STUDENT SUCCESS RETENTION TASK FORCE
FINAL REPORT
26 August 2015

Task Force Membership:
C. Thomas Philbrick (Chair), School of Arts & Sciences
JC Barone, School of Arts and Sciences
Daniel Barrett, University Senate President
Linda Forbes, Ancell School of Business
Leslie Lindenauer, Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching
Emily Stevens, School of Professional Studies

INTRODUCTION
The future of Western Connecticut State University depends on making significant improvements in student success and retention\(^1\). Western is not alone; colleges and universities nationwide are wrestling with similar problems. There is a rich and growing literature pertaining to understanding the underlying causes of diminishing student success and retention, as well as strategies that have proven effective in addressing the problems. Even so, it is clear that a ‘one size fits all’ solution does not exist and appropriate actions vary from school to school. Consequently, effective strategies need to be school-specific. The overarching goal of this report is to identify ways to increase student success and retention without sacrificing academic rigor and opportunities for an excellent liberal arts education. That goal and Western’s mission guide the recommendations provided below.

The Student Success Retention Task Force was appointed by Provost Gates in March, 2015, was convened on 6 April, has engaged in consistent electronic discourse, and has met five times between April and 26 August.

The charge of the committee was two-fold: identify contemporary best practices and innovative academic programs of distinction to promote student success; and identify how we might implement best practices at Western no later than August 27, 2015. (Academic programs of distinction were not selected as a priority as such because they could not be put into place by the deadline for this report.)

The Task Force reviewed pertinent literature on best practices and examined how Western’s peer institutions addressed student success and retention issues. It is especially important to note that considerable input was also gained from Western standing and ad hoc committees, or groups of individuals not comprising a formal committee, currently working on issues relevant to the charge of the Task Force. Subsequently, high impact factors were identified that were most applicable to Western. We strongly believe that the university needs to act immediately and forcefully on the recommendations presented in this report.

Recommendations are presented under three broad categories: 1) establishing administrative accountability and coordination; 2) strengthening student engagement; and 3) embracing both resident and commuter student populations. The first category reflects the reality that when student retention is everyone’s responsibility, it can also become “no one’s” responsibility. One consequence is the lack of a specific person or office responsible for coordinating retention

\(^1\) Student success and retention are closely linked, but not synonymous. Completion of one’s academic degree (graduation) is the most pertinent measure of student success. Retention, in contrast, is a measure of the number of students who continue on in a school; typically from their first year of enrollment to graduation.
efforts. The second involves several elements that enhance student engagement; engaged students are more likely to be retained. The last category reflects the need for a deep cultural examination of the importance of the increasing commuter student population at Western. Specific topics are addressed under each of these categories.

I. ESTABLISHING ADMINISTRATIVE ACCOUNTABILITY AND COORDINATION

A. Systematic Retention Effort and Data Analytics

Western is experiencing enrollment and retention challenges. Even so, aside from general demographic trends, no specific causes have been identified and empirically supported. Addressing student retention is a shared responsibility across the university, but it is crucial to have a specific individual/office responsible for leading and coordinating the strategies and practices designed to improve retention. Without such a person/office there is no clear accountability or oversight for retention efforts. Although the Student Success Action Plans 2015 identify important issues, what is missing is the big picture—a university-wide, cohesive plan to improve student outcomes, including retention and graduation rates.

The Task Force examined three national reports (summarized below) about best practices aimed at improving retention, as well as two reports specific to Western. The former heavily emphasize the need for systematic retention efforts and for detailed, ongoing data gathering, analysis, and data-based decision making. The latter identify a need to strengthen Western’s institutional research capacities.

The ACT Fourth National Survey: What Works in Student Retention? (2010) indicates that nearly 70% of 258 public four-year colleges and universities surveyed had designated a particular person to coordinate retention efforts; Western lacks such a person. In the report “The Secret to Student Success: Effective Practices to Boost Student Retention and Graduation Rates,” Sousa (2015) discusses how the improvement of student success rests on insight derived from data analysis (e.g., collection and use of data to identify at-risk students; policy/program changes based on such analyses; tracking the effectiveness of such changes) and an effective planning process. The same report also indicates that while most institutions recognize how important data is, many do not use it effectively. The Noel-Levitz National Research Report (2007) lists 20 best practices in student retention, many of which are based on the importance of good qualitative and quantitative data (e.g., retention rates, tracking progress) and ways to communicate these data to the campus community on a regular basis.

There were two reports focused specifically on Western: Report on The Role of Institutional Research at Western Connecticut State University (Volkwein, 2014), and the Report of the WCSU 21st Century Role of Institutional Planning Committee (2014/15). The former emphasizes that Western needs a more effective Institutional Research Office that includes strengthened internal and external reporting of key statistics, educational outcome studies, and enrollment management analysis. The latter report recommends that Western strengthen its data collection and reporting capacities, increase the staffing allocated for institutional research, and move toward a school-based institutional research model.
Task Force Recommendations

1. Create a position of Chief Retention Officer (CRO) whose sole responsibility is leading and coordinating student retention initiatives across Western.
2. Establish a new standing multidisciplinary committee that is responsible for guiding and monitoring the retention plan in conjunction with the CRO.
3. Develop a cohesive university-wide retention plan applicable at the department, school, and university levels.
4. Integrate retention efforts into the strategic planning process.

II. STRENGTHENING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN ORDER TO LESSEN BARRIERS TO STUDENT SUCCESS

A. Community-Based Learning

Community-based learning is a high impact practice that enhances student success and retention (Kuh, 2008; WCSU Environmental Scan Final Report, April 2015). In this section, unless stated otherwise, ‘community-based learning’ is used in the broad sense, to include such things as internships, co-ops, experiential learning, service learning, etc.

Community-based learning activities have been steadily growing at Western (WCSU Environmental Scan Final Report, April 2015). Over the last year the committee charged with examining this topic has clarified the important distinctions among and value of service-learning, community service, field experience, etc. We are proud to note that Western has earned a place on President Obama’s Higher Education Community Service Honor Role (http://www.nationalservice.gov/special-initiatives/honor-roll). Moreover, Western is a member of Campus Compact (http://compact.org/), a largely national organization that “… advances the public purposes of colleges and universities by deepening their ability to improve community life and to educate students for civic and social responsibility” (http://compact.org/).

Increasing our commitment to community-based learning has the potential to make important contributions to student success and retention at Western. Maturation of community-based learning activities at Western, however, is hindered by the lack of coordination, communication and a “central” office or person to strengthen these efforts. As a result, important elements of community-based learning are located in disparate divisions across the organizational structure of the university leaving us without a mechanism for sharing institutional knowledge.

Service-learning is an excellent example of how a community-based program can enhance student engagement and retention. It is a course-based, credit-bearing, structured learning experience that combines community service with explicit learning objectives, preparation, and reflection. Service-learning is playing an ever-increasing role in higher education (Kuh et al., 2005). A report provided to the Northern New England Campus Compact demonstrated that students who participated in service-learning courses scored significantly higher on success-related measures including community engagement, academic engagement, interpersonal engagement, academic challenge, and likelihood to remain at the university [retention] than students in courses that did not include service-learning (Nigro and Farnsworth, 2009). Thus, a carefully-coordinated and intentional service learning program, as well as more career-focused learning opportunities, add significant value to undergraduate education.
Task Force Recommendations

1. Appoint a director/coordinator of community-based learning and establish where in Western’s organizational structure the position would most effectively reside.
2. Develop a comprehensive plan for incorporating community-based learning into the undergraduate curriculum, as reflected in the university’s strategic goals.
3. Review and clarify the role of the Career Development Center regarding community-based learning (in particular, internships across the divisions) and Institutional Advancement’s role in establishing relationships with external organizations that could support community-based learning.
4. Provide faculty with incentives (i.e., reassigned time, stipends) to develop community-based learning courses.

B. On-Line Learning and Technology

The potential for on-line education is untapped at Western. Carefully planned and executed on-line education or teaching is an effective means of addressing both academic and structural barriers to student success and retention (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004). Online, hybrid, and blended learning courses are well-established elements of the toolbox of modern higher education, and their use will continue to evolve. Innovative teaching and engagement are the key drivers of successful distance learning, although appropriate technological resources are crucial (e.g., Chaney et al., 2010). Western’s current on-line learning presence is inadequate. For instance, across the 2012-2015 academic years (fall and spring sections) the number of online course sections has never exceeded 3% of the total course sections. Sections of online courses are higher for the winter and summer sessions.

The badly needed growth in Western’s virtual academic community requires that appropriate resources and incentives be provided for faculty. Moreover, Western needs to evaluate how students (residential, commuter, full-time, part-time) interact with, and respond to, its virtual academic community.

Task Force Recommendations

1. Significantly enhance and promote faculty support for developing online, hybrid, blended or tech-facilitated courses (e.g., adequate financial incentives, adequate face-to-face and/or on-line training).
2. Provide one on-site instructional designer for each of the three schools that currently lack such a person.
3. Embark on a careful evaluation of the extent to which the Blackboard Learning Platform meets the needs of students (e.g., functional mobile access) and faculty, and that, depending on the nature of the service gap, serious consideration be given to alternatives.
4. Initiate a review of the usage of the Blackboard Learning Platform across Western courses, matching patterns of use with outcomes such as student course evaluations and course enrollment.
C. Commit to the First Year Program

Strong evidence indicates that a First Year Program increases student success and retention. Numerous studies that analyzed successful college programs have highlighted the effectiveness of a carefully designed First Year Program (e.g., Goodman and Pascarella, 2006). Western’s study body (e.g., significant numbers of first generation, underprepared and transfer students) would benefit substantially from a strong First Year Program. Indeed, Western recognizes the importance of such a program, as it is one of the required competencies for general education.

With the support of a significant grant from the Davis Foundation, Western has made considerable progress in thinking critically and strategically about the University’s First Year Program, with an eye toward ensuring that it is an “intentional combination of academic and co-curricular efforts…to strengthen the quality of student learning during and satisfaction with the first year of college.” (Greenfield et al., 2013). Even so, it is crucial that a long-term commitment to the First Year Program is established at Western.

Task Force Recommendations

1. Clarify and provide adequate support for the role of the coordinator for the First Year Program and his/her position in the University’s organizational chart.
2. Establish an advisory committee on the First Year Program.
3. Provide faculty with adequate incentives (i.e. reassigned time, stipends) to develop a first year course or to adapt an existing course.
4. Examine the efficacy of a similar type program for transfer students.

D. Address the importance of Western’s Website for the technology-focused student body

The website of a university is its “virtual face” (Myer and Jones, 2011) and is crucial for brand establishment, recruitment of students, and the most important source of information for enrolled students. The infrastructure that Western students interact with on a daily basis has become as much virtual as physical; such is especially true for commuter students and indeed for all students who have significant off campus commitments to work and family. If Western’s website falls short of its intended purpose, we’re not alone. Various sources indicate that university websites can require considerable skill and persistence to find the desired information (Meyer and Jones, 2011; Pendell and Bowman, 2012), i.e., often resource rich, but not easy to utilize efficiently.

The importance of website quality to colleges/universities is evidenced by the considerable literature on the topic. For example, Van Iwaarden and van der Wele (2002), in their study of students at two universities, found that five service quality dimensions (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) are important for use and efficiency of university websites. Not unexpectedly, these dimensions are the same as those for the service sector. The International Organization for Standardization propose a “quality in use” measure that “can be used to validate the extent to which the software or Web application meets specific user needs” (Olsina et al., 2006). It is no surprise that effectiveness and productivity are emphasized - “effectiveness,” is the capability “…to enable users to achieve specified goals with accuracy and completeness,” while “productivity” is the ability “… to expend appropriate amounts of resources in relation to the effectiveness achieved” (Olsina et al., 2006). A review of website evaluation literature by Chiou et al., (2010) found that “ease of navigation” and “content relevance and usefulness” are key.
What distinguishes the Web from traditional media is its unique interactive ability. Jo and Kim (2003) conclude that “…interactivity and multimedia orientation have significant effects on relationship building between the organization and publics.” Gordon and Berhow (2009) report a positive correlation between university website features that encourage interaction (dialogic features) and student retention. Harmon et al. (2014) report that both students and faculty include the following as elements of a good website: 24-7 help desk access, Amazon and eBay-like experience and performance, a social media look and feel, and fast networks. Allowing for seamless website access via mobile devices is a particular challenge (Pendell and Bowman, 2012), but one that needs to be confronted. As stated in Western’s Environmental Scan Final Report, April 2015, “Students are more likely than ever to access information and resources, produce assignments, and check progress on their mobile devices.”

**Task Force Recommendation**

1. Establish a transparent evaluation process by an outside third party to assure that Western’s website is aligned with best practices for design, efficiency, and ease of use for its stakeholders, especially students.

**E. Co-locate virtual access to all student services into a Student Success Center**

A rich array of student services, both academic and non-academic, are provided at Western. Such services are available via a range of sources, e.g., Tutoring Resource Center, Career Development Center, Academic Advisement Center, Counseling Center, Health Service, Western’s libraries, Recreational Services, Student Tech Training Center, Student Government Association, Student Center/Student Life Office, Greek Council, Mail Services, Inter-Cultural Resource Center, Program Activities Council. These sources often have differing physical locations on campus and virtual locations on Western’s website.

Today’s student interacts as much with the virtual as the physical infrastructure of Western. Best practices indicate that the co-locating of student resources in one space (physical and/or virtual) enhances student use of these resources and positively influences student engagement with the university and thus success and retention (e.g., Coley et al., 2014; Harmon et al., 2014; Kent and Taylor, 1998; Meyer and Jones, 2011; Pendell and Bowman, 2012). Many colleges and universities name the location where student resources are pooled as something similar to a ‘Student Success Center.’ Five of our peer institutions have what are essentially these types of

---

centers, although their specific names, types of resources provided, and physical vs virtual presence varies. Ideally, Western would pool student resources in both physical and virtual space. As the charge of the Task Force is to make recommendations that can be put into place quickly, our emphasis is on a virtual student success center. (It is important to note that we are not downplaying the importance of physical locations for student services.) Moreover, the majority of student services provided at Western already have a virtual presence. What is lacking is a single ‘portal’ through which students can access all these services.

As today’s students are digital natives, the virtual space is especially important as it provides 24-7 availability from on and off campus. As noted in the Environmental Scan Subcommittee Final Report, April 2015, student “…services need to develop in such a way that mobile access can be expected and respected, services can be delivered in a wireless environment, and displays are developed that will be attractive on either a large or small screen.” Centralized online access to academic services would encourage expanded student awareness of what support options are available, allow access from both campuses, and increase availability to an increasing commuter student population.

**Task Force Recommendation**

1. Create a virtual Student Success Center

**III. EMBRACING THE DIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN STUDENT BODY: RESIDENT & COMMUTER**

A. A significant commuter student population is not a weakness

The Environmental Scan Subcommittee Final Report, April, 2015, presents a powerful statement that can readily be overlooked: “…the notion of the “traditional” university student has dissolved. Only one in five students is now entering college at the age of 18, studying full-time and living on campus. The university must adapt…” The future of Western requires an objective and holistic re-examination of its student population, one that will represent no less than a deep cultural evaluation. Our focus in this report is on commuter students.

Commuter students make up a significant portion of the student body at Western. The Student Success Action Plan 2015 state that Western is “…predominantly a commuter campus.” The Environmental Scan Final Report, April 2015, notes that “The number of residential students has declined steadily over the last 5 years, culminating in an annual average of over 65% of students living off campus.” Although an important goal for Western needs to be increasing residential student numbers, it is equally important for a large commuter student demographic not be viewed as a ‘negative.’ The first sentence in Western’s mission statement states that the university “…changes lives by providing all students with a high-quality education that fosters their growth as individuals, scholars, professionals, and leaders in a global society.” This statement applies equally to resident, commuter, full-time and part-time students.

The significant proportion of commuter students at Western is often viewed as a ‘problem to be solved.’ For example, the increasing commuter population “…reduces revenues, impedes building community and student engagement, and complicates offering services at convenient hours” (Environmental Scan Final Report, April 2015). “Staff and students comment that we are
becoming a “commuter” or “suitcase” campus” (Division of Enrollment Services, Annual Report / Self-Appraisal, AY 2014 to 2015).

We do not discount the importance of developing a strong residential student body at Western, as student engagement is enhanced for residential students and reflected in positive retention. Even so, there is scant evidence that the university has fully embraced the reality of an increasing commuter population. Western needs to develop a mentality in which a student body composed predominantly of commuters is viewed as a strength, not a weakness. Western needs to explore how such things as course offerings (on-site, on-line), infrastructure (e.g., residence halls), and services (e.g., dining, advisement, website) can be used creatively and effectively to serve its resident student body while also incorporating the needs of the majority of the students at the university – commuters.

Task Force Recommendations

1. Ask the University Senate to establish, in collaboration with Student Affairs and Academic Affairs, a task force to explore the significance of an increasing commuter student population.
2. Establish strategies for increasing commuter student engagement at Western.
3. Integrate the distinct needs of commuter students into strategic planning.
REFERENCES CITED


Student Success Action Plans 2015: A Roadmap for Innovation, Student Success and Sustainability. Provided by the Provost’s Office, Western Connecticut State University


WCSU Environmental Scan Final Report, April 2015. Provided by the Provost’s Office, Western Connecticut State University