

GSW Incubator Grant Proposal: Category I:***¹Project Storm Spotter: Developing a Data-Driven Response to Student Risk Factors
Georgia Southwestern State University*****Project Co-Leaders:**

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Project Overview

The Storm Spotter project has three essential components 1) use data-proven method of identifying student risk; 2) develop targeted data-driven responses to individual student risk factors through peer mentoring program; 3) develop long-term, data-driven institutional strategies based on aggregated data of student risk. As noted in our CCG plan, GSW has little data to indicate why our retention rates are low (this was a common theme in discussions at the February CCG Summit). Part one of our plan is to administer the College Persistence Questionnaire (CPQ) to all incoming freshman through our Freshman orientation course, Fall 2013. Each student will receive the results of the questionnaire along with a success plan based solely on his or her own results, along with peer mentoring and resource support. Aggregated data will be collected over three years in an effort to develop data-driven and targeted institutional strategies for addressing retention.

Impact on Completion

Funding for Project Storm Spotter will have wide-spread impact: 1) It will provide immediate data on the individual students entering GSW in Fall 2013 and will allow us to tailor responses based on the data; 2) It will provide GSW with data needed to do long-term strategic planning as we develop intervention strategies and support systems; 3) Because GSW's student population closely mirrors the targeted population of the USG CCG efforts (low-income, minority, and first generation students), results from our studies will provide useful data across the system for responding to student risk factors.

Potential Lessons to be Learned

1. Most important for GSW is *why* we lose our students. As indicated in our CCG report, we can profile our non-retained students by various demographics and characteristics, but we currently rely on loose correlations and anecdotes. With limited resources, we need to target our response strategies.

¹ GSW is home to the Hurricanes. Many of our resources have weather related names, for example our web-based Banner interface is called RAIN and the student handbook is called The Weathervane. Our team of peer mentors will be involved in identifying and responding to retention obstacles, therefore the metaphor Storm Spotters captures our vision well.

2. Most important for the USG is better information about the “at-risk” student demographic which could provide other institutions with data needed to develop their own response strategies based on their own student demographics.

Concept Description

Area of Need and Defined potential Impact on Completion

Although the development of effective plans to improve success and completion among Georgia college students requires evidence-based decision making, a common theme in many discussions of the Complete College Georgia initiative is the lack of specific data showing why students fail to successfully complete college. Another frequent theme in discussions about improving educational attainment is the need to reach students from traditionally underrepresented populations. In order to achieve the number of new college graduates expected as part of the CCG initiative we will have to drastically improve college graduation rates for those groups that currently have the lowest attainment (especially students from low-income backgrounds and first generation students).

GSW proposes a plan that will help identify freshmen at risk of not completing college and provide intervention specifically designed to address the student’s individual risk factors. These data will be aggregated across the university and over several years to provide a large-scale view of the main reasons why students fail to graduate and allow development of university initiatives to address these issues. Because a large percentage of incoming freshmen at GSW are from traditionally underrepresented groups (80% of incoming students are either from low-income backgrounds or are first generation college students, or both) collected data will likely have application at other USG institutions and successful retention strategies can be implemented at other campuses.

Connections to College Completion Plan

Objective 2.1 Improve academic advising processes to promote student success and timely graduation. Storm Spotters will provide peer support for encouraging students to use campus resources, such as the Academic Skills Center, Student Support Services, Career Counseling, tutoring services, supplemental instruction, Health Services, Student Activities, and Academic Advisors.

Objective 2.2 Identify administrative barriers to success of students, especially underserved populations. As peers, Storm Spotters are positioned to gather information from students about obstacles they face and provide feedback to the retention team so we can remove barriers and better serve students.

Objective 2.3 Develop a First Year Experience Program that promotes academic success, student engagement, and retention. Providing peer mentors to freshman will strengthen the team already in place to support our first year experience, and for many students, a peer mentor will be a much more credible source of advice for students. In addition, peer mentors have regular campus interaction with the freshman in the residence halls and campus life, allowing them to connect more readily and be more visible than are staff and faculty.

Objective 2.3. Action Step 2: Implement Use of College Persistence Questionnaire to identify freshman at risk for dropping out. (We have not had the funds to do this, though we believe it will be very helpful.)

Objective 2.3 Action Step 4. Assign peer mentors to sections of UNIV 1000. (Implementing this has been postponed as it requires resources for training and remuneration that we do not have.)

Theory of Change and/or Illustrated Logic Model

Collection of data identifying freshmen at risk for leaving the university will be achieved by administering the College Persistence Questionnaire (CPQ) (Davidson et al., 2009) to all freshmen in their Freshman Orientation course (UNIV 1000). This questionnaire uses student responses to 84 multiple choice questions to generate scores on ten scales that are predictive of college persistence (academic integration, financial stress, social integration, degree commitment, collegiate stress, advising, scholastic conscientiousness, institutional commitment, academic motivation, and academic efficacy). The CPQ has been found a highly valid and reliable instrument for predicting college persistence (Davidson et al., 2009; Gore, 2010; Lindheimer 2011). Best results are obtained by administering this questionnaire during week six of the freshman semester as responses will capture the students' response to the particular university (Davidson et al., 2009; Gore, 2010). Use of this instrument will allow us to identify students who are unlikely to be retained at the university and to develop individualized success plans for those students.

The freshman orientation course will provide a venue for reviewing the CPQ data and developing individualized success plans for students. A key component of Project Storm Spotter is the use of peer mentors as a vital part of the retention team. GSW will identify, hire, and train a cohort of successful upper-class students (Storm Spotters) who will serve as co-instructors for the orientation classes. Because freshmen are assigned to orientation classes by major, the Storm Spotters will serve as an attainable model of success for the freshman. Faculty leaders who will be teaching UNIV 1000 will be trained to use the CPQ to develop success plans for their students and will work with the Storm Spotters to help connect each student to the resources identified in the success plan. Storm Spotter training will include peer mentoring, team building, confidentiality (FERPA), and knowledge of campus resources. In addition, the campus retention team will develop intervention plans for students identified as at risk by the CPQ, matching campus resources with the specific needs of individual students. The Storm Spotters will play an integral role in connecting the students to resources.

Although we are confident responses to individual student needs will result in improved retention, we recognize that reaching the goals of CCG will require campus-wide strategies across all academic levels. With limited resources we must develop data-driven strategies that target areas of greatest concern among our students on our campus. The CPQ data collected for the freshman will guide us in identifying the factors most common on our campus and designing university-wide plans to address those issues. For example, if 50% of students are identified as at risk due to social integration, we would know we need to address social integration in order to dramatically improve retention.

This collection of campus-wide data and implementation of university plans would be an ongoing and iterative process. Data would be collected across years to ensure the validity of the findings as well as changes over time. Once plans are implemented to address identified issues, data would be collected in subsequent years to evaluate the efficacy of those plans. This iterative process of planning, implementation, and evaluation using the same instrument would result in substantial improvement in success rates.

Our model is innovative in that it is a data-driven model that gets to the heart of why students while at the same time providing individual intervention in the form of student success plans developed by trained faculty leaders, and it allows us to develop a university-wide perspective of our most pressing institutional needs. In addition, it will provide valuable data to the USG concerning the CCG's target population.

Potential for Lessons Learned and Models for Other Institutions

1. Most importantly, this model promises to identify specific reasons why *our* students leave *our* institution.
2. Because our students are mirror the target students of the USG CCG efforts, and are among the least successful demographically, the results of our data will be useful for other USG institutions seeking to improve retention of our most at-risk students.

Project Plan and Timeline

Spring 2013 Goals and Objectives

1. Solicit recommendations for Storm Spotters (one per UNIV 1000 course) with goal of finding students who reflect the demographics of the larger student population (\$300 stipend for fall)
2. Purchase rights to use CPQ

Summer 2013 (June/July/August) Goals and Objectives

1. Develop training program for UNIV 1000 faculty (half day focused on use of CPQ, half day focused on working with peer mentors) with goals of:
 - a. Preparing faculty to use CPQ results to develop success plans for students
 - b. Coaching faculty in best practices for working with peer mentors
2. Develop peer mentoring program for training Storm Spotters (half day focused on learning resources and logistics of program, half day focused on best practices for peer mentoring,)
 - a. Prepare them to work with faculty as co-instructors in UNIV 1000
 - b. Help them understand all available campus resources and how to access them
 - c. Train them in appropriate communication and relationship development skills

Fall 2013 Goals and Objectives

1. Administer CPQ to all new freshman in UNIV 1000 (week six)
2. Support faculty in development of success plans for each student as part of UNIV 1000 curriculum
3. Work with retention committee to develop first freshman cohort profile of institutional risk factors
4. Administer end of semester surveys for faculty and Storm Spotters to get initial feedback on how to improve the training and execution of the peer mentoring process and use of CPQ

Spring 2014 Goals and Objectives

1. Storm Spotters will continue to mentor freshman, specifically, they will asked to connect with students identified by the early warning system for poor grades or attendance (\$100 stipend)
2. Assess initial efforts through Fall-to-Spring retention rates
3. Assess effectiveness of peer mentoring program training based on surveys of faculty and Storm Spotters
4. Retention team will begin to develop campus strategies to respond to the identified institutional risk factors
5. Recruit Fall 2014 Storm Spotters

Summer 2014 Goals and Objectives

1. Use assessment of peer mentoring program to make needed changes to training and implementation of CPQ and student success plans
2. Train faculty and Storm Spotters

Fall 2014 Goals and Objectives

1. Implement changes to peer mentoring program and success plan development as needed based on assessment

Evaluation

Project Storm Spotter will be evaluated by tracking retention of first year students. GSW's current fall-to-fall retention rate is 62.62% (Fall 2011 cohort). Our goal is 65% for the Fall 2013 cohort. We expect success plans will result in increased retention for the 2013 cohort and a much greater impact once we have the data needed to develop initiatives specific to our institution and its students. We expect a retention rate of 67% for the 2014 cohort and expect to eventually reach a 70% fall-to-fall retention rate through continual assessment and improvement. As plans university-wide strategies are adopted over time, we expect our retention over 4 years to increase and our 4, 5 and 6-year graduation rates.

Davidson, W. B., Beck, H. P., & Milligan, M. (2009). The College Persistence Questionnaire: Development and validation of an instrument that predicts student attrition. *Journal of College Student Development* 50(4):373-390.

Gore, J.N. (2010). The Importance of Freshman Experiences in Predicting Students' Retention Decisions. M.S. Thesis. Appalachian State University.

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