

# Promoting a Culture of Student Success



How Colleges and Universities Are Improving Degree Completion

## SREB

Southern Regional Education Board • [www.sreb.org](http://www.sreb.org)

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# A Message from the SREB President

## *College students' success links directly to region's economic future*

State policy-makers and the public across the nation now recognize the severe consequences of low high school graduation rates and the need to raise those graduation rates significantly.

But relatively few state leaders and Americans realize that average college-completion rates fall well below high school graduation rates.

While colleges and universities must find ways to greatly increase their graduation rates, we also need to raise the *numbers* of people with two- and four-year college degrees and career certificates. Most new jobs now require some level of postsecondary education.

We can argue about exactly how many more adults with degrees are needed nationwide, but the facts show that the United States is falling behind other developed countries in degree completion. Many policy-makers agree that degree completion needs to as much as double in order to keep the nation economically competitive.



Western Kentucky University

Increasing the numbers of persons with degrees and certificates in the coming years will require increasing the rates at which students who typically enroll in college actually *graduate*. However, to raise the numbers substantially, we will need to see that many more students, younger and older alike, *enter college* and *succeed*. The pipeline of students working toward college degrees and career certificates needs to grow — and its leaks need urgent repair.

Boosting degree completion requires a range of strategies:

- Improving students' academic readiness and motivation for college.
- Smoother college-transfer programs in each state.
- Greater institutional priority and effectiveness in helping students complete degrees.
- More access to college and an emphasis on affordability, even during stressful economic times.
- Drawing more adults into postsecondary education and helping them complete degrees and certificates.
- State education policies and funding that directly, forcefully prompt improvements on campuses and across postsecondary systems.

SREB will be issuing a full set of recommendations this summer that will help state leaders and policy-makers make progress in these areas.

The following report speaks directly to one of these components — what individual colleges and universities can and should do to help more students succeed. It outlines specific actions that we believe have attained best practice status that nearly every institution should follow.

As states and institutions work to make degree completion their first priority in postsecondary education, they need to do so while also increasing access to college. Higher college graduation rates will not mean anything if these rates result from fewer students entering in the first place.

Increased degree and certificate completion depends on two crucial actions. First, institutions must increase the rate at which current students graduate. Second, to reach the much higher number of degrees that SREB states need, postsecondary education will need to enroll many additional students and then help them succeed. Both actions are essential — enrolling more students in postsecondary education and pushing for higher rates of degree completion.

Improving degree completion while also guaranteeing access traditionally has not been a major priority at most institutions. Making headway in degree completion will require a major cultural shift of purpose and practice on campuses, from boards of trustees to administrators, faculty and among students.

The result of our work should be that more students *enroll* in college — and that more who enroll *finish* degrees. Advancements in this area will pay off for generations to come.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David S. Spence". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "D".

Dave Spence, SREB President

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## Introduction

Despite rising college enrollment, improvement in students' timely completion of bachelor's degrees in the United States has stalled. Student success rates are alarmingly low and have not changed significantly in many years: **Fewer than one-third of degree-seeking, full-time freshmen in public four-year institutions graduate in four years.** Most students who enter college as first-time, full-time freshmen take at least six years to earn a bachelor's degree — and only 55 percent graduate in that time span.

Clearly, the nation's success in attracting more students to college has not been matched by success in graduating them. In fact, research shows that students from disadvantaged economic backgrounds or with low SAT/ACT scores are even less likely to complete bachelor's degrees than their classmates.

Some colleges and universities, however, *are* helping more students complete degrees while also providing a high-quality education. These institutions often serve a comparatively high percentage of students from low-income families and students with average-or-below scores on standardized achievement tests. Yet their six-year graduation rates are near the national average for **all** students. These colleges and universities are the focus of this report.



Delta State University, Mississippi

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) examined many strategies that public institutions are using to help more students earn bachelor's degrees, with particular attention to students in regional colleges and universities who often face academic and/or economic disadvantages. The findings of this report draw most heavily from interviews with college administrators, faculty, staff and students to identify **institutional actions that contribute most to the colleges' relatively high graduation rates.**

This report also reflects current research on student retention and degree completion. Recent studies offer valuable insights into the factors that influence student success and how institutions are performing relative to the graduation rates of different groups of students. In *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter*, George Kuh and others cite research showing that the best predictors of student success are academic preparation and motivation. While these characteristics are common among many college students, a high percentage of students on campuses across the nation do not enter college with strong academic preparation or high levels of motivation. Nonetheless, simply by admitting these students, postsecondary institutions acknowledge their deficiencies and commit to helping them succeed.

Institutional actions can make a significant difference in student retention and degree completion. At Education Sector, Kevin Carey’s research during the past decade identifies several institutions with higher graduation rates than their peers. In *Choosing to Improve: Voices from Colleges and Universities with Better Graduation Rates*, he features some of these institutions and their policies, practices and decisions. The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education studied 10 colleges and universities with many students from low-income families and higher-than-average graduation rates. It found that those institutions emphasized academic planning and intrusive advising, academic reviews for students in trouble, special programs, a dedicated faculty, financial aid and an explicit retention policy. Research at ACT Inc. by Veronica Lotkowski and others also found that non-academic factors such as institutional commitment, social support and social involvement had a positive relationship to student retention.



Students at Montclair State University, New Jersey

As Kuh and others have noted, effective leaders are a key component of success at high-performing institutions. Vincent Tinto argues that the “institution’s capacity to engage faculty and administrators across the campus in a collaborative effort to construct education settings, classrooms and otherwise, that actively engage students in learning” is central to successful retention efforts.

*The purpose of this report is twofold: to emphasize that institutions can increase degree completion and to give institutions and policy-makers recommendations for promoting greater student success.* This report also adds to existing evidence of how institutions can help more students graduate.

Specifically, this report summarizes 15 institutions’ successful approaches to improving graduation rates and student achievement. (See the complete methodology for the selection of the institutions on Page 14.) It recommends specific strategies that campus leaders can use. Finally, the report profiles each institution and its particular student-success initiatives.

State officials, university systems and state higher education agencies also need to provide leadership in improving colleges’ degree-completion efforts through more effective planning, policies and procedures. State agencies and officials can emphasize retention and college completion by requiring and monitoring institutional plans to increase degree completion and by rewarding successful and improving institutions.

A companion publication from SREB will examine *state policies that can enhance college students’ opportunities to complete degrees*. This series of SREB reports provides a guide for institutions and policy-makers at the state and federal level as they work to improve college-degree completion for all students — raising the overall education levels for each state and the entire nation.

## A Graduation-Oriented Culture

Most institutions of public higher education exist to educate students. Students, their families, and policy-makers expect that the state’s public colleges and universities will do everything possible to help students complete their degree, and college completion should be the institution’s *top priority*. While there is no single formula that can guarantee a student will earn a bachelor’s degree, institutions that successfully promote degree completion share several common strategies.

The keystone of all of the institutions highlighted in this report is **a campus culture that supports student success**. A culture reflects the character of an organization and generally is defined as the sum total of the

values, customs, traditions and beliefs that shape how people behave. Culture cannot simply be declared or legislated — it is established and maintained by people. In the institutions visited and studied by SREB, campus leaders have built strong cultures that lead more of their students than those in similar colleges and universities elsewhere to keep working on their degrees until they graduate.

**SREB found two important characteristics that create and define the strong cultures at these institutions:** The first is **attentive leadership** at many institutional levels, shown by a deep commitment to student success in all communications with students and employees and in policy decisions. The second is an **intense focus on the individual student**, verified by sharply targeted programs and services, affinity groups, and attention to each student’s needs.

## I. Leaders Should Build Cultures of Student Success

The attentive leadership that SREB found to be pervasive at every institution in this report often includes a campus “champion” for student success in degree completion — usually the president, but not always. Even when a clear champion exists, faculty and staff members provide other types of leadership at many levels, so that *leadership for student success is everyone’s job*.

Building and sustaining a graduation-oriented environment for students require a **variety of campus leaders** who define expectations for the college and consistently reinforce them. At their most effective, these leaders clarify the best practices and programs that enhance students’ opportunities for degree completion, and they allocate money and staff to achieve the goal of graduation. They then assess their progress and change course where necessary. Finally, they recognize all contributors — faculty, department heads, administrators, students, etc. — who sustain the graduation-oriented environment.

All of these leadership-based activities need to occur, but no single individual or group can provide them all. *Collaboration among individuals and departments* also is a significant element of the culture of every institution in this report. SREB found that leadership at all levels — state, system, institution, department and program — contributes in crucial ways to student success.

**Senior and mid-level administrators** are key leaders and advocates in improving graduation rates at the institutions in this report. Presidents were most often cited as champions for degree completion, ensuring that policies and procedures promote student progress, allocating and focusing resources on degree completion and student success, and prioritizing assessment of the institution’s performance on such indicators. At **California State University, Long Beach**, President King Alexander and his predecessor, Robert Maxson, were lauded by colleagues and students for their consistent attention to student success, for example.



Queens College, The City University of New York

But other leaders also were mentioned in interviews as champions for student success: Vice presidents, deans and/or directors were cited as key to institutions’ relatively high graduation rates at every institution in this report. In fact, on more than one campus, these leaders were identified as *critical* to student success — and in some cases were the primary campus champions. Students’ chances for degree completion involve their academic, social and psychological well-being, and administrators in student services, academic affairs, advisement, counseling, residence life, faculty development, the library and others play crucial roles — confirming that effective leadership toward student success is a shared responsibility.

SREB found in campus interviews that mid-level administrators in some cases have pioneered the development of services that promote student success or lead such services. These services include educational-

opportunity initiatives for first-generation college students and those from low-income households, programs for students with disabilities, special counseling or advising centers (e.g., for athletes, students with disabilities, international students and others) and more.

Some of these administrators are vocal proponents for degree-completion efforts, and many of them are mentors and role models for students:

- **Registrars** (or comparable departments overseeing course scheduling) can be important to degree completion. If students cannot take the courses they need *when they need them*, it hinders timely degree completion. Typically, students — especially commuter students — want to cluster their classes to avoid making multiple trips to campus per day. At larger institutions, this can be a major challenge.
- **Financial aid officers** also play a critical role in degree completion, especially for students with economic challenges. Financial aid officers at the institutions in this report often work hard to prevent students from leaving for financial reasons, according to campus interviews. In addition, some institutions' student aid programs provide incentives for academic progress that contribute directly to higher completion rates. **Western Kentucky University** (WKU) and other institutions provide “angel funds” to assist needy students with expenses for books and transportation, and at WKU the administration ensures that students who are behind on tuition payments find help early in the semester. At **Sam Houston State University** in Texas and several other institutions in this report, financial aid staffs regularly refer students to other campus offices for help with study skills, reading and writing.

Inclusive, campus-wide **institutional initiatives** are additional strategies that leaders at the universities in this report use to increase retention and completion. Often, these initiatives are temporary, such as a team appointed to lead strategic planning or a task force charged with a mission related to improving degree completion. Such efforts often involve the entire campus and lead to long-term efforts that transform the institution's culture. They often come about because of a state initiative or with the arrival of a new campus president, such as at **Montclair State University** in New Jersey.

Other organizational initiatives that figure prominently in student success include retention committees such as the one at **Clarion University of Pennsylvania**, enrollment management committees, ongoing strategic planning teams and faculty senates. Attentive leadership by these groups can help sustain efforts to improve students' degree completion if the champion departs. Having additional parts of the institution involved creates a collective champion (the team or committee) or multiple champions for improving degree completion.



Students at Clarion University of Pennsylvania

SREB interviews also showed that effective **academic departments and administrative units** provide leadership for student success. Many departments at these institutions have a long-standing departmental culture of strong student engagement and an emphasis on degree completion. Signs of graduation-oriented departments include joint research projects among faculty and students, departmental tutorial centers, faculty efforts to introduce students to intellectual and cultural opportunities on and off campus, and easy student access to the faculty. At these institutions, students typically have little trouble in finding a faculty member available to help them, contributing to their success.

“One-stop shops” are an emerging institutional approach to changing internal administrative units to meet student needs. Instead of having various administrative services scattered across campus, several institutions

house them close together, often with a single check-in desk. At a few institutions, students wait for service in comfortable, lounge-type seating where electronic message boards alert them when a support person is ready to help. One-stop shops typically include fee collection, financial aid, the registrar and the academic advisement center.

Many interviewees cited student advising as especially important. At some institutions, faculty members serve as the primary advisers for students. Several institutions in this report use specialist advisers (whose primary job is to provide academic advising), especially for students' first two years, to ensure students have a good start in college. A few institutions in this report engage faculty more comprehensively in student advising. **Western Kentucky University** created the Campus Advising Network (CAN) in response to faculty requests for additional training as academic advisers and offers a Master Advisor Certificate (MAC) to faculty. The program helps faculty become better advisers to students and focuses on student retention.



Sam Houston State University, Texas

Other institutions in this report have established or are creating *campus-wide advisement centers* to assist students during their entire time in college. Campuses with professional advisement centers visited by SREB often were described by college staff and students as excellent, and the institutions had survey data showing strong student satisfaction. At institutions with these centers, faculty advising may be ancillary and focused exclusively on academic majors.

In addition to administrators, campus-wide committees, and more effective administrative units, institutional leaders need **faculty, students and alumni** to help create a graduation-oriented culture. *Faculty members' roles in attentive leadership for student success are not confined to academic departments.* Faculty also play a major role individually in students' degree completion at the colleges and universities in this report: They often are gifted teachers, listeners, mentors and regular participants in student activities. They serve as role models who help students define their own expectations, determine personal priorities and time allocation, assess students' progress and recognize their accomplishments. These intellectual and emotional bonds strongly engage students in college work and the campus environment and are hallmarks of attentive leadership. These efforts are difficult to make part of public policy, but their importance cannot be overemphasized. They are at the heart of a graduation-oriented institution.

The institutions in this report *involve students in leadership roles* as peer mentors, tutors, orientation leaders and resident advisers. These students are important as role models for their younger peers and serve as examples that progress and success are possible.

*Alumni* also provide leadership and serve as role models for students, especially at institutions such as North Carolina Central and Elizabeth City State universities that historically have served minority students and have traditions of alumni participation. At these institutions, alumni seem to be everywhere — serving as visiting lecturers, sponsors for off-campus activities, community service volunteers, career advisers, job providers and financial contributors. Their leadership is seen as crucial to many students' success.

In summary, **a graduation-oriented campus requires consistent messages from leaders about high expectations for students, how to achieve these goals, and the resources that are available.** Attentive leadership toward student success at the colleges in this report is not about a single charismatic leader. When one exists (and SREB encountered several in its interviews), the institution is fortunate. But without attentive leadership at all institutional levels, involving a wide range of individuals, efforts to improve degree completion may be fragmented and halting.

## II. Institutions Should Support Student Needs

Attentive leadership is only one campus characteristic that drives timely degree completion. When attentive leadership is combined with *intentional* institutional practices that promote degree completion, the result often is greater levels of student success. The colleges and universities profiled in this report have other common strengths that contribute to an institutional focus on student success: targeted programs and services, affinity groups, and other practices that meet individual students' needs.

### *Targeted Programs and Services*

**All of the institutions in this report have specific programs that focus intently on students' timely degree completion.** Among the most common are **First-Year Experience (FYE) programs**, designed to engage incoming students in campus life early. No two FYEs in this report are the same, though many are based on the popular seminar model developed by John Gardner of the University of South Carolina. The seminars vary by number of sessions, comprehensiveness of the course content, whether student attendance is required, who teaches the course, whether students also are scheduled together in other classes, and other elements.

Some institutions' FYEs go well beyond the seminar. Many programs include organized social activities, visits to cultural sites or events, attendance at lectures, common summer reading assignments, and college "survival training" in areas such as time management and study skills. A few institutions have expanded the FYE to include transfer and adult students — and even upper-division students. Decisions to expand these programs often were based on data showing student satisfaction and demand.

Student activities also have a positive influence on degree completion. Colleges' efforts to provide "social engagement" are important to keeping students in college and can vary by geographic location. Rural colleges in Wayne, Nebraska; Clarion, Pennsylvania; Cleveland, Mississippi; and Elizabeth City, North Carolina, provide many student activities on their campuses. However, commuter-dominated colleges in busy urban areas such as Southern California and New York City also work to keep students on campus and connected to each other and the institution. Student services departments and administrators are key to ensuring student engagement.



Commencement at  
Wayne State College, Nebraska

Many of the institutions in this report also have **programs that focus on students' academic readiness for college**. Many high school graduates — even some with good grades — are not ready for the rigor of college courses. California, Kentucky and Texas are among only a handful of states that have developed (or are instituting) statewide college-readiness policies that call for states to identify high school students who are deficient in reading, writing and mathematics in time to bolster their knowledge and skills. The goal is to reduce or eliminate the need for remedial college courses. These programs are promising, but they are few in number and too late for today's first-year college students. Ensuring that students are ready to succeed in college-level courses is an essential part of helping more students graduate.

Sometimes called developmental studies, remedial college courses can be controversial. Debate continues about whether colleges should admit unqualified students. In fact, students taking remedial courses often are not fully admitted and may have only a year to pass entrance examinations. But they do attend class and require institutional resources.

For the institutions in this report, all of which accept high percentages of students with average-or-below high school records and standardized achievement test scores, the numbers and percentages of students who

require developmental studies are high. In some cases, these students need developmental instruction only in one area, but some are deficient in reading, writing *and* math. Even so, many students at the institutions in this report have passed their developmental courses and gained admission at relatively high rates: more than 60 percent for students requiring more than one remedial course, and more than 80 percent for those who needed only one remedial course. Data also show that many of these students do well in college after admission and *graduate at rates similar to those of the general student population.*

Clearly, these remedial programs are working better at these institutions than at many others. Why? One reason is that institutions such as the **College of Staten Island, The City University of New York**, monitor developmental students' progress carefully and use data to guide program improvements. Also, SREB interviews revealed that most faculty and staff members at the institutions visited are passionate about the mission of developmental studies and often take students' failures personally. Many of them recognize their opportunity to improve students' lives and enjoy the challenge. They clearly convey their expectations for students, sometimes using written contracts that detail the responsibilities of both parties. They regularly express personal confidence in the students, strengthening students' self-confidence, bolstered by the success of their predecessors. Many faculty and staff members are mentors who help students with issues beyond the curriculum.

Many students at the institutions in this report passed their developmental courses and gained admission at relatively high rates.

Another type of targeted service is the **tutorial center**. Every institution in this report provides students with extensive tutorial services. The typical tutorial center has at least one professional coordinator, many student peer tutors and sometimes other professional staff, even faculty. The centers serve all students, though academic departments at some institutions provide their own tutors, often in math or English. In a typical semester, the percentage of the student body served by the tutorial center is high — and approaches the majority at some of the universities. Surveys uniformly indicate widespread student satisfaction.

Institution-wide **student retention and success centers** and related services are a relatively new approach to improving degree completion. In Mississippi, **Delta State University's** proposed Academic Advisement Center will bundle targeted services and initiatives to strengthen coordination and collaboration among the many individuals and programs that contribute to student success.

**Supplemental Instruction (SI)** is a central part of efforts to improve degree completion at several institutions in this report. First introduced at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, SI usually is applied to courses that historically have high failure rates. Commonly, a graduate student or selected upper-division student sits in on lectures or class activities and then leads a review session for small groups of students prior to the next class session. Research shows that students who participate in SI regularly perform better than their classmates who do not. Some of the institutions in this report offer SI for large percentages of their courses.

Highly effective **orientation** programs at the institutions visited by SREB often are a targeted strategy for helping new college students succeed. When orientation programs are carefully and comprehensively developed by institutions, they can be valuable sources of information for new students, can guide them through administrative tasks and can build their enthusiasm for college. All of the institutions in this report have spring and/or summer orientation sessions, rather than just before each semester. Colleges' approaches to orientation vary, but they typically cover testing and placement; an introduction to the institutions' people, systems, processes and services; and inspiration and socialization. Students in orientation sessions often share home and campus e-mail addresses to make contact prior to the start of classes. Later, orientation can include a long weekend just before classes begin, to reinforce the earlier sessions, further develop friendships among students, confirm registration, help students acclimate to living on campus, and introduce them to support staff and services. For many of the institutions, FYE is a natural extension of orientation.

Several institutions in this report have centers dedicated to **faculty development** — another key to high degree-completion rates. Typically, the institutions require new faculty orientation. At several institutions, a senior faculty member mentors each new faculty member for a year. Some universities — including **North Carolina Central** — also have required annual or semi-annual faculty workshops, and many hold additional, optional workshops on topics such as helping students improve their writing and boosting faculty members’ advisement skills.

### **Affinity Groups**

All colleges and universities have clusters of students who share some common likenesses, interests or goals. Affinity groups can help institutions pay close attention to individuals and student groups and promote greater student engagement in the institution.

Some institutions arbitrarily create an affinity group (e.g., by randomly choosing students for an FYE seminar or for the same group of academic classes). In other cases, students join together for athletics, by international origin, or through programs for honors or at-risk students. Residence halls often provide a venue for affinity groups, sometimes congregating a group in a single floor or building. Some institutions house together athletes, musicians, international students, students with the same major and others. Others assign students to residence halls more randomly but create affinity groups through workshops on succeeding in college, discussions, and competitions with other residence halls, all led by students trained as resident advisers.

Some affinity groups are called “**learning communities**” (LCs) and are viewed by many in higher education as effective in improving degree completion. LCs have existed for centuries (though not with that label), with roots in the traditional British university model that features self-contained residential colleges.

**Murray State University** in Kentucky began a residential model several years ago, with good results. Most learning communities are curricular, allowing students to be actively engaged in a sustained academic relationship with other students and faculty, often for longer than one course.



Murray State University, Kentucky

LCs can promote academic success and student engagement by emphasizing student-to-student and student-to-faculty interactions. Some LCs also provide intensive mentoring and advising for students. Many LCs try to enhance the educational experience, not just students’ mastery of course content. LCs can use block scheduling to keep the same students together through many courses, and some also provide social and/or cultural activities for students. Some LCs group students with similar interests or backgrounds together, while others create community among a diverse mix of students through common activities.

Research reports and student surveys show that students in effective LCs often report having comfort or safety in an otherwise large, sometimes intimidating campus setting. LCs lend themselves well to interdisciplinary teaching and planning by faculty and administrators. They have helped to build supportive environments for students at the colleges in this report. Some LCs are part of campus FYE programs and others focus on honors students. Several institution officials see honors programs as LCs that are important for student retention and degree completion because they provide enriched college experiences for academically talented students who might otherwise attend other universities. LCs can also serve at-risk students, science-oriented students, women and “average” students. Larger universities, in particular, may benefit from the sense of community that LCs can provide.

**Programs for at-risk students** are an important type of affinity group and often take the form of learning communities. These programs have different names (e.g., EOP for Educational Opportunity Programs, SEEK for Search for Education Elevation and Knowledge, and TRIO SSS for Student Support Services) but otherwise are similar. Generally funded in part by federal or state governments or state college systems, they provide financial aid and intensive support such as mentoring, intrusive advisement, professional and peer tutoring, personal counseling, special classes and social events, and field trips.

Students at institutions in this report noted consistently that these programs provide a “home” for them where they can find caring adults and fellow students. Some of the institutions in this report show first-year retention and six-year degree completion rates for these students that are similar to those for the overall student body.



Students at Elizabeth City State University, North Carolina

### ***Meeting Individual Needs***

The college experience needs to be as academically and administratively hassle-free as possible so that students stay on track. Institutions need to provide *individualized services* to help them. One such service — **a learning contract** — is used by several institutions highlighted in this report. Student-advisement offices, tutorial centers and programs for at-risk students or struggling students (e.g., those on early alert or probation) often use contracts that define the responsibilities of the student and the institution (represented by an adviser) toward specific academic- or graduation-related goals. For example, a student striving to leave academic probation may promise to meet with an adviser weekly for academic counseling, show the adviser all graded papers and tests, receive tutoring, provide notice when adding or dropping a course, and seek help in deciding on future course electives. The adviser, in turn, may answer questions, suggest better study habits, and provide direct help or recommend other support services. The contracts provide students with a clear plan that can lead to a degree and remind them that someone on campus is paying attention and can be summoned for help.

**Student advisement** is clearly important to student success. Furthermore, institutions that use *intrusive advising* often identify this assertive approach as especially valuable to retention and graduation. Intrusive advisement usually requires students to check with faculty and other advisers regularly. It also helps protect students from errors in course registration, and it can boost degree completion by assuring that students take only the courses they need as they work toward graduation.

All of the institutions in this report have at least some full-time professional advisers. In most cases, they are in central advisement offices that work with all first-time students. At most of the institutions visited by SREB, all students who have not yet officially chosen a major must seek advisement from a central source. After students choose a major, they work with specific faculty members in their academic departments. However, there are some significant variations to this approach:

- **Queens College, The City University of New York**, developed a successful advising model in response to concerns about inconsistent advisement. It features a central Academic Advising Center, open seven days and three nights a week, which provides a full range of services from entry to exit.
- At **Western Illinois University**, almost all advising is done by full-time professional advisers, first in a central office for students who have not declared a major and then by specialists in each academic area.
- **Northwest Missouri State University** has only one advisement professional, who spends nearly all of his time meeting with and coaching faculty on advising skills.

- **California State University, Stanislaus**, uses faculty as the primary advisers but also includes the Academic Wellness Program, an “umbrella” academic advisement program that supplements faculty advising and features five stages of advising “checkpoints,” each linking students with an adviser to monitor, encourage, inform and assist them in making good choices.

While the approaches are different, students at each institution in this report consistently indicate on institutional assessments a high degree of satisfaction with advisement. Faculty and administrators also generally express satisfaction with advisement efforts. Most of the institutions monitor the effectiveness of their advisement programs and regularly consider improvements.

**Early alerts** help colleges identify students who are struggling, usually by halfway through a semester but sometimes earlier. They are most commonly used for first-year students. Faculty members often send alerts to the campus advisement center, but some institutions such as **Wayne State College** in Nebraska encourage anyone to make a referral: faculty, administrators, athletics coaches, resident advisers — even fellow students. Most advisement centers then request or require students to visit and develop a success plan that may involve signed contracts. SREB’s campus interviews show that many college employees and students consider early alert programs important to helping students succeed — especially first-year students. The interviews found that early alerts need to happen early enough in each term to allow for effective corrective action.

**Course scheduling** is crucial to students’ ability to graduate on time in today’s complex institutions, which provide many different academic majors, minors and interdisciplinary programs. Scheduling and registration can require great skill, organization and robust information technology. The challenge is for all students to have the courses they need — when they need them — and to make them accessible. This involves not only complicated formulas based on the number of students needing each course among hundreds of courses, but also the task of securing appropriate-sized and appointed space for the classes. *Some students have difficulty graduating on time because the courses they need are not available in a workable sequence.* Missing only one prerequisite course can cost a student an entire year — and can lead to their frustration, longer time to degree completion, or possibly dropping out.



The College of Staten Island, The City University of New York

Many institutions in this report have developed processes for **degree audits**, which can ensure that students are in the correct course sequences for their degrees. Audits traditionally have been used with college juniors, but institutions now commonly conduct them earlier by having advisers work with students to develop improvement/graduation plans. The goal is to eliminate unfortunate surprises that may have a negative effect on student success — such as when students accumulate far more credits than they need or haven’t chosen the right sequence, which could lead them to a dead end when a course they need isn’t offered that semester. *Requiring students to select a major by the end of the freshman year helps them focus on specific courses and enables the institution to provide more effective advising and monitoring services.*

This report opened by stressing the importance of establishing a graduation-oriented culture through leadership and meeting student needs. This approach to student success underscores the importance of personal attention for students. At every institution that SREB visited, interviewees offered inspiring explanations for their success in degree completion. Stories were legion about individuals going above and beyond expectations: faculty phoning students who skip class or providing extra help for a struggling student, or taking students to places and activities they had never experienced. Paraprofessionals such as peer mentors, residence advisers and tutors also provide help, sending a powerful message to students that their academic success is important — a message that is reflected in the numbers of students completing degrees.

## Summary

The 15 institutions profiled in this report outperform similar institutions in *admitting high percentages of students who face economic and academic challenges and graduating many of them on time*. SREB’s research and interviews found that these institutions have created **graduation-oriented cultures** that are focused strongly on student success, through **attentive leadership** at all levels and an array of **programs, processes and policies** that work in collaboration to serve students effectively and help many of them complete bachelor’s degrees.

SREB also found that the institutions in this report focus intently on **continuous improvement**, through ongoing institutional research, assessment of programs, and monitoring of data — especially around students’ degree completion. The institutions’ leaders, faculty and staff rarely are complacent or satisfied. They continually look to raise their institutions’ performance and have employed several key approaches that contribute to their own — and most importantly — their students’ success:



North Carolina Central University

- **Focus and expectations:** All levels of administration and staff at the institutions in this report focus intently on student retention and timely degree completion. Leaders — board, president, senior or mid-level administrators, and faculty — declare and reinforce that student retention and degree completion are the highest priorities. Student success is a core value, and every position in the institution contributes to it. Faculty and staff at all levels expect timely degree completion and understand their roles in making it happen. These high expectations are expressed openly and often by campus leaders and communicated directly to students. One president cited in this report tells first-year students every year in his convocation remarks that if they are not planning to graduate, they should go someplace else.
- **Consistency and longevity:** Institutional themes and messages are carefully chosen, consistently presented and crafted to last. They are not the “flavor of the month.” If a president leaves (or even several presidents), attention to retention and timely degree completion continues. A student success committee can develop short-, medium- and long-term goals and then provide the leadership to achieve them. This engrains student success into the culture of the institution.
- **Early intervention:** These institutions identify potential problems and solutions even before students enter college — including efforts to improve students’ readiness for college-level academic work, summer bridge programs that help students make the transition from high school to college, and intensive developmental studies programs to help students improve reading, writing and math skills in order to meet minimum admission standards. First-Year Experience (FYE) programs, along with learning communities, early alerts and effective follow-up services for struggling students, work well. Degree maps that clarify normal routes toward graduation are an important guide and help to increase student success. Several institutions employ academic “check-ups” that often lead to intervention by an adviser who can help to correct a student’s direction before it is too late. The common characteristic of all such initiatives: *proactive, preventive actions that rescue students from potential failure*.
- **Collaboration:** Student retention and timely degree completion are everyone’s responsibility and are promoted through effective collaboration among individuals and departments. All of the institutions visited by SREB generally demonstrate effective collaboration from the top of the organizational structure to the bottom: People at many levels support one another and accept the premise that *student success is part of their jobs*.

- **Student involvement:** The institutions in this report encourage and support many forms of student involvement in campus life, providing good role models and increasing students' engagement and commitment to the institution. Whether as orientation volunteers, peer mentors and tutors, Supplemental Instruction assistants, resident advisers, research assistants or in some other capacity, students who are involved can help bolster student success.
- **Faculty influence:** A caring faculty was cited consistently in interviews as a primary reason for student success. The institutions in this report involve the faculty in their campaigns for better student retention and timely degree completion. The institutions consistently and persistently communicate their expectations for faculty participation in advisement and student initiatives and recognize faculty members' contributions to student success.
- **Personal support:** Campus interviews identified personal support as a primary reason for institutions' relative success in degree completion. Faculty, professional and non-professional staff, students, alumni and others are willing and able to assist students. This builds student engagement, and every institution aspiring to improve degree completion should make these types of support a major priority — although they may be more cultural than set in policy. SREB found that seasoned college employees often work with new faculty and staff to pass on the institutional history, stories, legends, beliefs, values, attitudes, standards of behavior and other elements that create a culture of student success. Personal support for students is central to a graduation-oriented campus environment.

## Recommendations

SREB developed the following recommendations for institutional and system leaders as well as state policy-makers to consider as they work to improve student success in colleges and universities. The recommendations are based on campus interviews, research in the field, and SREB's experience in higher education policy and practice.

1. **Graduating all students should be the first priority of faculty and staff and central to the campus culture and all institutional practices at every four-year institution.** The goal for all students should be degree completion, and many campus-wide and student-focused efforts should be directed toward that goal. All institutions should establish a graduation-oriented culture and work to ensure that institutional operations and services focus on helping students to continue learning and graduate. The strategies and approaches in this report can help institutions better understand how to evaluate their current programs and move toward making student success the central function and a key strategic goal. Many colleges and universities already offer some of these programs and services, but low retention and graduation rates show that much work remains in providing students with greater opportunities to complete degrees.
2. **The selection, performance evaluation and accountability of all campus administrators — especially the president and top-level academic administrators — should emphasize a commitment to and the effective pursuit of students' degree completion.** When institutions and systems prepare to hire a president and other senior administrators, the search criteria should include measures that identify candidates who make student retention and degree completion a central focus. College leaders must build and sustain messages that student success is the institution's most important goal. This is particularly important in institutions that serve considerable proportions of academically and economically challenged students. Student success also should be a main factor in how presidents and other leaders are evaluated and compensated, including specific performance measures that demonstrate gains in various measures of student success.

**3. Colleges and universities should charge a team of campus leaders with overseeing efforts to improve student success.** A formal, high-profile, institution-wide committee appointed by the president to coordinate student success initiatives sends a powerful message to the institution and the community that graduation is important. This cross-institutional, collaborative group can help focus institutional energy and resources; communicate a common message to faculty, staff, and students that underscores their important roles; and reinforce to students that their success is an institutional priority.



Student at Northwest Missouri State University

**4. Institutions should ensure that students have college-ready learning skills — in reading, writing and math — and should provide them with additional instruction when needed.** Reading skills are fundamental to student learning in all fields. Few students who lack basic preparation for college will complete degrees. Thus, students' capacity to read with comprehension and their ability to write clearly about various texts are critical to college success. Because many states do not have clearly identifiable college-readiness standards with performance levels that students need to meet to begin college, institutions must provide students with additional instruction in reading comprehension strategies in key academic subjects. Colleges need to actively support statewide college-readiness initiatives, through which greater numbers of high school students will gain the reading, writing and math skills needed for higher learning.

**5. Institutions should ensure that all students choose a major and develop an individual graduation plan by the end of the freshman year.** Students need specific goals for completing a degree and a clear path to follow. They can find greater focus and direction in completing a degree by choosing a major earlier, even if they change it later. An individualized degree map should outline each course they need toward a degree.

**6. Institutions should provide appropriate and targeted programs and services that foster degree completion.** Traditional services such as orientation and counseling should be enhanced to complement additional practices such as learning communities, intrusive advising and Supplemental Instruction/tutoring — especially for students who need help with study skills, time management and personal issues.

**7. Institutions should closely monitor all students' progress on their individual graduation plans.** Degree-audit technology can help institutions cost-effectively monitor students' course-taking and link it to their schedules and graduation plans. Students who fall behind need to be identified and promptly provided with counseling. Better guidance can restrict students' chances for failure. Interventions for students may involve changing their majors or adjusting their graduation plans or schedules.

**8. Institutions should develop an institutional master course schedule that covers at least three years.** Using the accumulation of all of the individual student graduation plans, this practice can help ensure that students can access courses when they need them.

# Methodology

SREB has committed to engaging states and institutions in efforts to increase student retention and college completion. This report adds to policy-makers' and institutional leaders' understanding of how purposeful and targeted institutional actions can successfully increase baccalaureate completion rates, especially among students who enter college with academic and/or economic disadvantages. The general framework and concepts for the study that underpin this report were developed in fall 2008 by Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) President Dave Spence and SREB Vice President for Special Projects Cheryl Blanco. Paul Bradley, a consultant and the president of The Bradley Group Inc., and Blanco researched and wrote the report.

The study was conducted in three phases: **Discovery**, **Institutional Reviews** and **Analysis**. In the Discovery phase, the team set institutional selection criteria, identified target colleges and established the interview protocol. The study team used the College Results Online database developed by The Education Trust ([www.edtrust.org](http://www.edtrust.org)) to select colleges and universities that met the selection criteria:

- Six-year graduation rate of at least 45 percent in 2006
- Median SAT score no higher than 1050 (ACT average of approximately 25)
- Proportion of students receiving Pell Grants in 2006 of at least 25 percent
- Carnegie Classification as a public baccalaureate or master's institution

The College Results Online database relies on information collected and reported in the Graduation Rate Survey (GRS) by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Data for the GRS are submitted by individual postsecondary education institutions. GRS graduation rates are based on the percentage of first-time, full-time, bachelor's or equivalent degree-seeking freshmen who earn a bachelor's or equivalent degree from the institution where they originally enrolled. Undergraduates who begin as part-time or non-bachelor's degree-seeking students, or who transfer into the institution from elsewhere in higher education, are not included in the GRS cohort. When SREB initiated this study, the six cohorts of GRS data in the College Results Online database included the entering freshman classes of 1996-2001. Students who began in fall 2001 are considered to have successfully completed their degree within six years if they earned the degree on or before August 31, 2007.

Using the study criteria, SREB selected the following 15 institutions for this report:

**California:** California State University, Long Beach

**California:** California State University, Stanislaus

**Illinois:** Western Illinois University

**Kentucky:** Murray State University

**Kentucky:** Western Kentucky University

**Mississippi:** Delta State University

**Missouri:** Northwest Missouri State University

**Nebraska:** Wayne State College

**New Jersey:** Montclair State University

**New York:** Queens College, The City University of New York

**New York:** The College of Staten Island, The City University of New York

**North Carolina:** Elizabeth City State University

**North Carolina:** North Carolina Central University

**Pennsylvania:** Clarion University of Pennsylvania

**Texas:** Sam Houston State University

A review of each institution's Web site enabled the team to develop a basic profile of each institution and research the initiatives that might contribute to degree completion.

Identification of the target institutions marked the transition to the second phase, Institutional Reviews. A letter from the SREB president was sent to presidents of the 15 institutions to request campus visits and interviews with key individuals. The site visits were completed from February to May 2009 and provided an opportunity to verify information from the College Results Online search and determine the institutional strategies that contributed most significantly to student retention and graduation.

The final phase, Analysis, included a review of documents, interview materials and additional telephone conversations as needed. Draft institutional profiles were prepared, and the president of each institution was invited to review the profile for accuracy before the report went to press.



## California State University, Long Beach

For visitors to the California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) campus, there is little doubt that degree completion is a primary goal. Banners hanging from lampposts announce “Graduation Begins Today,” and this theme is even repeated on the dining room napkins.

With nearly 38,000 students in the 2007-2008 academic year, CSULB is a large institution that increased its six-year graduation rate by more than 20 percent from 2002 to 2006. In 2007, the rate jumped an additional 7 points to 54 percent, “completely blowing by our goal of 50 percent and almost reaching our 2010 goal,” one interviewee said. “And we accomplished this with the same high percentage of Pell [Grant] recipients and a majority of first-year students entering [who are] deficient in CSU standards for math and English.”

### Presidents act as champions

At CSULB, two champions for degree completion were named over and over: Former President Robert Maxson spent 11 years at the school and is credited with “making the public want and value the degree — to want to come and to stay,” one person said. “He emphasized student success, branded us and brought us to a place where seven of our top 10 competitors now are UCs” (i.e., University of California institutions, such as UCLA and Berkeley). When Maxson retired, King Alexander took over as the president under the motto “Graduation Begins Today” — and he repeats it often. As another person said, “With his energetic style, he reinforces the mantra of student success all day, every day.”

But senior-level champions alone have not brought CSULB to where it is today. Decentralization is another important factor behind the institution’s success. The university is

“absurdly decentralized,” one interviewee said. “No one can make anything happen institution-wide without the willing collaboration of many, many people — and that is the culture we now have. But this does not stop people from quietly introducing what generally start out as small innovations, with their main motivation being a personal commitment to the goal of [students’ degree] completion.” Several of these innovations now are among the multiple on-campus initiatives that contribute to student success.

Among these actions, the Office of Academic Advisement features three mandatory advisement sessions for all incoming freshmen, moving progressively from discussions on registration to selection of majors. Transfer students have two mandatory sessions. As a result, the proportion of first-year students on academic probation has dropped from one-third to only 10 percent. Those students who remain on probation get help, too. The Strategies for Academic Support program provides students with one-on-one guidance and helps them with college survival skills. Remarkably, many students who go on probation make it to graduation, and 14 percent of all graduates in a recent class were on probation at one time.

Other programs to boost student success have proven effective. For example, an administrator in Academic Advisement contacted students who had left just short of graduation and invited them back to explore options for degree completion. Most showed up, most are now graduates, and “Graduation Green Light” now is a formal initiative at CSULB, with more than 500 graduates to its credit. And it spawned another thought: “Why wait so long?” Now, the record of every junior is reviewed, and those off-track are urged to come in for individual counseling as part of the Destination Graduation program. To date, more than 2,000 students have received help, many have

graduated, and others are back on track. In addition, daily “graduation check-up” workshops have been added for 10 to 30 walk-in students looking for help to stay on track. These sessions often generate referrals to specific faculty members, and to Math Tutorial, Personal Counseling, Writing Lab and Counseling programs.

Athlete Support is another program that promotes degree completion. It began in 1995 in a large room with one counselor and three peer advisers. It now has 17 counselors and advisers who make 20,000 student contacts yearly, the most in the CSU system. Among their tools are a special First-Year Experience (FYE) seminar, mandatory advising, learning contracts, career services and more.

### Developmental studies, intensive care benefit students

In the CSU system — and across the nation — a significant percentage of freshmen’s skills are not at the levels they need to begin pursuit of a bachelor’s degree. Students are allowed one year in which they must pass tests to remain enrolled. At CSULB, 50 percent to 60 percent of the incoming students must take developmental studies courses to remain enrolled. From 70 percent to 80 percent succeed in those courses each year, and 85 percent survive the freshman year. Tutoring centers staffed by trained faculty members, graduate assistants and peer tutors are important supplements. According to one SREB interview, the number of contact hours students have with tutors is key: “At three [contact] hours, 55 percent succeed in developmental math; with four hours, 65 percent; and by adding one more [hour of tutoring/counseling], 80 percent are passing.” Results in English and writing are equally impressive.

Other important support programs include CAMP (College Assistance Migrant Program), which has a 90 percent continuation rate for students who normally have low graduation rates; Partners for Success, in which faculty mentors work with 100 first-generation students; a strong counseling center, and many peer adviser programs.

The Education Opportunity Program is a large initiative, serving 2,485 participants. Its intensive care for students includes special advising, mentoring, tutoring and other support that helps at-risk students achieve degree completion at



higher rates than the campus average. Similarly, students with disabilities receive intensive assistance from the Disability Center, and their graduation rate is about 70 percent.

There are several learning communities at CSULB, including many focused on special interests (e.g., Jensen Student Access to Science and Math). The Beach Learning Community began in 2007 for 150 freshmen who needed to succeed in pre-baccalaureate writing and math courses. It provides intensive support to three clusters of 50, including weekly check-ups. The Beach Learning Community has boosted first-year success rates by 20 percent.

Large campuses that primarily serve commuter students — such as CSULB — face particular challenges with degree completion. CSULB has tried to make the campus commuter-friendly so that students want to spend more time there. Students may choose among more than 300 clubs and activities, and the library and Student Center recently were redesigned to be more inviting. While CSULB is not a traditional residential campus, students report that it does not feel like a typical commuter campus, either.

A common theme emerged in interviews with students, faculty, staff and administrators: the university’s overall focus on graduation. While the CSU system has emphasized degree completion for many years and monitors each university’s progress, CSULB stresses more than just the numbers. As one person on campus said: “Completion serves as the standard used to weigh every significant decision.” Another added: “There is no one thing here, no magic bullet, but rather a ‘mosaic’ effect that gets everyone — from senior administrators to the grounds crew — to understand their role in helping students graduate.”

#### 2006 Data Used as Selection Criteria for SREB Study

Graduation Rate <b>48%</b>	Median SAT Score <b>1,015</b>	Pell Recipients <b>33.9%</b>
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## California State University, Stanislaus

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) recognized California State University, Stanislaus (CSU Stanislaus) in 2005 as one of 12 campuses nationwide that has created a culture resulting in outstanding student retention, achieving an 80 percent first-year retention rate and a high six-year degree-completion rate. These distinctions did not come easily. Significant challenges faced the institution over the years, yet many faculty and staff members have reveled in overcoming them.

With a 30 percent Latino undergraduate population in fall 2007 and other underrepresented minorities totaling at least 18.2 percent (an additional 11.5 percent are “unknown”), the student body comes from many different backgrounds. White, non-Hispanic students represent 40.2 percent. Of those receiving undergraduate degrees, 41.7 percent are Hispanic, putting CSU Stanislaus in the top 100 among U.S. institutions in this category, and many of these graduates are the children of farm workers. Forty-two percent of first-time freshmen are Pell Grant recipients, indicating modest family incomes. About half of CSU Stanislaus students take remedial courses in both math and English.

### Campus culture drives success

Interviewees gave several explanations for the institution’s relatively high completion rate. One is the faculty’s understanding of their role in helping students complete degrees. “There is almost universal dedication to work cohesively, collaboratively and respectfully as one team to ensure student success,” one person said. Others cited the relatively small size of the institution and classes, easy student access to faculty and staff, and strong student advising. One person summarized: “It simply is our tradition here, our

culture. CSU Stanislaus is unique in its devotion to student success. There are incredible differences from any of my previous five institutions.”

How did CSU Stanislaus build this culture? Two main explanations emerged in campus interviews. First, from the school’s founding, faculty and staff members have faced daunting challenges: The student body was — and remains — drawn from the six agrarian counties of the Central Valley. High percentages were first-generation college students, often short of money for college and deficient in educational preparation, and speaking a first language other than English. Compounding the situation was a perceived lack of resources for the institution as the “new kid on the block in CSU.” However, rather than fixating on the college’s challenges, faculty and staff bonded around student success, interviewees said. This created a culture that “persists to this day, and senior faculty continue both to maintain it and endeavor to pass it on,” one person said.

The second reason for CSU Stanislaus’ success appears to stem from institutional actions. In 2002, the California State University System established a Task Force on Facilitating Graduation that provided recommendations for campuses. In response, CSU Stanislaus President Marvalene Hughes launched a broad-based Student Success Center Committee, which met monthly. But within a year “it began to receive serious push back from a culture that resisted the idea of a single ‘center’ versus a collective, campus-wide involvement,” one interviewee explained. Subsequently, “Center” was dropped from the committee name, though the work continued and over the years has supported many initiatives:

- The Summer Reading Program gives first-year and transfer students a common experience by identifying a book to read and discuss on arrival.

## 2006 Data Used as Selection Criteria for SREB Study

Graduation Rate  
50%

Median SAT Score  
970

Pell Recipients  
45.1%

- The BEAMS Project (Building Engagement and Attainment of Minority Students) introduced the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) to CSU Stanislaus. It still is administered and used to identify campus strengths and areas for improvement.
- The Pathways Project created curriculum guides for advisers to help students stay on productive tracks toward their degrees.
- The Summit Program provides an alternative to traditional upper-division general education classes, with learning communities that emphasize in-depth studies in math/science, art/humanities and social sciences. Ninety-five percent of its students are transfers, and 90 percent have graduated or are still enrolled.
- Dashboard indicators posted on the university Web site provide students, faculty and the public with current data and updated metrics on student retention and completion.

Other programs geared toward improving graduation rates at CSU Stanislaus include the Residence Program for students who live on campus. The program has a wide range of programming and helps students learn to self-govern their residence halls and engage in meaningful social and intellectual/cultural activities. The Faculty-In-Residence (FIR) program encourages contact with and support from adults who live on campus.

The Student Leadership Program (SLP) prepares students for leadership roles on campus and in the community. It includes a four-day summer institute, a two-unit multi-disciplinary class, and a one-unit community service component. Students completing the SLP have in the past received a transcript that describes the program and documents their leadership positions, club involvement, community service and special rewards. The SLP is free and open to all students.

A new initiative that emerged from the Student Success Committee in 2006 is the Academic Wellness Program, which engages students from the time of admission to beyond graduation. It has five stages, each involving an adult adviser to monitor, encourage, inform and assist students as they work toward a degree. These stages monitor progress and suggest course correction as necessary: “Get-

Out” focuses on final steps to graduation, while “Welcome Back” helps students explore graduate school opportunities.

Additional programs are under the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. While the center’s primary focus is teaching, it also supports faculty research, service, and social and political life on campus with myriad activities and initiatives. All new faculty members participate in orientation and have a mentor. “While an eight-course annual teaching load limits participation, attendance numbers for about 10 center activities each month are strong. For example, a session on how to help students improve writing recently drew 48,” said one person familiar with the program. The center also provides workshops on helping students with reading, several pedagogical workshops (e.g., on the use of technology), faculty lectures, book clubs and more.

Many people on campus praised the Faculty Mentor Program (FMP). About 45 active volunteer faculty members serve as mentors, and more than 110 faculty members have participated. After multi-day training, each faculty mentor works with up to 10 students who are the first in their families to attend college. The mentoring includes one-on-one meetings with students, “last-Friday lunches,” off-campus trips, an annual retreat and other activities. There now are 140 “protégé” students, and the mentees’ graduation rate is around 90 percent.

In addition, to support CSU Stanislaus’ many students from poor and/or rural backgrounds, faculty members “take pride in extending themselves to ensure that the university experience goes beyond the classroom. This ranges from actively contributing to various clubs, leading field trips to ensure that students see other places, encouraging students to attend concerts, lectures, art exhibits, and the like, and arranging to meet them there,” one person said. As one administrator put it: “Faculty step up for our students.”





Clarion University was founded in 1867 as a seminary and later became a school to prepare teachers. Today it is a comprehensive regional public university with two campuses, providing bachelor's and master's degrees in three colleges and one school, as well as extended programs, for more than 7,000 students. Most students come from a predominantly rural region, though the institution also draws students from Pittsburgh and Philadelphia.

Clarion's long-standing culture was the primary reason identified in campus interviews for the university's success in helping students complete degrees. Comments included:

- The key is "our intense focus on the student."
- "We believe all students have potential."
- "We have had a sustained effort, at least for my 10 years, and I believe much longer."
- "Everyone who works at Clarion is a champion [of completion]. We all believe and all contribute."

Several interviewees cited related factors, such as a relatively small overall enrollment with an average class size of 33, a "polite, nice-to-each-other and us" student body, a safe environment, good collaboration among academic and student services departments, and various initiatives. The expectations of the state also are an important factor in the institution's success.

### State requires accountability

In Pennsylvania, as one administrator explained: "Every institution is measured on several quantifiable performance indicators, and eight are 'play for pay.' Three to four percent of our Education & General budget is based on these indicators that include second-year retention, the four-year graduation

rate and the six-year graduation rate." Three benchmarks for each measurement include past institutional performance, the system targets set by the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) and comparisons with "peers." Several people said that the state accountability monitoring process provides both an impetus and focus for Clarion's efforts to help students complete degrees at relatively high rates. But most also insisted that the institution was focusing on helping students graduate long before the state scrutiny began. One person said: "We invited [researcher] John Gardner to the campus when he was just getting under way with his FYE [First-Year Experience] ideas and [he] became one of the first converts. This year, we gave him an honorary degree as our commencement speaker."

Two university committees have played important roles in the university's strong record, according to those interviewed. The Retention Committee (chaired by three faculty members) is credited for starting initiatives including the comprehensive Transitions program, third- and sixth-week attendance checks that help spot struggling students early, exit surveys, Meet Your Advisor events in all academic departments, and others. Recently, the Enrollment Management Committee, chaired by the dean of Enrollment Management, and a committee that oversees the Transitions program also have helped boost student retention and completion by making Clarion "easy for students to navigate," one person said.

The Transitions program was most often cited for improving degree completion. The comprehensive program begins for some as high school students attending new-student orientation at the university and then continues to serve them through college graduation. It helps students form positive relationships with faculty, staff and students; take advantage of support from family and friends; learn academic and

co-curricular success skills; and engage in meaningful leadership activities. The first stage is Orientation, a one-day session held 13 times a year for students and their families, starting in the spring. Incoming students who are in still in high school meet deans, staff, faculty and other students; learn the best routes through degree programs; register for classes early; and get a campus I.D. and e-mail address so that communication with other students can begin. Next, Discovery is a three-day experience just before classes start. It helps students settle into their required residence halls, teaches some immediate college survival skills, provides social events, and concludes with convocation. Exploration is a First-Year Experience involving 11, one-hour-per-week sessions on diversity, campus life, study habits, course registration, how to communicate with professors, time and stress management, wellness and selection of a major. Exploration is optional, but most students take it in the fall.

### Sophomore experience extends FYE

Clarion now has gone beyond the FYE to add Focus, a sophomore experience. It aims to get students involved on campus, develop their leadership skills, encourage community service, and develop a Co-Curricular Transcript that describes significant leadership and service activities. The program trains students to be mentors in their junior and senior years to help build transition skills they will need in the workplace — the focus of future planned junior and senior Transitions programs. Students in the program show progress in many areas, including higher GPAs than those not in the program.

Teaching and advising are clearly an emphasis for faculty. Advising is “emphasized in hiring discussions — important for promotion — and faculty work hard at it,” one administrator noted. All new faculty members must attend a two-day Transitions for Faculty Workshop. The Faculty Senate then assigns each new faculty member a mentor for regular conversations. Other initiatives include Partners in Teaching, which “typically draws 40 to 50 participants on various topics and publishes the journal *Hand in Hand*. The Hip-Hop Symposium brings in speakers, and workshops cover topics such as diversity and improving teaching skills. Several faculty members also receive Presidential Enhance-



ment Grants — three, one-year stipends of \$5,000 for experimentation in teaching.

The College Readiness and Study Skills program currently serves select new freshmen and those on academic probation, but recent research supports expanding it. A pre-college bridge program, Summer Start, which works with students who cannot be fully admitted because of low SAT scores and/or low high school grades, also has done well. Ninety-eight percent of students gain full admission, with more than 60 percent surviving the first year. The university’s TRIO Student Support Services program also has significant success retaining first-generation and at-risk students and those from low-income families, helping them graduate at rates at or near the university average.

An accredited tutoring program, part of Clarion’s Center for Academic Enrichment, has about 20 trained peer tutors to assist students in all lower-division courses and most others, including online classes. Some academic departments use peer mentors and offer tutoring, as do the athletics department and Greek organizations.

Clarion takes student activities seriously. More than 100 clubs keep students engaged, and all residence hall advisers organize at least eight programs for students annually.

Clarion follows a state mandate to boost retention rates by limiting degree programs to 120 credits. “The financial aid office typically holds back some Federal Supplementary Educational Opportunity Grant (SEOG) money for emergencies and allows students to re-enroll, even though they have some money owing. This has saved more than a few [students],” one person said. Academic departments also contact students who have not re-registered on time.

### 2006 Data Used as Selection Criteria for SREB Study

Graduation Rate  
**53%**

Median SAT Score  
**915**

Pell Recipients  
**33.0%**



## The College of Staten Island, The City University of New York

The College of Staten Island (CSI) is one of 11 senior colleges and other institutions that comprise The City University of New York (CUNY). It was founded in 1976 with the merger of Staten Island Community College and Richmond College. CSI today is a comprehensive college that offers associate's through master's degrees. It has more than 135 doctoral students who technically attend the CUNY Graduate Center but study with CSI faculty. The faculty, staff and students are proud to represent and continue the traditions of the City University and are committed to the Borough of Staten Island and its people. As one person noted in a campus interview: "This is where they want to be and to stay."

Staten Island's population is diverse by racial/ethnic background, religion and language, and the CSI student body reflects this diversity. Situated near the center of the island, the CSI campus is a hub for community and cultural events. The impressive arts center is very popular and leads many local residents to consider CSI "our college." CSI draws about 75 percent of its students from the borough, though it is actively recruiting from other locales. One example of this outreach is a new, free shuttle bus service that meets the Staten Island Ferry from Manhattan to ease student commutes.

### Completion rate ranks high

CSI was chosen for this report in part because of the dramatic 15 percentage-point rise (from 36.4 percent to 51.4 percent) in its students' degree-completion rate from 2004 to 2006 — among the highest in the country for public four-year colleges. But the improvement is not the result of any sweeping effort or change, campus staff and students said. Instead, they simply described a strong CSI culture of

commitment to student success. They characterized the campus atmosphere as "supportive" and "collaborative."

Many people said that the elimination of "silos" between academic departments, once a problem, has helped boost retention rates and may stem from turnover among faculty and staff. Several people, including senior faculty, noted that new and younger faculty are focused on student success. One particular comment summed up the on-campus view of CSI and its recent improvement: "We are the best-kept secret in higher education."

In addition to CSI's overall culture, some important structures and programs may be factors in the rise in completion rates as well. The decades-old SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge) program for economically challenged students was the first learning community at the institution. SEEK is a part of every CUNY institution, and its funding at CSI is limited to 450 students. It provides intensive student advising, tutoring and mentoring. Though all students admitted to SEEK are considered at risk in terms of degree completion, the program's students maintain equivalent GPAs and boast higher graduation rates than other students, a campus official said.

Additional learning communities have been launched more recently. The Macaulay Honors Program helps with the retention of "academically gifted students who receive full financial support, seminars focusing on New York City and its cultural treasures, access to the college's best instructional technology, mentors, internships and opportunities to study abroad," one campus official said.

Another is The Verrazano School, which focuses on "mid-range, dynamic individuals" and features personal attention, internships, community service, 'study abroad'

## 2006 Data Used as Selection Criteria for SREB Study

Graduation Rate  
**51%**

Median SAT Score  
**1,035**

Pell Recipients  
**32.2%**

opportunities, peer mentors and a career academy, a school official said. The Verrazano School is a “school within a school” that uses block-scheduled courses over a wide range of majors, study groups and social activities to keep students together. Peer mentors play an important role. Interviewees believe that both of the learning communities have contributed to CSI’s recent improvement in retention and completion.

Many CSI programs help make campus life easier for students, and several programs target affinity groups or students with particular challenges. For example, “the Hub” is a one-stop center that gives all CSI students easy access to a variety of services (registrar, bursar, financial aid and others). Another comprehensive program offers excellent facilities to help make the campus more accessible to 450 students with disabilities.

### First-time students get aid

Incoming students also get special attention. The FIRST program helps first-time students transition into college by providing mentors who guide participants in the first semester and help them select two or more courses taught by professors who collaborate on course materials around a particular theme. In addition, the program offers several support services, including tutorial centers in math, writing and other subjects.

The Summer Immersion Program helps raise the knowledge and skill levels of students who have failed at least one of the CUNY entry tests in reading, writing or math. Enrollment in the summer program usually ranges from 1,300 to 1,500 (with another 500 to 600 in January).

It is voluntary and intensive, with 12 to 18 four-hour days of lecture, in- and out-of-class tutoring, and assigned online work. About two-thirds of the participants qualify at the end of the program to enter for-credit courses in the fall class.

Two other areas of CSI’s work that focus on improving students’ degree completion rates are under review and development. One is a supplement to the current First-Year Seminar. The current program helps students get to know each other, but it may need content enhancement and more academic rigor. The other area is academic advisement: Some faculty do it well — but others struggle. CSI is studying whether to introduce a centralized advisement department in 2010.

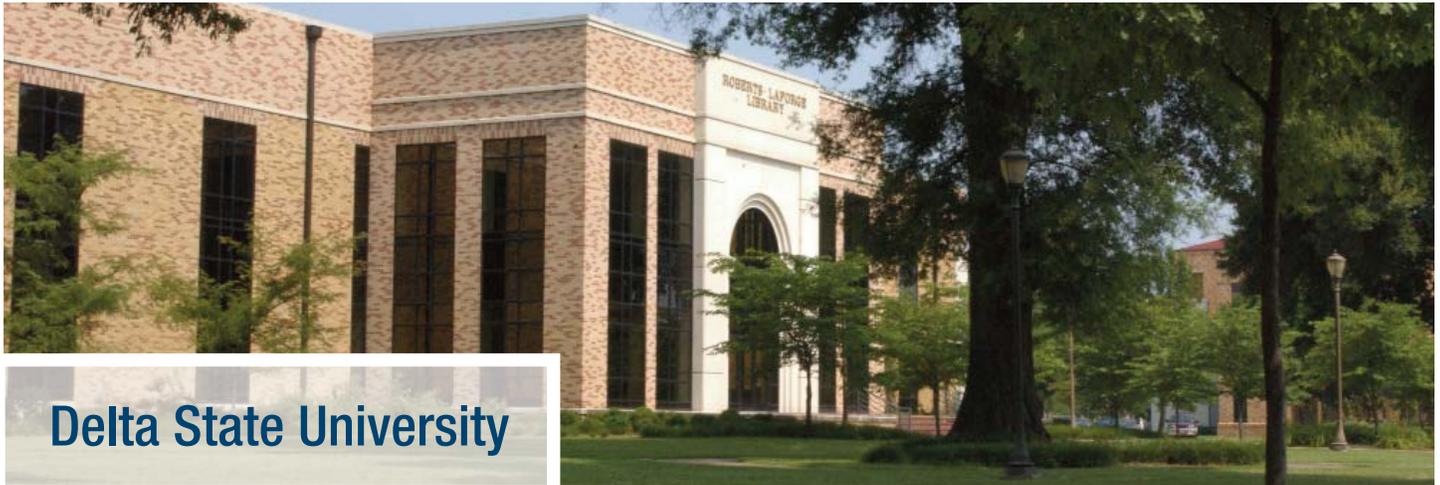
Two administrative structures have made important contributions to CSI’s improvements. The Enrollment Management Committee was formed in 2000 during a period of enrollment decline, and it continues to be active. Its 20 members typically discuss how to make CSI easier to negotiate administratively for students. Several persons on campus called it an effective and significant factor in improved completion rates.

The second structure is the Enrollment Management Group, made up of key administrators in related offices who meet regularly to address similar issues to those of the broader-based committee.

In addition, an important administrative structure for CSI and its sister institutions is called the PMP (Performance Management Program), developed by the CUNY administration. The process begins with the chancellor stating the university’s targets for the upcoming academic year, guided by the Master Plan. Each institution then proposes goals in alignment with those of the university, based on historical performance, other similar CUNY campuses and a national peer group. Negotiations finalize the goals.

Results on the PMP impact executive compensation and other items. Some PMP areas directly relate to retention and completion, so the process may play a role in CSI’s dramatic improvement in the timely graduation of many students.





## Delta State University

Delta State is a comprehensive regional university with about 4,000 undergraduate and master's-level students in the small city of Cleveland, Mississippi, in the heart of the rural Mississippi River Delta.

“The typical student comes from the Mississippi Delta region, is the first in the family to go to college, does not have a strong support system at home and probably has never been beyond Memphis,” said one interviewee. Added another: “Many also have attended elementary and secondary schools that are lacking in resources. We must take them where they are and help them succeed. We are in the total development business.” And another concluded: “Given the population we serve, especially the number of nontraditional students, we have an astonishing graduation rate!”

### Faculty involvement is key

The primary reason given for Delta State's comparatively strong record of timely degree completion — despite comparatively low SAT/ACT median scores and high percentages of Pell Grant recipients and underrepresented minorities (both rates were the third highest among the institutions in this report) — is caring faculty and staff who connect with students on many levels and take pride in student success. One faculty member said, “We are genuinely interested in our students, we know them by name, we ‘chitchat’ with them, we are involved in their lives, we go to their events and invite them to meetings.” One student noted that faculty often “go above and beyond to provide proactive help.” An administrator added, “There are lots of stories of faculty members actually visiting students every day to help.”

Faculty particularly target students for help who have not declared majors or who are facing academic failure. A few departments have non-faculty counselors for their students. For example, the business school pays particular attention to students with low GPAs and seniors close to finishing. The driving force behind these practices appears to be a long-standing culture at Delta State that “every person can succeed.”

Other factors contribute to Delta State's completion rate. One is the relatively small size of the institution and its classes. Many student support programs also cater to student interests and needs. One person suggested that people in the Delta “do not believe they have many other options and are especially persistent, as this may be their only chance for a university education.” Another noted that “many of our students are mature, taking on obligations for the right reasons, and they can't afford to fail.”

In other words, Delta State students do not take a college education for granted. One administrator underscored the point by noting that the region perceives Delta State as a “difficult, serious and committed institution, so serious and committed students may self-select the university.”

Delta State recently hired a director of student retention who is working across the institution to improve retention and graduation rates. But interviews found no single university-wide network or individual who has driven degree-completion efforts. “The strategic planning process does address retention but, to date, it has not been data-driven. Thus, while all know that retention is an important area, most will not be able to tell you the specific targets,” one person said.

## Special programs target success

A number of initiatives focus on improving retention and student success. The Academic Support and Developmental Studies Office helps students build the skills and attitudes necessary for success in college courses. It has a full-time director and several upper-level students as peer tutors. The office also identifies at-risk students and develops individualized interventions to meet their needs, and it helps all students develop educational plans that identify life goals and objectives and how to achieve them. It also provides services to strengthen students' study skills, such as reading comprehension and time management, and it coordinates group workshops and individual assistance. Tutoring centers run by academic departments with peer tutors supplement the office.

GST 100, the First-Year Experience student seminar, has 20 sections, each with 15 or fewer students. The current version helps freshmen with college survival skills, such as using the library's resources effectively and social activities to help students meet classmates. While the First-Year Experience seminar is seen as valuable already, planning for a new and improved program began in fall 2009.

Delta State also has a nine-week, state-funded summer development program described as a "last chance" for students who have not achieved minimum admission standards. Students assigned to the program cannot be formally enrolled as degree-seeking students unless they succeed in the summer program. The program's curriculum covers intermediate algebra, writing and reading comprehension and stems from a lawsuit that led to "the Ayers Settlement" in 1996. Every institution in the state must offer the program, stemming from a 1970s lawsuit seeking more equitable funding and opportunities for black students. The summer program has helped only 25 percent of its students to enroll as freshmen, but after two years its students do "better than the regular students," one staff member said.

The university is planning a major new initiative: a centralized Academic Advisement Center. The center will supplant some of the regular faculty's advising responsibilities, and some welcome the change. A second new initiative is the



revamped First-Year Experience (FYE), stemming from the institution's participation in John Gardner's Foundations of Excellence program and an institutional study completed for the program. Other new first-year initiatives may follow.

Delta State students benefit from the Mississippi Tuition Assistance Grant Program (MTAG), a statewide retention strategy for certain low-income students. Only students who receive less than a full federal Pell Grant qualify. Freshmen and sophomores receive up to \$500 per regular academic year; the award doubles to up to \$1,000 per regular academic year for juniors and seniors. Even though Delta State describes itself as affordable, the program's extra funds for upper-division students may encourage some students to persist through graduation.

Many people describe the Delta State student body as diverse. One interviewee called it "the most diverse institution in the state." Some interviewees mentioned that some of the diversity may be more a matter of skin color than social class. Many come from the Delta region and "have known poverty personally or through friends," as one person said. Indeed, some students may find particularly rich educational experiences at Delta State compared with some of the region's public high schools.

The predominant descriptions of the campus environment were "friendly," "career-focused," "non-strict," and "collaborative." While a system of fraternities and sororities contributes to some sense of exclusivity (18 percent of students participate in these social organizations), there was evidence of inclusiveness, too, perpetuated by the "Delta State culture" that stresses the success and connectivity of all. As one person on campus said, the school serves as "an oasis in the Delta, where wonderful things happen."

### 2006 Data Used as Selection Criteria for SREB Study

Graduation Rate  
47%

Median SAT Score  
930

Pell Recipients  
45.3%



## Elizabeth City State University

Elizabeth City State University (ECSU) is located in a small coastal city of the same name, surrounded by some of the poorest counties in North Carolina. An historically black institution, ECSU has increased its enrollment to more than 3,200. Though more than 65 percent of its students receive Pell Grants and the median SAT score is 835 — the lowest median score among the institutions profiled in this SREB report — in 2006, ECSU outperformed similar institutions with a six-year completion rate of close to 50 percent. In 2005, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) included ECSU in its study of institutions with exemplary performance on degree completion.

### A personal approach is part of the job

In addition to several programs that help improve students' retention and completion rates, ECSU places a strong emphasis on relationships between adult mentors and students that show the students they are cared for personally at the university. Again and again, interviewees at ECSU used “family” to describe their approach to educating students, along with “my children,” “like my grandchildren,” and “one big happy family.” Several interviewees told of faculty and staff members going out to “look for a student who missed class” or phoning (in one case during the summer, because the faculty member had heard the student might drop out). “If a student is missing, we call!” one ECSU official said. Several university officials reported that they often receive calls from family members who are concerned about students. “This is pretty common around here. We all expect it and consider it part of the job.”

One administrator emphasized that the student culture also involves support and caring relationships. “Our students

support one another. For example, at the Fashion Show, even the ones who look awkward receive loud applause, and we will have 1,000 students (one-third of the student body) turn out for our student government election event tonight, and everyone will be well-received. No one will be treated badly.”

The relatively small size may be part of the explanation as to why no one is invisible at ECSU. One explanation is that “it always has been this way. Students expect it because that’s what their parents, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, and cousins told them to expect. Also, many of the faculty members are alumni, and this is all they have ever known. They assume that their job simply is to have high expectations for students and then to do everything possible to help them achieve them. They are our special students, and this is our special mission.”

There are some other noteworthy elements to ECSU’s degree-completion efforts. One is that faculty members apparently work hard to advise students at ECSU. The General Studies department includes a team of full-time advisers who guide students through the first 48 credits. Then the other faculty take over. ECSU interviewees (including students) consistently reported that the ECSU faculty members understand how to help students and take their advising role seriously. One faculty member noted: “We know that we are not just instructors, but also mentors, advisers and role models.”

Students seem to notice: On the most recent administration of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), the ECSU students’ rating for advising assistance was considerably higher than the national benchmark.

## 2006 Data Used as Selection Criteria for SREB Study

Graduation Rate  
**49%**

Median SAT Score  
**835**

Pell Recipients  
**65.4%**

The university's General Studies faculty and staff members include many alumni who "are almost fanatical in their passion for students." One said: "We believe in them and look carefully for the mechanisms that will work for each individual. When they come in with problems, we personally do everything we can and never send them away. We let them know, 'you belong to us.' The staff works to ensure that all students get off on the right foot, in the right classes, and knowing that they are cared for."

University leaders also cite the First-Year Experience (FYE) program as important to retention and completion. The required 15-week, one-credit seminar follows a standard curriculum that is common to freshman-year experience classes that many institutions now offer. "But it's not just the seminar; it's the whole first-year program that is important," one official said.

### VANS program sparks interest

Other efforts to help students include tutorial programs, an early alert system and new student orientation, primarily run by VANS (Viking Assistants to New Students).

VANS is a significant service organization on campus, and its members also serve as mentors to the FYE students, run a variety of workshops on the transition to college, and lead groups to discuss new students' questions. VANS membership is highly competitive, and members receive significant training and a small stipend. Because students are eligible by their second semester, many serve as VANS for the rest of their time at ECSU — yet another incentive for them to complete degrees.

Developmental studies are important for ECSU. Approximately 75 percent of the students must take at least one developmental course. Many believe that staff attentiveness makes a difference since students achieve enrollment at nearly a 90 percent rate, and data show that former developmental studies students graduate at the same rate as other students.

A different group of students is served by an Honors Program that adds enrichment and challenge. Faculty see the program as important in helping ECSU retain these students.

ECSU's financial aid staff often visits local high schools in the region throughout the year to help students understand that college is possible for them and to assist in the completion of financial aid applications such as FAFSA. The staff also supports ECSU students by endeavoring to offer financial aid packages designed to retain students and help them graduate. "We try to cover all direct costs and rely less on student loans. It is almost as if they can come for free. For most kids, the extra things also are covered," an official said.

ECSU's small-town location makes it the primary source of activities that engage students. There are 48 clubs, nine Greek organizations, an acclaimed band and choir, intramural sports and more. In the evenings and on weekends, game rooms (with such activities as free bowling and video games), gyms and other venues are jammed with students, according to an administrator.

Organized athletics also are well-attended, with competitive teams and "excellent coaches who work hard to ensure academic success of the athletes," who graduate at a rate exceeding the rest of the student body, an official said.

Fifty-seven percent of the students live on campus, and the residences also are active with weekly academic, life-skills, health, social and other programs. Resident assistants are chosen selectively and trained as peer mentors. A popular competition between living units also builds camaraderie.

An interesting feature of ECSU is the prominence of alumni on campus. Faculty, staff and coaches who graduated from the university are cited often as visible examples of success. Also, alumni often speak to student groups and "share their stories on how the experience of college will benefit" them, an official said. This is one more example of how the ECSU culture is a factor in student success.





## Montclair State University

Montclair State University (MSU) is located in an upscale northern New Jersey suburb of New York City and draws many students from the state's largest urban communities. Of the institutions profiled in this report, Montclair had the highest six-year graduation rate (59 percent) for students who enrolled as first-time, full-time freshmen in 2000. The latest data show that the rate is continuing to rise, reaching 62 percent for the 2002 cohort. This success is deliberate, as everyone on campus seemed to know that student retention and timely degree completion are the university's top goals.

MSU began in 1908 as a college for students preparing to be teachers, and today it is New Jersey's second-largest and fastest-growing public four-year institution. While not small (with more than 18,000 students at last count and more than 200 degree programs, including doctoral-level), Montclair tries to "act small." As one administrator said: "We are large but don't believe it. We do things that other 18,000-student institutions don't do, such as sending letters to every student explaining what to expect and telling them about programs that may fit them. And we react quickly if students are not paying bills, re-enrolling on time or cutting class — all signs of a problem."

### Task force, FYE program boost graduation rates

A common belief among interviewees was that MSU's proximity to Manhattan and excellent public transportation (including a campus train station) help boost student retention. In addition, a large number of programs were developed expressly to improve both retention and completion, and results are monitored on a regular basis. One administrator noted: "The Enrollment Management Plan, developed several years ago, and the Strategic Plan are key drivers

of the school's focus on student success. In fact, we look at the Strategic Plan monthly."

President Susan Cole is seen as the school's champion of retention and completion. Before her arrival in the late 1990s, MSU historically had a high dropout rate after the students' first year. "Many thought it was natural. But she simply declared, 'This is nonsense' and asked for volunteers to form a Presidential Task Force on Student Achievement," one interviewee said. The task force, a diverse group representing multiple constituencies, met for more than two years. Its members conducted a self-assessment of every unit in the university, benchmarked each unit against those in peer institutions, and developed a series of recommendations for improvement. Many were implemented.

One recommendation seen as key to the improvement of student retention led to the expansion and strengthening of MSU's First-Year Experience (FYE) program. Its linchpin is a required, one-credit New Student Seminar with 80 sections, each serving 20 students in a learning community that employs block scheduling for 10 credits, which one person said "eliminates confusion and subsequent mistakes in registration for students." Other important elements in the first year include extensive academic advising; peer mentors; a First-Year Success Series that requires students to attend cultural, educational and social workshops; and residence-hall learning communities.

Many people said in campus interviews that these first-year initiatives are a primary reason for MSU students' dramatic and consistent improvement in degree completion. This may help explain some embellishments to the FYE program that include 15 sections now set aside so that specific departments can group their prospective majors together. Another is a separate "first-year re-entry seminar" to serve students older than 25. In addition, MSU is designing support

## 2006 Data Used as Selection Criteria for SREB Study

Graduation Rate  
**59%**

Median SAT Score  
**1,045**

Pell Recipients  
**26.3%**

programs for students beyond the first year. As one administrator said, “If it is good for freshmen, it probably is a good idea for upper classmen, too.”

### Fewer credits are required

President Cole did not limit her focus on retention and graduation rates to the FYE. The number of credits required for graduation in the university’s programs was reduced to a number that a student could actually achieve in four years of full-time study, and a tight rein is kept on keeping programs within that range. One person noted that “she asserts a position, re-asserts the position, and then asserts it again to the general faculty, Faculty Senate, Senate leadership and anyone else she speaks to.” And her senior team does, as well. “At Montclair, student success simply is an absolute priority in everyone’s mind at all times.”

Supporting this priority, a required New Student Orientation is held prior to students’ first semester and involves staff, faculty and peer mentors doing skits, leading sessions, helping identify resources for the new students, and more. It focuses on families as well as students, and many feel that it gets most new students off to a strong start.

Some individuals identified the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) as perhaps the best overall program at Montclair State. It has operated for decades and has a staff that also has many years of committed service. It provides intensive support for 250 at-risk students. MSU’s Disability Resource Center also provides intensive support, and 900 students with special needs have enrolled at the institution. Staff members of both programs report that their students graduate at a slightly higher rate than the regular campus population, according to institutional data.

One reason cited for MSU’s success is that academic advising is now assigned to specialists, but it is shared among many offices and groups, such as academic departments, the Honors Program, EOP, and the New Student Experience program, where initial mandatory advising on general education and selection of a major take place. In addition, the Center for Academic Advising and Adult Learning assists “undeclared” students and handles various advising issues, including helping individual faculty, developing online advisement guides, and periodically holding on-site office hours in academic departments.

The university’s Center for Academic Development and Assessment (CADA) coordinates tutoring across 28 subjects, with walk-in hours for most academic areas five days per week. CADA also coordinates workshops on topics such as writing and test-taking and offers Supplemental Instruction (SI) in historically difficult courses by providing scheduled out-of-class sessions with trained SI leaders. And it conducts testing, including the University Placement Test, to assign students to appropriate courses. If students need developmental courses in reading, writing and/or math/algebra, they are encouraged to take them as soon as possible, preferably before enrollment. The center coordinates the developmental instruction and re-testing, and its results are excellent: About 80 percent pass.

Faculty development is an area of special institutional focus. Some aspects are fairly common, but there is one unusual opportunity called RAUL (Research Academy for Undergraduate Learning). RAUL is a teaching and learning center and provides a year of mentoring for 30 to 40 faculty members each year that also includes regular observation (including videotaping of classes), special workshops, and one-on-one discussions aimed at improving teaching and learning. One official said, “It took awhile to move the faculty to see this as a good thing, but it is greatly valued now.”

One finding unique to MSU in the SREB study is that everyone interviewed knew the institution’s degree-completion goals. The initial first-year student retention goal, once thought ambitious, was exceeded years ago and now is above 80 percent. Similarly, the institution topped its 60 percent graduation rate “stretch goal” with the 2001 cohort and the goal has been raised to 66 percent. Montclair also excels in student-data management and uses extensive data in many important decisions related to degree completion.





## Murray State University

Murray State University (MSU) is a regional institution that serves the far western 18 counties of Kentucky. Students, faculty, staff and administrators say the key factor in the institution's success is its commitment to personally engage in recruiting, retaining and graduating students.

"It's an ethos here," said President Randy Dunn. In his 2007 address on the state of the university, Dunn made his goals for the university clear: "[We] have to dramatically rethink our efforts at recruitment, admissions and enrollment, retention, and program completion."

Faculty, staff and administrators drive this student-oriented culture of success at every level. "It is talked about constantly," one person said. The focus on retention and graduation begins in high school conversations with prospective students. On "Racer Days," prospective students visit the campus to talk with representatives from a range of offices and service centers; these visits include strong messages about graduation as the ultimate goal.

### College structure promotes graduation

The Murray State "Characteristics of the MSU Graduate" — statements that lay out the school's goals for all students — are a constant reminder of the importance of student success. On banners, in pamphlets, on the university Web site, and during interactions with students, the institution underscores the goal of graduation. The MSU's University Studies program was reformatted around these characteristics. This allows students flexibility in their studies and facilitates timely graduation; students who change majors are not required to take additional credits.

While students, administrators, staff and faculty said there are many factors in the institution's success, most said the "residential college" structure is crucial in promoting stu-

dent retention and degree completion. Modeled after both British and American approaches, the university's eight residential colleges are a partnership between the MSU's academic affairs and student affairs offices to provide social and academic hubs for students. All students — including commuters — have a designated residential college. Faculty, administrators and board members also are assigned to them. Students can earn credits for faculty-led seminars held in the colleges, and hundreds of activities are available to students every year, several through the colleges. The residential colleges have many of the common characteristics of learning communities, but they are more comprehensive in other offerings and do not have block schedules (in which the same students take the same classes). The colleges have contributed to an increase in first-year persistence rates from 62 percent to 70 percent in recent years.

Campus-wide leadership and research opportunities for students also help boost graduation rates. The First-Year Leader (FYL) program in the residential colleges is one example. FYLs are trained students who lead groups of freshmen through the first few days of the university's Great Beginnings orientation program. Many FYLs often continue meeting with their students after the first semester, and students said the FYL program helps them adapt to campus life. Students also reported that leadership activities and research opportunities have influenced them to stay in school. Leadership and research activities are expected in some programs and are embedded in opportunities for students to volunteer in the community.

Faculty indicate a strong commitment to high-quality teaching and service to students. Early in his tenure as president, Dunn spoke about the importance of this commitment: "We need to encourage the full spectrum of talent and areas of focus of our faculty and staff — supporting those doing heavy research as we do those who concentrate on service,

and doing the same with those who choose to concentrate on the scholarship of teaching.”

This message on the value of teaching and service is reflected in faculty members’ relationships with students. Many interviewees referred to a departmental culture that makes students feel included. Faculty described nurturing their deep interest in student success. Faculty search committees look for new hires who can perpetuate the culture. One faculty member said, “It is part of the service responsibility here. It’s a constant reminder from members that service to the students is strong.”

### Administrative actions have impact

Administrative processes also enhance retention and degree completion by acting as a safety net for students: An early alert system requires each struggling student to meet with faculty and counselors to design an academic restoration plan. Students are encouraged to declare a major by the time they complete 60 credit hours. An appeals process aids students who experience financial difficulties. Financial assistance is available through Racer Advantage Grants and small loans for expenses such as books.

To help returning students graduate, especially adults who have not completed a degree, MSU has implemented a Bachelor of Integrated Studies as an alternative baccalaureate degree program.

The university-wide Retention Committee also plays a vital role. Comprised of representatives from all segments of the university, it examines data and evaluates activities to guide MSU’s student retention strategies. The committee helps convey the importance of graduation to the university community and develops a Retention Time Line that details activities that begin well before classes start in August and continue through June. Some of the activities include student meetings with department chairs to discuss retention alerts and strategies, sophomore focus groups, surveys of freshmen who leave, and academic progress reports for at-risk students.

Other campus activities focus on students from under-represented racial/ethnic minority groups. The Office of Multicultural Affairs is a clearinghouse, referral service and



liaison between students and the administration, academic units and the community. The Emerging Scholars Institute assists students with academic and social transitions through programs and services designed to improve academic performance and retention among students of color.

Parents are another part of the institution’s approach. A Multicultural Parents Advisory Council meets regularly, and staff members meet with parents to help them understand what it means to be a student. The university has an advisory committee of parents and a parent newsletter. Parents also are strongly encouraged to participate in a summer orientation session. “Parents perceive MSU as a good place to send their children — a caring place,” one interviewee said.

MSU faces cultural obstacles in helping students graduate. Like other institutions, it serves many students who are not academically prepared for college-level work or are financially disadvantaged. One individual said, “We have a culture in Kentucky that does not value education. Education is threatening for the family. Parents have unreal expectations. These things manifest themselves in various ways.” In some cases, students are pressured to leave college to support their families, interviewees reported. In other instances, students do not want to live far from their families. Some students “do not want to go home, because things are better here for them [at school],” one person said.

Still, university staff and students described how they overcome those obstacles to student success: “We make students feel like they matter,” one person said. “We remove obstacles,” added another. “Administrators stay close to students at Murray State.” “Faculty are very involved with students and have an open-door policy.” “Students are not intimidated by MSU. It’s not hard to find help.”

#### 2006 Data Used as Selection Criteria for SREB Study

Graduation Rate  
56%

Median SAT Score  
1,025

Pell Recipients  
29.5%



## North Carolina Central University

In 1909, Dr. James E. Shepard founded the National Religious Training School and Chautauqua as the nation's first public liberal arts institution for African-Americans. Today, North Carolina Central University (NCCU) is a comprehensive institution that awards bachelor's and master's degrees in more than 100 fields of study. Among the institutions in this report, it has the second-highest percentage of federal Pell Grant recipients (62.9) and the second-lowest median SAT score (840), but it consistently graduates about 50 percent of its more than 8,500 students within six years, well above many peer institutions.

Members of NCCU's diverse student body characterized the culture as "collaborative" and "inclusive." As one student noted, "We are all Eagles!" But NCCU's success comes from more than school spirit. Specific requirements and expectations help to ensure student success.

### Faculty involvement is ongoing

Faculty members are expected to spend 10 hours in their offices every week, and it "is noticed when faculty do not attend events or get involved in student activities," one person said. Faculty also are expected to pursue extensive personal and professional development. To support this expectation, NCCU has an active Center for Teaching and Learning for faculty that provides a two-day, new-faculty orientation; required full-day fall and spring teaching workshops; seminars on using technology in instruction; a recurring workshop on how to teach writing; and a special, three-day faculty community session.

Similarly, students are expected to comply with a class-attendance policy that is enforced, mandatory advising, mandatory contracts if they struggle in an academic subject, and a required first-year, two-hour credit course.

NCCU has added rigorous new oral and written communication requirements that are expected to further improve performance.

Student success at NCCU is defined as timely graduation, and raising the degree completion rate is a consistent theme cited by NCCU leadership. One past champion of completion was Julius Chambers, an alumnus who was chancellor from 1993 to 2001. One interviewee noted that Chambers "instilled in us the belief that we could move beyond and not settle for what we had. The chancellor said, 'Don't ask only for what you think you can get. We don't need to settle for second best!' So we went for more — and got it." Current chancellor Charlie Nelms also was cited for his persistent message to improve degree completion. At his first convocation, he told assembled freshmen: "If you did not come here to get a degree, you need to go someplace else!"

This theme is repeated at every dean's or faculty meeting, and at department, school and college meetings, according to campus interviews. And Chancellor Nelms backs up his words with action. One clear indication is the recent creation of University College, a unit of the university that is focused on first- and second-year student success. Nelms chose 30-year NCCU veteran Bernice Duffy Johnson, who was mentioned often in campus interviews as a champion of student success, to head the college.

Pell Grant recipients now make up nearly 63 percent of the student body, yet the faculty members accept the challenges of teaching students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds with enthusiasm and an expectation of success. One said: "It is the way we do things here and have from the beginning. We do not lower standards — we raise aspirations and abilities." This "commitment to the population we service" was the single most-mentioned reason for NCCU's

## 2006 Data Used as Selection Criteria for SREB Study

Graduation Rate  
**49%**

Median SAT Score  
**840**

Pell Recipients  
**56.6%**

success. “It simply is our responsibility to take students from wherever they are to someplace beyond, and we all feel it. Teaching here goes way beyond the classroom,” another faculty member said.

Specific practices support this intention. In June, the two-day Eagle Institute begins the process of helping students make the transition to college. The required Week of Welcome, a four-day orientation held just before classes begin, features workshops, social events, an introduction to the Eagle Creed and the New Eagle Pinning Ceremony.

Other initiatives for incoming students include a first-year course called “Dimensions of Learning — College and Beyond.” It is “a serious course that addresses research, technology, leadership, diversity, global learning, communications, social protocol, etiquette and resource management,” one person said. Each course section is set up as a learning community to strengthen bonds between students and to increase student engagement.

A summer bridge program, Aspiring Eagles, serves students who have not qualified for full admission. In its first year, all 50 participating students achieved full enrollment based on subsequent tests, which has led to plans to make it mandatory for all incoming students with SAT scores below 750 and/or high school GPAs below 2.5. Another strategy that helps at-risk students succeed is the use of learning contracts, which are negotiated and signed, and define responsibilities of both students and the institution.

### Center focuses on success

The campus Comprehensive Academic Support Center coordinates a range of initiatives focused on student success, including individual and group tutorial sessions, computerized learning, individual and group study programs, counseling services, developmental skills programs, and curriculum and course monitoring services that track students’ progress in individual classes and toward a degree. “The office offers a helping relationship with counselors, professors and other resources and exists to help students develop a positive self-image, pride, determination and the skills to graduate in a timely framework,” one person said.

NCCU also has a University Testing Center that conducts placement and aptitude tests and prepares students for the full range of tests they may encounter during college and in applying for further study. “Historically, students have performed well on such important assessments as the teacher and accounting examinations,” one person said. Student advising is “truly intrusive,” another said, “with students required to get sign-offs at the Advising Center [noting they had attended advising sessions] for their first two years and then from departmental advisers after that.” If a student is struggling after four weeks, an early alert process requires them to work with an adviser to develop an improvement contract, which is reviewed after eight and 12 weeks.

NCCU’s Student Affairs division offers more than 100 activities and programs, including several on leadership. (The off-site, multi-day LeaderShape program is especially popular.) The division’s staff works closely with the Academic Affairs staff to ensure that students perform meaningful community service, required of all students in keeping with the institution’s motto: “Truth and Service.”

The many NCCU graduates among faculty and staff also help to perpetuate the positive culture at the institution. Mini-biographies and references to successful alumni fill bulletin boards throughout the campus and the university Web site. Alumni serve on advisory committees, speak to classes, are involved in student activities, provide part-time jobs, and connect students with community service opportunities. They serve as role models for degree completion — the clear sign of success for both the university and its students.





Northwest Missouri State University (NMSU) is a rural comprehensive university, with 85 percent of its 7,000 students of traditional college age. But its similarities to many other universities end there. The institution's intense focus on student satisfaction and graduation have earned it major awards for quality (including four Missouri State Quality Awards) and recognition for a solid record of promoting the timely graduation of many of its students.

NMSU is driven by what it has labeled the "Culture of Quality: a systematic, sustainable culture that is embedded throughout the organization." Many persons interviewed deem the campus culture critical to degree completion.

Another common explanation for the institution's success is that "Northwest Missouri State is a teaching institution, first and foremost," as one interviewee said. Faculty are students' primary academic advisers for all four years. The only professional adviser on campus spends the majority of his time conducting workshops and one-on-one meetings to help faculty improve their advising skills. As one person said: "Almost all of our faculty are full-time, and they teach 12 hours a week. They also are required to do seven office hours, but most do double that number." Another person said that searches for new faculty "always make it clear that there is a heavy teaching and advising expectation." On satisfaction surveys, students consistently rate advising as "excellent."

Complementing the network of faculty advisers is what one official called "an army of student peer mentors" who are used in the Talent Development Center, First-Year Seminar, tutorial labs, residence halls, orientation, Supplemental Instruction and elsewhere.

## FYE is multifaceted

The "First-Year Experience" (FYE) program also is cited for its impact on student retention and degree completion. Not just a seminar, it is an integrated series of initiatives in which virtually all administrative and academic units have roles. The three-tier orientation program is preceded by the development of first-semester schedules for the students by a team of faculty, advisers and peer mentors, who ensure that the courses are right for the students and fit together. Then comes SOAR (Summer Orientation Advisement and Registration), a one-day orientation that helps parents and students navigate the maze of new challenges and university resources. Students also meet with advisers to review the pre-assigned schedules.

The second tier of orientation, called Advantage, includes four days of academic, social and personal activities that focus on topics such as diversity and multicultural awareness. It takes place immediately preceding the fall trimester to help students transition to campus life. Freshman Seminars, networking, socializing, a merchant fair and continuing advisement are all parts of Advantage, with student "ambassadors" providing much of the leadership. As the third tier, Freshman Seminars continue for the first eight weeks on typical FYE topics. Sections are small and are taught both by faculty and professional staff.

FYE is seen as particularly successful in conjunction with other initiatives, such as the Talent Development Center (TDC). The TDC teaches both struggling and successful students to improve their study skills, critical thinking, collaboration and time management. Staffed by professionals and student tutors, it serves more than 2,500 students a year. The TDC also oversees the Student Athlete Success Program and the Enhanced Freshman Seminar, serving 150 high-risk

students. The seminar meets for 16 weeks. Student participants also meet weekly with peer mentors, who develop two-way contracts and provide guidance on study skills, regularly check students' grades, monitor attendance and more. Students who do not meet goals for specific course grades must leave but can return the next fall.

Supplemental Instruction (SI) is another TDC program. "Students in SI courses, almost without fail, do a half to a full letter grade better than comparable sections without SI," one interviewee said. A stated goal is to "get student 'instructors' to make themselves obsolete by the term's end." No apparent stigma is attached to taking SI classes at NMSU, as 2,500 to 3,000 students per term sign up. In fact, as one person said, "SI is so popular that Northwest students expect it in every class."

Other on-campus resources aim to keep students engaged. ARCHs (Academic Resource Consultants in the Residence Halls) are peer tutors who assist in many academic areas and are part of a broader NMSU commitment to on-campus student jobs. "This year, approximately 1,100 students are working in jobs and assistantships. It helps retention by keeping students on campus and engaged," one interviewee said. "Jobs create de facto mentoring relationships, especially in the many paraprofessional jobs," said another.

## Financial awards play strong role

Northwest also uses financial assistance as an incentive. If students enter college with a 3.3 GPA from high school, they receive an award of \$1,000; a 3.4 GPA, \$1,500; a 3.5 GPA, \$2,000. "Continuing student scholarships also helps motivate students to achieve strong GPAs," an interviewee noted. Furthermore, "out-of-state students can get a half-scholarship for tuition coming in, and it can float to a full scholarship with a 3.0 GPA." An American Dream Grant for low-income students "provides all but \$2,000 of tuition, room and board, textbooks and laptop for two years with a 2.0 GPA and a 12-credit load. After that, they follow the regular rules." There also are some departmental scholarships that have a role in motivating students, and Financial Aid distributes \$100,000 in direct awards.

Several people mentioned NMSU's former president, Dean Hubbard, as a champion for degree completion. Over the years, he helped introduce several initiatives: a federal TRIO



program, which led to the Talent Development Center; follow-up letters and calls to every student not enrolling for the next semester; an emphasis on student jobs (especially tutoring); Supplemental Instruction; the First-Year Experience (FYE); the embrace of Total Quality Management, and more.

In the late 1990s, a 35-member Task Force on Student Success, led by the provost, the vice president for student affairs and the dean of enrollment management, met monthly for several years, spun off many sub-groups, and eventually developed and/or linked all elements of the university related to student success. "This brought an emphasis on connecting with students on every level, to the point where the food servers now know the students' names," one interviewee said.

In 1987, a 25-person team introduced the "Culture of Quality," including a model that focuses on planning, implementation, integration and improvement while emphasizing collaboration, high expectations and the "Seven-Step Planning Process" (SSPP). A cornerstone of SSPP is an annual, two-day retreat to update the university strategic plan. Each department then aligns itself with the overall plan, and a Dashboard (accessible to all) displays indicators of student success, student satisfaction, enrollment and financial responsibility to help monitor progress.

The Northwest campus itself is a reflection of the "Culture of Quality." It sparkles, even though most facilities are decades old. Framed posters of the campus mission, vision and core values are displayed, and comment cards are available everywhere. A revolving trophy case in the administration building shows some of the results: Four Missouri State Quality Awards and an American Association of State Colleges and Universities plaque acknowledge the university as among only 13 institutions in the nation with exemplary levels of student retention and completion.

### 2006 Data Used as Selection Criteria for SREB Study

Graduation Rate  
56%

Median SAT Score  
1,010

Pell Recipients  
26.8%



## Queens College, The City University of New York

Including commuters and residential students, Queens College of The City University of New York (CUNY) has approximately 20,500 students attending classes and other activities seven days and several evenings a week. With Queens Borough identified as the most diverse county in the United States, many immigrant and first-generation students, representing more than 130 countries and speaking more than 100 languages, attend the college. CUNY colleges have a long tradition of serving such students effectively, and Queens is no exception. It has a solid record of graduating students in a timely manner, in part because of its financial aid and comparatively low \$4,600 annual tuition. There are many other explanations, however, for Queens College's relative success in helping students complete degrees.

Several staff members and administrators said in interviews that many of their students do not want to let down parents who have sacrificed to help their children pursue a college degree. Another factor is that most students live nearby and do not want to leave the borough for college classes. This helps with student persistence, though campus parking is a problem and — surprisingly for New York City — public transportation to the campus is a challenge as well. Thus, many Queens College students stay on campus for much of the day. In fall 2009, Queens College opened its first residence hall, with housing for 500 students. The college also recently redesigned the student union and other buildings to provide multiple lounge areas to make commuter students comfortable. “Both facilities are full all day and well into the evening, and there is a huge variety of student activities that range from cultural clubs to religious organizations to TV rooms to game rooms to study space available as well. This helps retention,” one interviewee said.

### Collaboration, group efforts pay off

Collaboration is another common reason that staff members and students cite for the college's success in helping students graduate. Several people noted that the administration and academic departments work together to serve students well. “Competition among offices is not present,” one person said.

While recognizing a group effort, many people acknowledged President James L. Muyskens and his senior colleagues for their leadership on improving the graduation rate. Increased student retention and completion are “the result of a patient, focused and systematic change-management effort. The change has involved centralization of some functions while leaving others decentralized.”

No overarching structural component, such as a key committee, drives the completion initiatives at Queens College. Instead, the primary guidance comes from a clear, consistent leadership message that ensures student understanding and ease in dealing with the college's procedures. The message simply is: “We are here to help you.” It is delivered both in words and actions. Leadership starts at the top and carries to all levels of the organization. The result is an abundance of comprehensive academic and social support services that help students build the life of the mind, their academic and personal discipline, effective skills and methodologies, and a sense of purpose. These services also help build bonds among faculty, staff and students.

Queens College has many common university programs that aim to improve student retention and completion. For example, pre-semester freshman and family orientation sessions encourage incoming students to participate in the successful Freshman Year Initiative (FYI) and its learning communities, which feature outstanding teachers in conve-

## 2006 Data Used as Selection Criteria for SREB Study

Graduation Rate  
**53%**

Median SAT Score  
**1,025**

Pell Recipients  
**30.7%**

niently arranged course blocks. FYI served nearly 1,000 students in 2008. These sessions, run collaboratively by the Academic Advising Center and Student Life with the assistance of several college offices, student leaders and FYI mentors, help students understand the full range of resources available to them. Academic advisers also are there to help students understand their course options and to get off to a good start. By the first week of classes, all incoming freshmen and more than 85 percent of the incoming transfers have met with advisers and registered for classes. Among the services offered by the Academic Advising Center are transfer advising, registration workshops, and periodic outreach letters to alert students to pertinent issues.

### Academic advising is critical

The Academic Advising Center documented 16,399 student interactions and is widely viewed by students and staff members as a major reason for the college's relatively high completion rates, with well over 90 percent of users calling it "effective" on surveys. It serves students "from entry to exit," one interviewee said, and is open seven days and three evenings a week, including Sundays. The Counseling Services office conducts up to 1,800 appointments with students per semester and oversees the early-warning process and academic probation, as well as supervising peer counselors.

Other important initiatives include the CUNY SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge) program, serving 971 students in fall 2009 who would otherwise not qualify for Queens College and who need substantial economic assistance. It starts with a summer seminar for first-year SEEK students, tied to block-scheduled courses and learning. As the program unfolds, it also provides intensive and comprehensive advising, counseling, mentoring and tutoring, and workshops on personal development, skills and career exploration. SEEK students, though considered at risk on entry, graduate at comparable rates to other students.

Queens College also offers a writing curriculum that involves a first-year college writing course and three required writing-intensive courses that may be taken in any department that offers them. The library sponsors a variety of creative initiatives and programs, including a peer-tutor program called Students Helping Students that helps them

assist faculty with research and have access to a wide range of campus jobs.

Two additional factors in the college's success relate to administrative procedures. First, the college intentionally tries to identify and eliminate bureaucratic rules and processes that may impede student success and degree completion. Staff observed that students know they will get a fair hearing if they have a problem. Second, a less visible but important factor is the college's focus on providing students the courses they need — when they need them. This is a major challenge in a large institution with classes seven days a week, but currently all general education courses can be taken on weekdays, weekends and evenings.

An interesting incentive for Queens College and its sister institutions is a mechanism that influences campus planning and decision-making called the PMP (Performance Management Program), developed by the CUNY administration in 2004-2005. CUNY creates a PMP for each campus through a process that begins with the chancellor stating the university's targets for the upcoming academic year, guided by the Master Plan. Each institution then proposes goals in alignment with those of the university based on historical performance, other similar CUNY campuses and a national peer group. Negotiations finalize the goals. Results on the PMP affect such things as executive compensation on the campuses, so the process has "teeth." Some PMP areas directly relate to retention and completion, so the process may be a factor in the college's record in achieving on-time graduation for many students.

Queens College exemplifies a large, complex, urban commuter institution that successfully achieves timely degree completion. One administrator observed that the key was getting everyone to understand the importance of truly meeting students' needs and how to do it.





## Sam Houston State University

Sam Houston State University (SHSU), a Texas State University System institution, is one of the oldest public universities in Texas. Located in Huntsville, about 60 miles north of Houston, it currently enrolls about 17,000 students.

From 2002 to 2006, the university's six-year graduation rate increased dramatically, from 34 percent to 46 percent. "We have combined a caring culture with good programs," said President James Gaertner. He credits a long-existing culture of "paying attention to students" and improving the organization of the institution as keys to better completion rates. SHSU also has increased one-year retention rates to 75 percent of full-time students, keeping more students in school each year. Half of its students are the first in their families to attend college, and nearly one in three of its first-time, full-time students receives a Pell Grant, indicating modest family income.

University staff members attribute some of the university's success to the deployment of the right personnel in the right programs to produce strong student retention and completion. SHSU faces challenges not unlike many other institutions in this report: a student body that lives mainly in the community, with about 20 percent living on campus but near home and able to visit family on weekends. Many entering students have weak academic preparation. Yet SHSU administrators, staff and faculty stressed a culture of success that is recognizable to students before they enroll and through their senior year.

### Reorganization makes a difference

Several persons cited a few strategic moves that have been particularly influential in improving retention, including a reorganization that created an Enrollment Management division, resources to strengthen key areas, and the establish-

ment of a strong student advising and mentoring center. These strategies sent a clear message from the president and his senior administrators that retention and graduation were important. As one interviewee said, the administration has dedicated significant resources "to do what we need to do" for student retention and degree completion. The university president's cabinet leads these efforts, and as one individual reported, "Everyone gets support from the cabinet."

Enrollment Management has its own vice president who reports directly to the president. This division centralizes the institution's retention efforts with oversight in many areas, including admissions, career services, financial aid, new student orientation, the registrar's office and residence life. This structure enhances a broad-based, collaborative network involving most parts of the university.

A key component is the Student Success program, which involves several retention initiatives for students, from pre-entry to graduation. While the program has focused on freshmen and sophomores, the Student Success staff also channels efforts to address some students' junior- and senior-year needs. Programs are not designed for particular groups of students, and support services (such as advising and mentoring) are open to all students, not just those who are required to report to a support services office.

Collaboration was cited by many staff and administrators as a primary reason for the institution's rise in graduation rates. They noted the many ways that departments, programs and offices collaborate to help students succeed. An important component of this collaboration is the Impact Planning Committee. Established in 2004, the committee consists of representatives from most administrative offices: admissions, the registrar, financial aid, institutional research, the Student Advising and Mentoring Center and others.

The group discusses how institutional decisions may impact other departments before action is taken. “Silos don’t get in the way when problems need to be solved,” one person said.

This collaborative spirit is evident in other ways on campus. Many interviewees mentioned that university staff members are accessible and approachable. Math faculty members assist students directly in the Math Center. The financial aid staff often sends students to other campus offices for help with study skills, reading and writing. “People realize that other good programs help them do a better job” in improving students’ chances for success, an interviewee said. SHSU also emphasizes the hiring of faculty, staff and administrators who share a focus on students. Staff members said they emphasize to new hires that caring for students is a valuable and expected part of working there.

### **SAM Center boosts success**

A significant component of the institution’s retention success is the Student Advising and Mentoring Center (SAM). In 2002, then-new President Gaertner led an initiative to strengthen the institution’s advising efforts. He had prior experience with the benefits of a centralized advising approach and began to establish what is now known as the SAM Center. The center provides intrusive academic advising and mentoring to all students and assists them in non-academic areas such as personal goal-setting, establishing strategies to achieve their objective, and providing incentives for realizing educational success. Interviewees described the SAM Center as many students’ most consistent point of contact with the school.

The center has had particular success with students who are on academic probation. The SAM Center staff provides a Monitored Academic Progress (MAP) program and other activities for students on probation and who are referred by deans and associate deans. Faculty and others concerned about students with low grades or poor attendance also can use the First Alert program to refer students.

Before the SAM Center was strengthened, the Institutional Research office found that the freshman-to-sophomore year retention rates were only about 45 percent, with subsequent six-year graduation rates at only 22 percent for students on



probation in the first year — compared with 76 percent retention and 53 percent graduation rates for others.

Since its inception in 2003, nearly 3,200 students have been referred to MAP. An average of 39 percent have removed themselves from probation, and 69 percent have improved their academic standing. Since 2002, First Alert has had an average success rate of 69 percent and more than 6,300 referrals.

The SAM Center and many other programs exemplify the way the campus successfully reaches out to students. “Personalization” is a term often used by staff and administrators to describe why the university is relatively successful with retention and completion. Ensuring that every student has a connection with someone on campus — through academic work or extracurricular activities — is a key tactic.

Interviewees also mentioned freshmen learning communities as examples of how students become immersed in academic and social activities on campus. “A student has to want to fall through the cracks. If a student fails, they are not asking for help and are not responding,” one person said. This personalization seems critical, since about 51 percent of the students are the first in their families to attend college.

Sam Houston also uses a reverse-transfer strategy to encourage students to complete bachelor’s degrees. The institution works with community colleges to apply credits earned at SHSU to transfer courses, allowing some students to earn an associate’s degree after they have transferred and enrolled at the university. This type of collaboration across institutions rewards the individual and provides an incentive to complete the four-year degree. An SHSU Web page lists colleges with transfer agreements, including the reverse-transfer option that can lead to an associate’s degree.

#### **2006 Data Used as Selection Criteria for SREB Study**

Graduation Rate  
**46%**

Median SAT Score  
**1,000**

Pell Recipients  
**30.3%**



## Wayne State College

Wayne State College (WSC) in Wayne, Nebraska, is the smallest of the institutions in this report. The majority of its 3,000 students are first-time, full-time undergraduates. While a significant number come from urban centers such as Omaha or Lincoln, many come from tiny communities with fewer residents than their campus residence halls.

A culture of “friendliness,” “care,” “attentiveness” and “excellent cooperation between academic, student services and other administrative units” was cited in campus interviews as a major reason for WSC’s comparatively high graduation rate. “We really understand our students — where they come from, what they want and need, including that they often underestimate their ability based on lack of experience, not talent,” one person said in a typical interview. Many faculty and staff members are alumni and come from similar backgrounds as the students.

Faculty and staff often take personal pride in participating in students’ growth, sometimes taking them to out-of-town academic and extracurricular conferences. For the 50 percent of students who are the first in their families to attend college, such trips may be their first outside the region.

A strong culture of student success began with the 1988 inauguration of President Donald Mash, who had spent part of his career in student affairs offices. Two programs that began during his 10-year term now are considered important to student completion: Cooperative education, which introduces students to careers and workplaces, and the “Succeeding in College” seminar. Dean of Students Curt Frye, who helped start and then enhance these completion initiatives, also was cited as an important champion for student success.

### Cutting class draws instant attention

WSC’s relatively small size has been important to the institution’s success in raising graduation rates, according to campus interviews. Class sizes rarely exceed 30 students. “If you cut a class, it gets noticed — many faculty will send you an e-mail saying you were missed. Some even phone you,” one person said. Through a roster of nearly 100 student activities (including several initiated by students, something encouraged at WSC), students can build leadership skills. Many activities are part of an active residence hall program that reaches one-third of the students living on campus. Other cultural, scholarly, social and athletic events attract strong interest from students and people in the community and region.

WSC’s small size leads to some interesting approaches toward helping more students succeed and ultimately graduate. For example, WSC does not use learning communities with block scheduling in which groups of students share the same courses as part of its First-Year Experience (FYE), in contrast to many institutions profiled in this report. “So many of our students come from smaller schools — where they always have had the same people in classes together — that they wanted to meet new people, rather than see the same faces all the time” one interviewee explained.

The college also provides professional advisers for students (except for “undeclared” freshmen), “intrusive” advising, a faculty development center and administrative policies that help students toward on-time degree completion. “We are small enough that we do not need a lot of formal programs” that focus on student success, one person said.

## 2006 Data Used as Selection Criteria for SREB Study

Graduation Rate  
52%

Median SAT Score  
990

Pell Recipients  
38.9%

The FYE program began when President Mash, shortly after arrival, asked his staff in a meeting: “If each of you had \$500 to spend in a way that helps students, what would you do?” This prompted discussion and a task force that traveled to Chicago to take a course taught by David Ellis, author of *Becoming a Master Student*. The task force established a “Succeeding in College” course that was so successful, it soon expanded to 15 sections of students. Now, all students with an ACT score below 20 take the course, “an important reason for our strong retention record,” one official said.

Faculty and administrators then looked at several alternatives for an FYE for students who scored between 21 and 25 on the ACT. They decided that the best approach was to offer five or six general education courses and add a “rider” as a second FYE program — four general education sessions that focus on typical FYE issues such as study skills and career paths, and some required out-of-class activities such as participation in Earth Day and the school’s Legislative Forum. “The goals of both FYEs are to create identity as a WSC student (and ultimately, an alumnus), to introduce the full range of college resources, and to help students see faculty as open and available,” one person explained. Sections have only 25 students, and one full class period is devoted to one-on-one conversations between each student and the faculty member. It is a different model from that of most institutions, but the interviewees at WSC agreed that it works.

### Learning Center offers services

Another initiative emerging from the task force was The Learning Center. The center has expanded its work over the years, and it now runs the academic program for athletes, offers six general education courses, and provides individual academic and personal assistance (including administration of the Myers-Briggs behavioral instrument). It also coordinates the Early Alert Program, in which anyone (a resident adviser, coach, faculty member or student) can contact the Early Alert Hotline to refer students who may have challenges. Students then are contacted within 24 hours. More than 500 Early Alert referrals are made each year (equivalent to one-third of the student body). Some referrals lead

to Individual Academic Assistance, which requires students to complete a 10-minute weekly check-in to discuss every class and grade. The center also runs 27 free tutorial labs, staffed by professionals and trained peer tutors. Students reported that their experiences with the tutorial labs were “excellent,” especially the writing Help Desk. The tutorial labs have 3,000 student contacts a year.

STRIDE, the Student Support Services component of the federal TRIO program, was another program cited by many on campus as a key to students’ success at WSC. All 225 participants are the first in their families to attend college, or have disabilities and/or come from low-income families. Many students also have relatively low ACT scores. STRIDE provides its own first-year seminar, access to tutors and extensive mentoring (three meetings a week for freshmen and less frequent meetings afterward until graduation).

The program functions much like a learning community and appears to boost first-year student retention rates (75 percent in the 2008-2009 academic year). One student plans to complete her studies in only three years by spring 2010, though she began in developmental classes.

Strategic planning also keeps WSC’s focus on student success and degree completion. Employees from across the college have a retreat every other November to review and update the strategic plan. “Student retention is always a key part of our discussions,” one official said. “One major goal right now is to get first-year retention above 75 percent and to keep the [graduation rate] over 50 percent.”





## Western Illinois University

Western Illinois University (WIU) has a main campus in rural Macomb and a branch in the Quad Cities area near the Illinois/Iowa border that primarily serves nontraditional students. Overall, WIU has nearly 11,900 undergraduates, most of whom began as first-time, full-time students.

The first-year student retention rate is 72 percent, and the graduation rate in 2006 was 55.6 percent. While WIU historically has not enrolled high percentages of underrepresented minorities, their numbers are increasing, with students coming from the Chicago suburbs, family farms, tiny rural communities and urban areas such as East Saint Louis. Campus interviews by SREB showed that the creation of WIU's new Multicultural Center is a result of this trend: "All are welcome," one person said. "We are committed to your success," added another.

In 2004, the Pell Institute selected WIU as one of only 13 U.S. universities with exemplary access, retention and graduation rates for low-income and minority students. One explanation was: "We are a big institution with a small-school feel."

### Leadership, Grad Track are critical

A major factor in WIU's relative success may be its leadership. President Al Goldfarb is consistent in his message that "WIU must be student-centered in all that it does." Many WIU faculty and staff are highly supportive of student degree completion and diversity. "We've always been this way — indeed, we have taken chances on students from poor farm families and inadequate schools right from the start — but it's our current administration that has taken us to a whole new level," one administrator said.

Many whom SREB interviewed noted that WIU faculty members often go beyond expectations in their efforts to

help students succeed — although their role does not include much academic advising, unlike many institutions profiled in this report. Instead, first-year students and students who have not declared a major use the Academic Advising Center. Students who have chosen their majors are advised by professional advisers in each academic department. With the aid of Grad Track (an online "degree roadmap" tool) and rules requiring students to have an adviser's approval before major changes to their courses, WIU's own data and higher-than-usual graduation rates suggest the system works.

One person on campus described WIU's hearty array of activities for students as "engaged intensiveness." With more than 200 formal clubs, programs, intramural sports and other activities, the word "engagement" was mentioned often as a reason for strong student retention rates. Many students participate in these activities and enjoy the campus recreation center, but some still feel out of place: Despite its efforts, WIU loses about 28 percent of students after the freshman year. One administrator's explanation was that some students miss suburban life, while others from rural environments are overwhelmed by WIU's size. But he added: "Those who stay after freshman year generally graduate or go on to other institutions."

### FYE differs at WIU

Several WIU programs specifically target student retention and completion. One is the required First-Year Experience (FYE), which differs from FYEs at many institutions in this report. WIU's FYE offers for-credit general education courses, taught by regular faculty and assisted by student mentors. As de facto learning communities, all courses at WIU have three or more out-of-class activities.

To further boost engagement, all students (other than locals) must live in a residence hall for two years, and WIU works hard to ensure a good experience. Resident advisers (RAs) are chosen carefully. One senior administrator quipped: “We spend more time selecting RAs than faculty!” The RAs receive several days of training and lead their residence halls in a range of social and co-curricular programs, including a non-credit residence hall course that eases students’ transition to college: “Housing FYE.”

Several people on campus identified the Office of Academic Services (OAS) as especially effective in improving student retention and degree completion. Established in 1970, it is an alternative admissions program with a major advisement component. Through the OAS, the university admits about 350 students (nearly 20 percent of the freshman class) who otherwise would not qualify academically. The students must sign a participant agreement that makes clear they enter under “academic warning” status. Among other things, participants agree to attend orientation, attend at least eight advising sessions each semester, meet with tutors as recommended, consult with their advisers before making any class changes, allow grades to be sent to parents, continue in the program for at least 27 credits, and refrain from participation in Greek life. The program follows students closely, requesting early alerts of students’ progress by week four of each term, and advisers often stay in contact with students even after they move out of the program.

University data show that OAS students’ performance is similar to regularly admitted students’ and that many students see the program as a resounding success. Campus interviews found several explanations for the success of OAS: its thorough selection process that identifies students who have promise and will work hard, the staff’s frequent and intensive contact with students, course selection matched to each individual, and extensive tutoring and diligent monitoring of students’ progress. But the central reason for the program’s success may be, as one person said: “The advisers are heavily invested in the student’s success, and they take it personally when students do not succeed.”

Several years ago, WIU expanded and redesigned new-student orientation to more strongly engage students. Orientation now features a two-day session in July that occurs closer to the start of the freshman year. As one person said,



“it’s when the high school students no longer have their mind on the prom.” The event includes an introduction to college expectations and sessions (for both incoming students and their families) on “letting go” of home, as well as financial aid, health and safety, and campus life.

The Student Assistance and Parent Service Center also was cited as important in WIU’s success. The center is a one-stop location for students to handle a variety of administrative services. The university also provides a city-wide bus system.

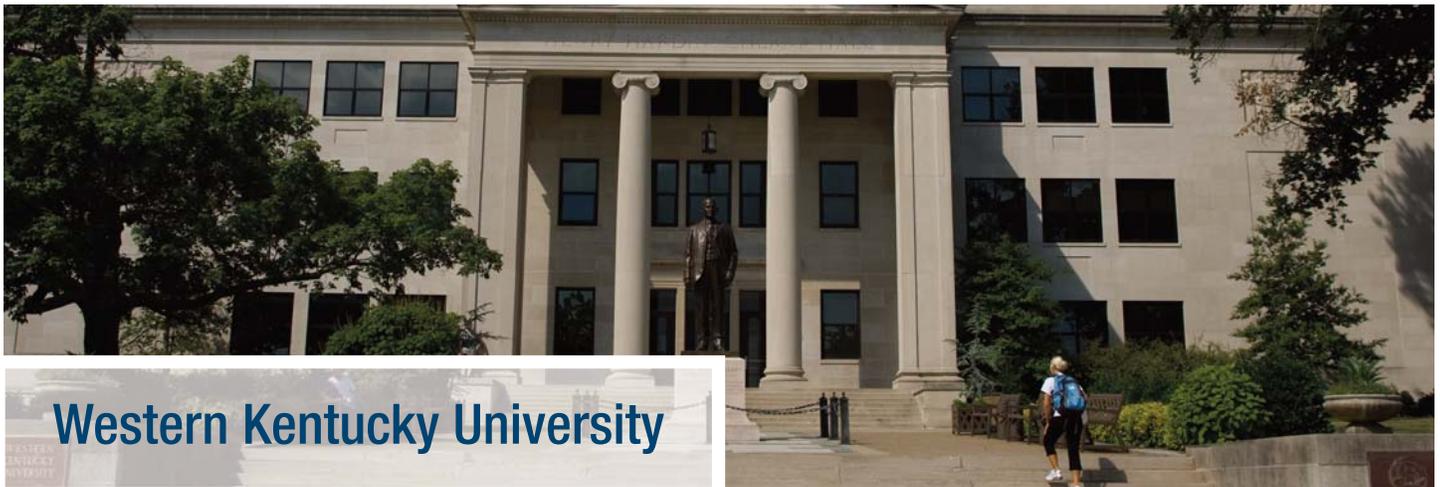
A few years ago after students identified finances as the top reason for attrition, WIU responded creatively. It was Illinois’ first institution to guarantee that tuition levels would stay the same for four years if students stay enrolled. “In an environment where other institutions raise tuition every year, staying enrolled at WIU is almost like an additional scholarship,” one person said.

When the state recently mandated that every public institution adopt the same tuition policy, WIU went further by guaranteeing no fee or housing increases. “We budget like a private business to keep costs down for students,” Goldfarb said. This kind of thinking drives many decisions at WIU. As another person added: “When things get passionate, inevitably someone will ask: ‘What’s best for the students?’ and the decision becomes clear. This is true for class schedules, building design and location, advising, faculty promotions — just about every decision.”

Four core values guide Western Illinois University: academic excellence, educational opportunity, personal growth and social responsibility. The values are linked to the strategic plan, developed in 2002, which is updated annually and monitored monthly. “The plan is the key managerial tool for keeping focus,” one person said, and its main goal is the “focused recruitment and retention” of students.

#### 2006 Data Used as Selection Criteria for SREB Study

<p>Graduation Rate <b>56%</b></p>	<p>Median SAT Score <b>990</b></p>	<p>Pell Recipients <b>27.7%</b></p>
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Western Kentucky University President Gary Ransdell is bold about his emphasis on helping students graduate: “We control our own destiny.” This is the guiding principle he has used to shape his leadership at Western Kentucky University (WKU) and a theme that came up as an explanation for WKU’s success in helping students graduate. “Our focus must be on degree productivity. If we admit a student, then we must do all we can to make sure that student graduates in as reasonable a time frame as possible. Sound, efficient curriculum and personal decision-making are essential to student success,” he said.

Campus administrators agreed that the president’s leadership has made a difference, leading to sustained efforts over several years that have made student retention and graduation the key campus goals — and everyone’s responsibility. The continuity of effort has helped ensure that programs and policies are in place to meet the challenge.

Located in Bowling Green, WKU is within two hours of both Louisville and Nashville. Unlike Kentucky’s seven other four-year institutions, WKU offers associate’s degrees and certificates through its community college programs. The community college provides opportunities for local students to earn a bachelor’s degree. WKU serves over 17,600 undergraduate students, and more than one-third of its first-time, full-time students receive Pell Grants. From 2002 to 2006, WKU’s six-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time students rose from 41 percent to 49 percent.

### **AARC fuels success**

The Academic Advising and Retention Center (AARC) is one of the most visible examples of investment in student success. Housed in an attractive, convenient location in the Student Success Center, the AARC provides academic advis-

ing, retention services and Supplemental Instruction; its services are expanding to the residence halls. The emphasis on advising has increased, as has intrusive advising, especially on scheduling. AARC staff said the center has a strong selection and training program for tutors, and it offers free tutoring for students in more than 100 general education courses. Mandatory advising is required before a student reaches 90 credit hours, and students cannot register until they have contacted an adviser. AARC had over 27,000 visitors in 2007. Some of its retention efforts include:

- an extensive telephone campaign, called Taking Aim, to encourage students to register and find out why students may not be returning to campus.
- Best Expectations Programs (BEP) to target academically at-risk students with programs to increase persistence through structured support, including intrusive advising, monitored study hours and free tutoring. In fall 2008, nearly 62 percent of participating students had a 2.0 GPA or above.
- early alerts through the 5th Week Freshman Assessment program, which identifies potential problems. During the fifth week of fall and spring semesters, faculty members submit information on students’ academic progress through an online system. Students identified as at risk are required to meet with AARC counselors or receive an e-mail outlining the resources available to help them.
- a “Majors and Minors Fair” links students with academic departments and encourages selection of a major as early as possible.

Another example of WKU’s work to improve student success is the Freshman Assembly each fall semester. The president awards a lapel pin to each student individually

## 2006 Data Used as Selection Criteria for SREB Study

Graduation Rate  
**49%**

Median SAT Score  
**970**

Pell Recipients  
**36.3%**

that shows the year of that graduating class, then he gives a strong message at the convocation about graduation as WKU's goal for each student.

### Pre-registration improves retention

The AARC also preregisters students to assist in retention. Most freshmen are pre-registered for up to nine hours of classes; more than 1,800 of WKU's 2,000 freshmen pre-registered in fall. This early registration opportunity gives freshmen access to the courses they need and enhances their persistence early in the semester. To help with college costs, the financial aid office at WKU provides "angel funds" to assist needy students with expenses for books and transportation. Also, the administration ensures that those who are behind in their tuition payments receive help early in the semester, sometimes using discretionary funds to help students. The financial aid office helps Pell Grant recipients apply for all applicable state grants; WKU is the state's largest user of state grants.

Other administrative efforts also stress completion. A Task Force on Quality and Access examined other barriers that may need to be addressed. The Provost's Initiatives for Excellence provide competitive awards to academic departments, and they support offices and student groups for innovative projects that are tied to the institution's strategic plan. Retention and six-year graduation rates are performance indicators for strategic goals targeted for 2012.

Faculty members boost student completion as well. Some individuals commented that, a decade or so ago, most faculty felt retention was not their job, but the administration has worked to change that perception. Faculty members now are involved actively in student advising. The Campus Advising Network (CAN) helps educate faculty and staff on advising. One of the elements of CAN is the Master Advisor Certificate (MAC), offered by the AARC for the faculty. The MAC was created in response to faculty requests for additional training as academic advisers. The program helps faculty become better advisers to students and understand the relationship of advising to student retention.

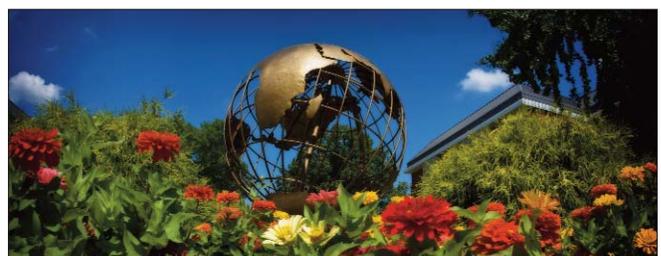
WKU administrators and staff reported that good information and communication help them understand where and how to direct resources to improve retention and comple-

tion. Thirteen years ago, the Institutional Research and Enrollment Management offices were established within Academic Affairs, facilitating WKU's analysis capabilities and strengthening of the assessments program.

Developmental and Supplemental Instruction also are important. In 2007-08, 42 percent of graduating seniors had taken at least one developmental course, and 66 percent of students awarded an associate's degree had taken at least one such course. Several faculty members cited collaboration between developmental instruction staff and academic departments, the personal attention students receive, the convenience of their meetings with faculty, and small class sizes as factors in this success. They also said that flexibility in the design, teaching and delivery of supplemental courses helps faculty meet the needs of students.

WKU's attractive campus was cited as an important element in its success. Students, administrators, faculty and staff said that the campus feels small and appealing. This reinforces WKU's "individual" approach to serving students, several persons said. Students said they appreciated the institution's investments, such as the residence halls' renovations. The overall effect is a welcoming campus where students know that graduation is a priority and that faculty, staff and administrators will help. Some students mentioned that their initial contact in high school with WKU made them want to enroll — and graduate.

WKU's challenges in degree completion are similar to those of peer institutions. Many students leave for personal reasons rather than academic problems. "Kids come in with a lot of baggage, especially family issues that weigh them down. In other cases, they just are not prepared," one person observed. Financial issues also are a concern, especially for low-income students for whom Pell Grants do not cover all costs. Lastly, some echoed the lack of family support for first-generation students, an issue raised at similar institutions.



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