

# Notes on Student Success & Retention

President's Breakfast for Progress – 1 October 2014

## 1 QUESTIONS

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### 1.1 STRATEGIC PLANNING, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND CULTURE CHANGE

- How do we implement a culture of accountability to track retention and success efforts?
- What will it take to make this a priority? How can we help every task or unit leader clearly and consistently explain how their actions positively affect retention?
- Are retention, success, and graduation included in the colleges' strategic plans?
- How are we defining these terms/measurements? Do the measures recognize and account for the differences between major retention, college retention, and institutional retention? Are decision-makers at each level incented to consider the impact of their policies/processes on measures at other levels?
- What items are in the toolbox of college responses to retention performance and which tools are being used by which colleges?
- What are the institutional rewards/responses to retention performance?  
E.g. funding, faculty lines, underperformance results in loss of faculty, etc.
- Where our Tier 1 goals focus on research and publication, how do we reconcile or balance these messages with those of the Success & Retention goals? Is it a bait-and-switch to hire faculty on a research platform and assess them on the basis of advising/mentorship?
- Is graduate retention/persistence/success/graduation being examined in parallel with the focus on these aspects of undergraduate education? Why or why not?

### 1.2 RECRUITING & ADMISSIONS

- How are our student success and retention metrics affected by our admission standards?
- If admissions standards are to blame, what is the data-driven process for modifying these, and what will be the impact on institutional enrollment growth? If a loss, is that acceptable?
- If poorly-prepared students are admitted, what are the tactics we might use to consistently identify and remediate deficiencies prior to, or in conjunction with coursework in their first one or two terms? Is this being done currently? What else might we do? E.g., bridge programs, mentoring, integrated blocks of coursework, peer tutoring, etc.
- How do we set expectations clearly for particularly challenging (but highly desirable) majors?
- Might student organizations be resourced (systems, incentives, opportunity) to better market themselves to targeted students prior to enrollment? Would this earlier organization-based identification with an academic major positively impact students' levels of commitment and willingness to invest in academic success?

### 1.3 ACADEMIC ADVISING AND STUDENT SUPPORT

- How can we use technology to accelerate time to degree, degree selection and transition, and the identification of and intervention with students-at-risk?
- Who is responsible/accountable for academic advising at our institution?
- Is advisor performance assessed consistently?
- Are advisors responsibilities and compensation consistent and appropriate?
- How can we construct professional opportunities that enhance the consistency of advising experience and outcomes? What mechanisms exist for consistently training, developing, assessing, motivating, and supporting our academic advisors?

- What are our institutional student to advisor ratios? Are they consistent and appropriate based on the populations of assigned students? Is it mathematically possible for advisors to have at least one appointment with all assigned students before the student's first opportunity to register?
- What is the institutional understanding of and process for "clarifying," "confirming," and/or "counseling out" students who are underperforming and/or seeking a new major? Are our messages and approaches consistent, clear, and timely? Where are our messages, curricula, policies, and processes at cross-purposes with the early exploration and confirmation of majors?
- For departments with professional advisors, how can faculty be more engaged in the advising process? Should this happen? If so, what are the goals (student learning outcomes), how should it be assessed, and how should it be encouraged/incentivized?
- Could an institutionally-administered survey provide insight (during orientation) on students' understanding of their chosen academic major, their commitment to it, and their levels of awareness regarding support resources, institutional policies, processes, etc.?
- What would it take to design, integrate, and maintain an information system based on historical data that identifies the ideal, probable, and actual student flows through the academics environment?
- How effective is it to target these improvements using traditionally accepted "at-risk" sub-populations of students? Will analysis of historical data encourage/discourage us from using/abandoning these generalizations and use technology to increase the personalization of student interventions
- What motivations/incentives/accountability need to be created to ensure complete implementation of DegreeWorks for real-time planning and degree certification in all colleges? What technologies, processes, and policies need to come to an end to help move all offices to fully and efficiently utilize new technologies like this?
- Where visual flowcharts are available to increase student understanding of critical (semester-based) paths within their chosen curricula, are these published online, linked within DegreeWorks plans? What would it take to make these universally available?
- Where is peer mentoring successfully connecting new students with successful upper division undergraduates? Can these successes be replicated in other areas without similar programs?
- How can the institution move from its current focus on measuring student satisfaction with advising to assessing excellence in student learning through advising?
- What additional orientation/training/preparation is required to help our international students have a more realistic picture of our social and academic life? Could this begin in the recruiting and admissions process to minimize the learning curve once students arrive on campus? Is this also true for historically under-represented groups, students from rural areas, transfers, and/or non-traditional students?

#### 1.4 CURRICULUM & INSTRUCTION

- How do we successfully address students' interest in career-focused education while building an appreciation for the benefits of a broad-based liberal arts education? How can "the basics" be shown to have value in career-oriented coursework? How can the career-oriented coursework validate and reinforce the value of content and capacity gained in "the basics?"
- How do we create and ensure excellent teaching/learning experiences that quickly ramp-up student performance to acceptable levels in students' early coursework? If the answer is training and resourcing more experienced faculty, how can this be done, especially when many of the best instructional faculty have less incentive to teach large gateway courses?
- If teaching and mentoring are important aspects of faculty work responsibilities, what incentives and motivators exist to celebrate, reward, and further encourage excellence in these areas? What training is available/required to develop and enhance the teaching and mentoring of all faculty members?

- Is it appropriate for a first session of lower division classes to include explanations of the discipline’s focus, elements and value of the discipline’s related major(s), and testimonials from upper division students and/or alumni on the benefits of further study in the discipline? If so, what resources would need to be invested by the departments, colleges, and/or institution to make this consistently excellent and valuable for student engagement and learning outcomes?
- Can more space, time, and personnel be committed to increasing the number of discipline-based living/learning communities? What disciplinary groupings would most benefit from such an increase? What faculty involvement would be necessary to help these living arrangements possess greater value for participating students?
- Can online resources (e.g., Blackboard, text messaging, email, social media, etc.) be used to introduce courses and set expectations even earlier than the first day of class?
- What policies, technologies, faculty training, and curriculum revision would be required to provide early, meaningful, and consistently recorded mid-term grades available for all students in all classes?
- What tools are available to help students make grade projections, update these as grades are received, and thus have a better real-time picture of their current academic performance?
- Many faculty care about their students’ success and are motivated to help students who approach them. Unfortunately, many feel too ill-equipped or time-constrained, to proactively engage struggling students. What training/professional development could be provided/required to develop these capacities in our instructional personnel?
- Many students feel that their instructors are set apart, unapproachable, or uncaring? What messaging, technologies, policies, or processes could be implemented to promote individual faculty-student interactions that facilitate student learning and counter these inaccurate perceptions?

## 1.5 TECHNOLOGY AND DATA OPPORTUNITIES

- Where should we focus our effort to achieve the greatest impact on retention “investment?” (School, departments, cohorts, sub-populations of students)  
What is the baseline right now? How sensitive it is to each factor? Can we sort factors in the order from highest to lowest institutional impact?
- What are the bottlenecks or cliffhanger points that can be identified by analyzing students’ progress (or lack of progress) through the curriculum? E.g., second semester Architecture
- Could course offerings be analyzed and optimized? Could the current process (faculty preferences, departmental cycles, and facilities) also consider other factors like current/projected student demand/need, course pairings/blocks, etc.?
- In planning a major’s curriculum, should departments consider reorganizing in ways that maximize course applicability for students who seek to change out in their first- and second-semester?
- What would it take to create a technologically-enabled (unified) communication mechanism that makes faculty/advisor/administration communication easier, more consistently handled, fully documented, and easily assessable?
- If historical data helps predict students’ potential for failure, how are we using our information system to give visibility and prompt action appropriate to the “state” or “stations” of each student? Might our data redefine our understanding of “at-risk” student populations? Will continuous and consistent references to analytics, dashboards, interventions, and outcomes help give visibility to successful efforts? Would this promoting a culture of accountability, support, and mutual responsibility communicating the incremental value and impact of each effort?
- As the process is mapped and documented and the instruments for online access are identified and implemented, new knowledge will be available that could be combined with best practices known to date. To other advising staff, a multidisciplinary focus that uses information technology could help improve capabilities systematically.

- How is COGNOS currently being used by administrators, faculty members, and advisors during the work of each semester? Would an audit of processes help identify best practices, expose opportunities for improvement, and minimize inefficient and redundant technologies, reports, analyses, and meetings?
- What real-time or near-time actions are being taken with students who drop and withdraw? What interventions are feasible/practical/beneficial to implement?

## 2 IDEAS

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- Should/could advising be flipped where 30-50 students begin by meeting with their assigned faculty member, then going to advisors for further instruction? What would be the content, focus, and desired student learning outcomes for these interactions?
- Much like the communication plan, could a four- to six-year communication blueprint be created for enrolled students? Could this ideal student blueprint be handled electronically, automated where possible, and provide for analysis of effectiveness for communications and interventions in the plan?
- With many students changing majors and colleges, are the student success centers of the various colleges managed consistently enough to ease student transitions from one to another? While maintaining decentralization of locations and disciplinary-specific resources, could increased coordination or more centralized management help improve offerings and student utilization?
- Real-time electronic dashboards, automated processes, and consistency in accountability might be more efficient and effective in getting important information to the correct personnel where trends and challenges highlight potential issues or opportunities for quick intervention. In contrast, our historical meeting- and paper-based processes seem to result in a trickle-down culture that cyclically dilutes the messages and impedes the responsiveness of front-line personnel. If measures, timelines, and data were made more consistent, transparent, and actionable, would each person be better equipped and enabled to take more timely action?
- If student engagement is important for student persistence, would it be feasible and beneficial to create early semester social events for newly declared students to quickly connect with peers, faculty, organizations, and advisors related to their respective disciplines?
- There are so many issues and ideas here? Will our work be more effective by prioritizing and addressing a few areas at a time in a more unified way (rifle), or should the ideal grand plan be the standard and individual areas left to determine their own next steps forward (shotgun)?
- Could faculty/staff/student exit surveys be better utilized to identify best practices, trouble spots, and opportunities for innovation? With graduating students, does our graduating senior survey foot this bill or is it too little, too late to be useful?
- Are there places where our graduation-based measures are inappropriate? For instance, could minor policy changes allow a reverse-transfer approach to the pre-health student who leaves Texas Tech prior to graduation to complete studies at a professional school? Would the creation of a pre-health associates degree undermine the Texas Tech research reputation or would the gains in graduation/completion rates warrant this risk?
- We boast an incredibly competent and highly motivated research faculty. We also recognize the importance of research and the influence our VPR office wields with the research faculty and graduate students? Why not leverage these assets to effectively incent multi-disciplinary research into the processes, policies, challenges and successes of our own institution, specifically as it relates to student success, retention, and graduation?