(s) to target problem areas and at-risk student populations. Appendix E (items 1 and 2) states a path for support that can provide a USG perspective on analysis and accountability.

This USG Team reviewed the RPG literature and considered best practices implemented at other institutions with high RPG rates and identified several best practices common to retention and progression plans. As stressed in the **Introduction**, intervention strategies are dependent upon campus culture for success. Institutions must work toward developing, promoting, and maturing campus cultures that include high academic expectations, a sense of belonging, and a sense of purpose. Furthermore, intervention plans need to be intentional, integrated, collaborative, and academic. Keeping these characteristics in mind when developing and implementing intervention strategies will increase the likelihood of success.

Studies in RPG isolate key at-risk student populations, beginning with freshmen. In **Retaining the Freshman Cohort: First-Year Experience Initiatives**, the Task Force provides examples of intervention strategies to help this group of students succeed and progress. Other at-risk populations include students who are unable to enroll in required upper-division courses due to lack of course availability, students who are unable to succeed in key gatekeeper courses, and students who work off-campus. **Beyond the First Year: Improving Progression Rates** addresses these populations, suggesting strategies for determining the extent of the problem at an institution and possible interventions. Appendices B-D also provide information on best practice intervention strategies that are applicable to these groups.

Finally, in **Shared Responsibility: Department/Division Retention Plans**, the Task Force reiterates the collaborative nature of any RPG effort. All units on campus must be active and involved in addressing these issues. This section identifies common problems and recommends how departments might correct these issues. Again, Appendices B-D provide institutions with additional insight.

TOTAL estimated costs (Appendix F) = \$4,085,500 (with additional costs varying based on institutional decisions and staff support, as noted)

Appendix A
Final Report
University System of Georgia
Task Force on Graduation Rates

<http://www.usg.edu/academics/comm/aca/minutes/oct04/gradrates.pdf>

Appendix B Course Redesign

We traditionally have assumed that high academic quality equates to low student-faculty ratios; in contrast, the most cost effective means of instruction is the large lecture/presentation. New models are emerging, however, such as those developed through the National Center for Academic Transformation (NCAT), <http://www.thencat.org/Monographs/ImpLearn.html>, that show it is possible to improve learning while simultaneously reducing the cost of instruction.

In partnership with more than 60 colleges and universities, the NCAT demonstrated how using information technology to redesign courses can improve student learning while reducing instructional costs. Each participating institution found that success depends upon collaboration among faculty members, professional staff, and administrators. Some of the characteristics of successful course redesign include:

- The whole course—not just a single class or section—was redesigned;
- All redesign projects emphasized active and learner-centered instructional methods;
- Instructional software learning resources were utilized to engage students with course content. Student pacing and progress were organized by the need to master specific learning objectives, which were frequently in modular format, according to scheduled milestones for completion;
- An expanded support system provided students with assistance from a variety of different people;
- By replacing expensive labor (faculty and graduate students) with relatively inexpensive labor (undergraduate peer mentors and course assistants) where appropriate, the projects increased the person-hours devoted to the course and freed faculty to concentrate on academic rather than logistical tasks.

Examples of increased learning and savings:

Tallahassee Community College—College Composition

- Approximately 3,000 students annually in sections of 30 students
- Poor success rates—DFW > 40%—improved to 32% after one year of redesign
- Redesign used appropriate technologies to provide diagnostic assessments, resulting in individualized learning plans; interactive tutorials in grammar, mechanics, reading comprehension, and basic research skills; online tutorials for feedback on written assignments; follow-up assessments; and discussion boards
- Classroom environment was restructured to include a wide range of writing activities that fostered collaboration, proficiency, and higher levels of thinking
- Realized reduction in the cost per student from \$252 to \$145—savings of 42%.

Iowa State University - Discrete Mathematics

- 1,800 students per year, with two large lectures (~150 students) and one recitation section (~30 students)
- DWF rates > 30%—Students in redesigned sections did better than the traditional sections on 11 out of 13 tests, with comparable results on the remaining tests.
- Redesigned course structure was modularized and self-paced and included a varied, integrated, proactive system for student support.
- Realized reduction in the cost per student from \$129 to \$77—cost reduction of 40%
- Traditional course—12 faculty and 15 teaching assistants annually; redesigned course—2 faculty, 10 teaching assistants, and a half-time Online Course Manager.

Appendix C

Supplemental Instruction

Based on the research and model from the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC), Supplemental Instruction (SI) targets difficult gateway courses as opposed to targeting high-risk students. After a high-risk course (at least 30% of students receive grades of D, F, W) is identified, a SI leader is hired based on his or her grade in that class and the recommendation of the professor or the departmental graduate administrator. SI leaders are trained in non-directive leadership skills, group process skills, and learning skills.

Additionally, USG institutions may have SI models in place that may be reviewed.

Appendix D

Undergraduate Peer Mentors

A model called Peer Led Team Learning (PLTL) was developed by a group of chemists as part of an American Chemistry Society initiative. PLTL uses undergraduate peer mentors in break-out sections of six to eight students.

The PLTL Workshop model engages teams of six to eight students which meet weekly to work on carefully structured problems in learning sciences, mathematics, and other undergraduate disciplines guided by a peer leader. The PLTL model:

- ▶ provides an active learning experience for students
- ▶ creates a leadership role for undergraduates
- ▶ engages faculty in a creative new dimension of instruction

Students who have done well in the course previously become guides and mentors. For the peer leaders, the experience of working with faculty and guiding their peers through a difficult course is rewarding and unforgettable and can have a profound effect on their individual and professional growth.

Workshop peer leaders actively engage students with the course materials and with each other. This facilitation can take many forms:

- ▶ using various techniques for problem solving
- ▶ offering timely assistance when a group is stymied
- ▶ providing guidance and encouragement

The workshop leaders do not dispense answers. They must understand the situations under which assistance is offered or withheld. The workshop leader sets a tone for the discussion in which individual points of view are respected, criticism is constructive, and all members have an equal opportunity to participate.

An alternative use of undergraduate peer tutors has been successfully piloted in the chemistry department at the University of Georgia (UGA). Trained peer tutors attend the lectures and assist students in their assigned area of the classroom to point out misconceptions, correct mistakes, and suggest problem-solving strategies. Each lecture has time set aside for student groups and peer tutors to interact on problem solving and conceptual understanding of the day's topic. In addition, regular meetings with the peer tutors provide the instructor with feedback on problem areas. Six peer tutors are assigned to courses that average 350 students per section.

Additionally, USG institutions may have Peer Mentoring models in place that can be studied for applicable principles.

Appendix E

Recommendations for Analysis, Monitoring and Accountability

Below are issues that support or complement the USG Team's recommendations on best practices.

1. **Use *USG Guidelines for 2005 Retention/Graduation Rate Plan Report* as the format for the next cycle of data collection.** The initial submission of these reports (Fall 2005) becomes the baseline data against which future performance can be measured.
 - c. To inform future data collections, provide formal feedback on the Fall 2005 reports along with a USG summary.
 - d. Review the Fall 2005 USG guidelines, and update the terminology for the next data collection.
 - e. For future collections of this report:
 - i. Determine USG staff member to evaluate and provide feedback when reports are collected. Feedback is a critical part of the process and allows for a System review and understanding of institutional procedures related to RPG initiatives. Also determine whether all institutions submit simultaneously or by institutional type on varying cycles (e.g., research universities submit in first year).
 - ii. Confirm that a November submission date is appropriate. Collect the report every three years at the USG level, and identify institutional decisions indicating how the guidelines are being followed in the interim.
 - iii. Include predicted versus actual retention/graduation rates in the report; determine guidelines for consistency on these rates from institutions, as well as method for institutional rates.

2. **Determine if there is an analytical tool that all USG institutions could use for predictive modeling; this issue follows-up on previous discussions within the USG and must address various institutional needs.** Such a tool could be based on or similar to:
 - a. Alexander Astin's model on graduation
 - b. USG model to be identified
 - c. Existing institutional model(s) (allows institutions to add other variables, e.g., housing, at-risk, environmental, and meets unique needs of various USG institutions)
 - d. Update every three years as targets/projections

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- 3. Examine current issues that may impact System-wide discussions, as well as institutional efforts for RPG.**
- a. Impact of part-time instructors (PTI) on retention rates
 - 1. Variables/issues could include:
 - a. How PTI are integrated into academic department(s)
 - b. Availability of PTI to students for help and support
 - c. Course grade of PTI-taught courses
 - d. Comparative courses where full-time faculty teach
 - b. Effect of curricular choices
 - 1. Variables could include:
 - a. Credit hour load (full-time versus part-time by range of hours)
 - b. Course selection
 - c. Courses in sequence (followed or over time)
 - c. Impact of gatekeeper courses
 - 1. Identify on each campus
 - 2. Track for student success
 - 3. Provide grade information by course—percentage of starters who passed with a grade of C or better and percentage of starters who completed the course
 - d. Determine path by which issues would be submitted and agreement reached as to which to pursue. (Proposals could be reviewed by USG Administrative Committee on Institutional Research and Planning, and then moved to a path for approval by USG Constituent Groups, e.g., Chancellor, Presidents, Academic Affairs.)
 - i. Seek support of USG professionals who are knowledgeable about available data and collection issues, as well as need to add variables.
 - ii. Identify timeframe for each project.
- 4. Explore systematic collection of:**
- a. Family income and education data
 - b. Relationship between financial aid and academic success
 - i. Utilize available Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) data and Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT)/American College Test (ACT) data
 - ii. If not identified through Financial Aid/SAT/ACT, what other sources for family income data may be available? Propose how and where to collect.
 - c. Collect during:
 - i. Registration process for classes
 - ii. Orientation
- 5. Explore the use of the *USG survey for non-returning students* for tracking those who leave an institution.**
- a. Establish USG process with ownership by institutions to ensure success.
 - b. Conduct survey on a three year cycle with the first collection in Fall 2007.
 - c. Address duplication for campuses already utilizing such surveys.
 - d. Identify USG process to summarize the data.

Appendix F

Estimated Costs

RETAINING THE FRESHMAN COHORT: FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE INITIATIVES

Section I, TOTAL estimated costs = \$225,000

BEYOND THE FIRST YEAR: IMPROVING PROGRESSION AND GRADUATION RATES

Section II, TOTAL estimated costs = \$3,405,500

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY: DEPARTMENT/DIVISION RETENTION PLANS

Section III, TOTAL estimated costs = \$455,000

TOTAL estimated costs = \$4,085,500 (with additional costs varying based on institutional decisions and staff support, as noted)

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