

Presidents' Task Force on Improving Retention and Graduation Rates



Background

Economic competitiveness depends upon a state's ability to educate and train its citizens and attract and retain talent. Research shows that higher learning equals higher earning; hence, every college student that fails to graduate represents lost opportunity for Louisiana in the form of wages, tax revenue, investments, and job creation. Only 20.1% of Louisiana residents age 25 and older hold bachelor's degrees or higher, ranking the state 45th in the nation for college attainment.

Retention and Graduation Rates

- Nearly ½ of the nation's four-year college students do not complete their degree programs and graduate.
- Retention Rates Public Four-Year (Full-time freshman to sophomore)

○ National Top States	84%	Graduation Rates Public Four-Year (6-Year)	59%
○ Nation	78%		53%
○ Louisiana	67%		37%
○ ULS	67%		37%

Factors affecting student success include:

- Academic preparation prior to arrival on campus
- Academic/career advising
- Student behavior
- Financial stability of student
- Support from home

UL System institutions need to do a better job of retaining and graduating students. However, university presidents face two challenges:

- Ensuring that students are prepared before they go to college
- Improving student success on university campuses

Meeting the Challenge

Acknowledging that institutional practices can make a profound difference in retention and graduation rates, the presidents in the University of Louisiana System created a task force to review their practices in order to improve retention and graduation rates.

Presidents' Plan of Action Improving Retention and Graduation Rates

GOAL

ULS universities will reach national six-year graduation rates by 2012.

Objective 1: Presidents will continue to strengthen partnerships with districts and schools to ensure students are prepared to meet higher academic standards.

- Facts:
 - Better and earlier academic preparation yields a better chance for collegiate success.
 - Louisiana lags the region and the nation in the number of students taking advanced placement courses.
 - Students are more likely to attend college if they are exposed to campus life at an early age.
 - 76% of students say they plan to attend college but 46% are not on target for being college ready.

- Strategies for success include:
 - partnering with high schools to allow students to obtain college credit
 - reporting back to high schools the performance of their students' freshman year in university courses
 - training and producing high-quality teachers and leaders that can improve student achievement
 - continuing professional development for teacher graduates once they are in the field
 - implementing teacher cadet programs for prospective teachers

- University Practices:
 - Nicholls grants graduate tuition waivers (up to six hours) for National Board Certified teachers and those seeking national certification.
 - Southeastern was the first institution to guarantee the effectiveness of its teacher graduates.

Objective 2: Presidents will lead every facet of the institution toward higher retention and graduation rates.

- Facts:
 - Student academic success is multi-faceted.
 - Every part of the educational experience, from classroom to extracurricular experiences, has an impact on student success.
 - The entire institution must commit to retaining and graduating students.

- Strategies for success include:
 - ensuring academic preparation upon arrival to campus
 - early and continual advising
 - streamlining student services
 - paying attention to atmospherics (beautify campus buildings and grounds)
 - improving service attitude among administrators, faculty, staff, and advisors
 - providing flexible and diverse opportunities for student scheduling and campus involvement
- University Practices:
 - Northwestern State University implemented a customer service training program for administrators, faculty, advisors, front-line staff, and student employees to make students feel welcome and well-served.

Objective 3: Every first-time freshman will have an academic/career advisor that will help chart a career path tied to specific coursework.

- Fact:
 - Both national and UL System data show that most students leave the university between their freshman and sophomore years in college.
- Strategies for success include:
 - establishing special efforts and programs to reach students at the earliest point
 - creating programs to help students transition from high school
 - enhancing freshman seminars with strong administrative and faculty participation
 - using Student Academic Mapping Program to be more responsive to student needs
- University Practices:
 - Louisiana Tech University implemented an advising program that utilizes a strong career component so students can chart goals and tie them to their major courses of study. All freshmen are assigned and required to meet with their academic advisor prior to the end of each quarter.
 - University of Louisiana at Lafayette implemented a freshman seminar course designed to help the freshman make a successful transfer from high school to college.

Objective 4: Every student will be tracked to ensure success through ongoing advising and counseling.

- Facts:
 - Students who have a clear understanding of what it takes to succeed have a stronger chance of achieving success.

- Certain barriers exist that may hinder a student's progress toward graduation. Institutions should look at demographic and achievement data to determine which students have a higher risk of failure and take steps to prevent it.
- Strategies for success include:
 - collecting, analyzing, and reporting data regularly to enhance retention and graduation efforts
 - charting progress toward increasing retention and graduation rates and including demographic data such as gender and ethnicity
 - ensuring that all university departments understand and clearly articulate students' academic requirements
 - collecting, analyzing and reviewing data by gender and ethnic groups in an effort to narrow the achievement gap
 - training faculty members to advise students about degree requirements using effective counseling practices
 - providing a feedback and assessment component to chronicle the effectiveness of advising
 - providing opportunities for rewards and recognition for outstanding faculty advisors
 - requiring academic advising for each student prior to registration every semester
 - identifying and targeting students at high risk of failure and providing early intervention
 - developing intervention programs that include advising and tutoring
 - identifying "road-block" courses (courses that produce a high failure rate)
- University Practices:
 - McNeese revised and strengthened its class attendance policy.
 - Nicholls State University implemented a Master Advisor Training Program to ensure its advisors are well informed about degree requirements and trained to provide positive advising experiences.
 - Southeastern Louisiana University constructed an information system for progression-related issues and shared information with the campus community to ensure that each recognizes his or her role in retaining and graduating students.
 - University of Louisiana at Lafayette found English proficiency to be the best predictor of success in freshman biology, one of its "road-block" courses. After requiring students to have either a 23 on the ACT English section or to complete English 101 prior to taking the course, passing rates increased dramatically.

Objective 5: Each institution will examine the consistency and flexibility of its course offerings to ensure students can graduate in a timely fashion.

- Facts:
 - Today's college students are more likely than ever before to hold jobs (approximately 2/3 of ULS students work at least part-time).

- These students and others would benefit from more scheduling flexibility so they can schedule classes around work and graduate on time.
- Strategies for success include:
 - working with faculty and possibly hiring more adjunct faculty to ensure courses required for graduation are consistently offered to accommodate the needs of students
 - exploring opportunities for using distance learning technology to reach working and non-traditional students
 - publicizing campus job opportunities that may provide job experience in students' areas of study to help defray educational costs and keep students on campus
- University Practices:
 - Northwestern State University excels in offering distance learning courses that give students scheduling flexibility so they can meet their degree requirements and graduate on time.
 - University of Louisiana at Lafayette created a marketing campaign to make students aware of on-campus jobs.

Objective 6: Presidents will promote service learning.

- Facts:
 - An engaged student who feels a connection to the institution has a greater chance of staying and graduating.
 - Students who participate in service learning on college campuses are more likely to be retained, make better grades, and choose a major earlier.
- Strategies for success include:
 - encouraging first-year students to reside on campus
 - providing diverse cultural experiences through social groups and programs
 - providing opportunities for civic engagement and service learning within the community
 - promoting opportunities for students of all ethnic and social groups to participate in organizations and programs outside of class
- University Practices:
 - The University of Louisiana at Monroe and Grambling State University implemented a program called Strategies Targeting African American Retention & Transition (STAART).
 - All of the UL System universities recently joined and are engaged in the American Democracy Project.

Objective 7: Presidents will ensure opportunities for smooth transition from two-year and other four-year institutions.

- Facts:
 - 23% of students who begin at a community college transfer to a four-year institution within five years.
 - 42% of community college students plan to earn bachelor's degrees but only 23% actually transfer to universities.
- Strategies for success include:
 - refining cross-enrollment agreements with community colleges
 - utilizing the Statewide Student Transfer Guide and Articulation System
 - implementing a database to electronically transfer transcripts among institutions
 - developing course articulation agreements
- University Practices:
 - University of Louisiana at Monroe has an agreement with Delta Community College to share physical and financial resources.
 - Nicholls recently signed an agreement with Fletcher Technical Community College to share physical and financial resources.

In Summary

The Presidents are committed not only to implement strategies but to continue to identify and facilitate best practices as they strive to reach their retention and graduation goals by 2011.

Resources

American Association for Community Colleges (AACC)
Board of Regents
National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)
Noel-Levitz, Inc.
Southern Regional Education Board (SREB)
The Education Trust