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IMPROVING RETENTION AND GRADUATION RATES

Introduction

The policies adopted by the Board of Governors encourage constituent institutions to decrease the average length of time students take to complete their degrees while maintaining the quality of undergraduate education and the integrity of the baccalaureate degree. In addition, students must also be expected to assume responsibility in planning their academic schedules so as to complete their degrees in a timely manner.

Plan to Improve Retention and Graduation Rates in The University of North Carolina

UNC's plan to improve retention and graduation rates has two elements: (1) University-wide policies and goals that may decrease the average time taken for completion of degrees, including the requirement that each institution perform institutional studies, based on factors that have been identified as causing students to take longer to complete degree requirements, or drop out, and develop an institutional plan to encourage retention and shorter average time to graduation; and (2) campus and University-wide measures to assess the effectiveness of the policies and goals adopted.

The goal is to move the time taken for completion of the baccalaureate degree toward a four-year period for students enrolled full time and continuously throughout their academic careers, or toward the equivalent of eight full-time semesters for part-time students or students who interrupt their enrollment for valid reasons.

I. University-Wide Policies

The Board of Governors has adopted the following policies for all institutions comprising the University of North Carolina except the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics:[1]

1. Undergraduate students are expected to enroll in at least 15 semester hours credit per term. Thus it should be possible for a full-time student to complete most baccalaureate degree programs within four academic years

[1] The North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics shall track data on student attrition, completion rates of its high school curriculum, and high school graduation. See G.S. 116-235.

or the equivalent (eight semesters of full-time study). Effective Fall 1995, baccalaureate degree programs shall be limited to no more than 128 semester hours. Any semester hour requirement beyond 128 must be approved by the Board of Governors. Any program authorized by the Board of Governors to require 135 semester hours or more shall be officially designated as a five-year baccalaureate program. Requests for an exception to the 128 hour limitation for existing programs shall be submitted to the Board of Governors.

2. In all institutional catalogs and also in orientation materials for parents and students, the normal number of hours and length of time required to attain the baccalaureate degree will be prominently displayed along with a description of the factors that may extend the length of time to successful completion of the degree for individual students.

3. The University will sponsor one or more conferences for administrators and faculty on successful strategies to increase retention and graduation rates and reduce the length of time to degree.

4. Recognizing that many students must work while in college, that part-time jobs off-campus are limited in some areas, and that working on campus has a positive correlation with retention and graduation because it limits student's work hours, imposes discipline on student schedules, and provides a stable source of income to help meet college expenses, the Board of Governors supports on-campus employment of students. This employment could reduce the number of "dropouts" for financial reasons and thereby shorten the time to graduation.

5. Each constituent institution shall review and revise or adopt a plan for improving retention, and four- and six-year graduation rates and shortening the average time taken to graduate for students who begin their studies as first-time, full-time freshmen. The plan shall incorporate the polices stated in items 1 and 2, above, and include, but not be limited to, a review of campus policies and practices that may affect retention rates, graduation rates, and time to graduate, with particular attention to the following:

    a. review baccalaureate degree program graduation requirements to ensure that all programs comply with the semester hour limitations stated in policy 1, above;

    b. review course schedules for the past three years to determine whether all courses required for graduation are offered on a timely basis and with an adequate number of sections and, where inadequacies are discovered, take steps to correct them;

c. review the availability of appropriate and timely academic advisement, especially at the freshman level, to assist students in making effective decisions, to increase the potential for students selecting appropriate courses and schedules, to provide students with assistance in selecting a major at the appropriate time in order to reduce excessive changes of majors, and to increase student awareness of the importance for traditional students of enrolling in at least 15 semester hours per semester in order to complete the degree in eight semesters;

d. review policies and practices governing course withdrawal, course repeat, progression, suspension, and reinstatement policies to ensure that such polices are not encouraging and facilitating behaviors that lengthen time to graduation;

e. review the specification of courses within majors to determine whether excessive or unnecessary specification or augmentation of general education course for certain majors is increasing course requirements for students changing majors;

f. review higher than typical institutional grade point average requirements for admission to a major or satisfaction of grade requirements in major courses to ensure that these requirements are not leading students to reduce course loads or to repeat courses unnecessarily, thereby lengthening time to graduation;

g. review financial aid policies to ensure that students are aware of opportunities for financial aid and that those policies do not encourage part-time or prolonged enrollment.

h. collect campus and university-wide data on retention, progression, graduation and time to degree and use it to assess factors that contribute to success and factors that may account for a student not being retained, not making adequate progress, or not graduating.

i. Review campus retention policies and practices in light of data analysis and best practices and revise and adjust policies and practices as appropriate. Track cost of efforts and the need for resources to address retention options.

II. Goal Setting

Each campus, in consultation with the General Administration, shall establish goals for increasing retention and graduation rates and for monitoring the time full- and part-time students take to graduate. The President shall establish guidelines for implementing the goal setting.

III. Measures of Progress and Success

- The University has developed a monitoring process that enables it to track retention, graduation and the length of time to degree for both full-time and part-time students as well as other groups such as community college transfers. This report will be produced annually.

- The University will use the baccalaureate graduate survey to ask graduates how long they took to complete the baccalaureate degree and, if longer than four years, why.

IV. Campus Reporting

The President will provide guidelines for establishing the goals for retention and graduation and for meeting the reporting requirements in this policy.