

Proposal for Initiatives to Improve Retention and Graduation Rates at Francis Marion University

Prepared for
President Fred Carter

Prepared by the
FMU Retention and Graduation Rate Committee

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TO: President Fred Carter

FROM: Retention Committee
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DATE: April 20, 2016

SUBJECT: Proposed Retention and Graduation Rate Initiatives for FMU

The Retention Committee has met several times this academic year to gather information and build substantive recommendations for improving the retention and graduation rates at FMU. We offer the following recommendations for your consideration:

- 1) Initiate curricular changes to make University Life 100 a one-credit required general education class, or implement a system to maintain a high proportion of students taking this course in their freshman year.
- 2) Create a Student Success Center equipped with an Early Alert System and enhanced advising. [See pages 3-5]
- 3) Supplement academic support centers on campus.
- 4) Provide additional support to gateway courses.
- 5) Conduct a review of the university's course withdrawal policies.
- 6) Create an ad hoc faculty Retention and Graduation Rate Committee to monitor ongoing retention activities and student academic support services.

Our recommendations, explained in the following report, are founded upon information gathered from our own university statistics, experiences of those teaching UL 100 and other courses at FMU, models from other universities, information gathered from a webinar from Ruffalo Noel Levitz, and presentations at the 2015 National Symposium for Student Retention in Orlando, FL.

Thank you for the opportunity to investigate student retention and graduation rates at FMU. We appreciate your involvement of the faculty in developing ideas to address this issue. Please let us know if you would like to meet to discuss these or other ideas further.

Proposal for Initiatives to Improve Retention and Graduation Rates at Francis Marion University

Throughout the 2015-2016 academic year, this committee has gathered and analyzed information from university datasets about student retention and graduation rates. Collectively, we have considered a number of options for improving retention rates at FMU. We agree that improving student retention should be the concern of every faculty member at FMU.

Participation by committee members in the National Symposium for Student Retention in Orlando, Florida (DeVincenzo, Gourley, and Kunka), and attendance in a Ruffalo Noel Levitz webinar (Bausmith, DeVincenzo, and Kennedy) has further underscored to us 1) the national and local challenges with college student retention, 2) pressures tied to performance-based funding in several states, and 3) the extremely competitive environment for college enrollment.

Based on this information, we have developed a set of six recommendations for improving retention rates at FMU.

Recommendation #1: Initiate curricular changes to make University Life 100 a one-credit required general education class, or implement a system to maintain a high proportion of students taking this course in their freshman year.

A first-year experience course can be instrumental in helping at-risk students—particularly first-generation, low-income, minority students and male students—navigate the expectations and challenges of the college environment. As evidenced from committee members' participation in the National Symposium for Student Retention, first-year experience courses are widely heralded as an essential tool for student retention and success.

University Life 100 is not currently a required general education course at FMU, but enrollments in that course are beginning to have an impact on student success and retention at FMU. Increased first-semester enrollments in UL 100, from 24.6% of the freshman class in 2011 to 90.1% in 2014, have yielded corresponding increases in second-year retention rates, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Freshmen Enrollment in UL 100 and Second-Year Retention Rates at FMU		
Cohort	% of Newly Enrolled Freshmen Taking UL 100	Second-Year Retention Rate
2011-2012	24.6%	65.4%
2012-2013	43.0%	66.8%
2013-2014	88.2%	68.1%
2014-2015	90.1%	69.1%
2015-2016	93.5%	TBD

Making UL 100 a required general education course will help all FMU students 1) learn how to successfully adapt to the college environment, 2) build study habits that lead to successful course

completions, 3) create friendships and a sense of belonging at the university, 4) gain specific feedback on their course of study and careers, and 5) develop non-cognitive skills that foster resilience and persistence in educational tasks.

Changes to the General Education requirements by adding UL 100 may be problematic, however. If the General Education requirements cannot be changed or if changes will take a long time, we recommend university action to ensure most freshman are taking UL 100. This means active support by every department.

Additional recommendations for UL 100:

- **Keep cohorts together by major or area of study.**

We encourage continuing the practice of grouping UL 100 courses by major or course of study. These groupings, such as UL 100 for nursing majors, biology majors, or business majors, help first-year students to build camaraderie and friendships, thereby enhancing students' sense of belonging at the university.

For undeclared majors, we recommend building sections focused on an area of study, such as health careers, humanities, or social sciences, when possible. This will allow students the ability to begin exploring careers and majors in their areas of interest.

- **Pair undergraduate mentors with this course.**

First-year students need to see models of successful student behavior. For this reason, we recommend that paid undergraduate mentors be paired with sections of this course. These undergraduate mentors can serve as relevant resources to UL 100 students, providing academic and social support both within and beyond the classroom. In addition, mentors can help to foster a sense of belonging at FMU and initiate camaraderie within the UL 100 cohort.

- **Involve UL 100 instructors in advising after midterm grades are issued.**

Students need more feedback about their academic progress early in the semester. UL 100 instructors should have access to their students' first-semester midterm grades. This would allow these instructors the opportunity to discuss academic problems with their students and lead them to campus resources that may help them to resolve their issues.

- **Increase faculty incentives for instruction of UL 100.**

This course, currently taught as an overload, needs a strong commitment from faculty over the course of a full semester. There were difficulties in Fall 2015 in securing enough faculty members to teach 40 sections of this course as an overload. A pay increase and other incentives would help to recognize UL 100 faculty members' first-line role in supporting student retention and make this a more appealing option for faculty.

- **Schedule the course in set blocks.**

We recommend setting designated blocks of times for UL 100 courses (such as Mondays, Wednesdays, or Fridays 12:30-1:20 p.m. or 1:30-2:20 p.m. and Tuesdays or Thursdays 12:45-1:35 p.m. or 2:10-3:25 p.m.) to make it easier for students to fit this class into a

variety of course schedules and provide several scheduling options (at least two choices on MWF and two choices on TTh). Blocking out specific times for UL 100 would help departments avoid scheduling conflicts with courses enrolled largely by first-year students. In addition, designated blocks would also permit UL 100 courses to meet *en masse* for occasional workshops and other events.

Long-term recommendation for UL 100:

- **Consider broadening this course into a three-credit class.**

In time, it may be beneficial to expand UL 100 into a three-credit class that helps to foster additional work in major selection, career development, and non-cognitive skills.

Recommendation #2: Create a Student Success Center equipped with an Early Alert System and enhanced advising.

To structure a coordinated and effective retention strategy, FMU would benefit from the creation of a Student Success Center led by a full-time Student Success Director. The center should be staffed with additional Student Success Coaches who handle student issues on a caseload basis. Psychology and education graduate students could serve as Student Success Coaches.

We recommend that the Student Success Director have his or her responsibilities focused only on student advising and retention efforts. The director should initiate and coordinate early intervention strategies for all students to ensure that they are getting the assistance they need to succeed on campus.

Student Success Coaches could become a supportive presence for first-year students upon their admission to the university. At Utah Valley University, for example, Student Success Coaches phone all incoming students to welcome them to the university, answer questions, build rapport, and establish the coaching relationship. That way, students who struggle at the beginning of the school year have an immediate contact for assistance should they need it.

Early Alert System:

Many universities now use an Early Alert System to notify Student Success Centers about problems students are experiencing, including low grades, excessive absences, learning challenges, emotional problems, or other issues. Early interventions are particularly critical for first-year students. At-risk students often need help getting academically back on track early in the semester, especially before midterms.

In our current system, first-year students generally meet with their advisors for the first time during the registration period for spring. If a student is having academic problems, this meeting is often too late. To make a difference, students need to change behaviors and improve classwork early in the first semester.

An Early Alert System will allow Student Success Coaches to contact students and intervene in cases of missing classes, missing assignments, and low grades. Coaches would then direct students to needed resources, such as the Counseling Center, Tutoring Center, Writing Center, Financial Assistance, academic advisors, etc. Coaches can also provide advice to students on how to contact a professor, how to study, and other essential activities.

Early Alert Systems were widely advocated as an effective retention initiative by attendee institutions at the National Symposium for Student Retention. UNC-Greensboro, for example, reported that 80% of first-year students took action on a problem when contacted by a retention counselor.

Additional recommendations for Early Alert:

- **Purchase or create a digital tool that enables Early Alert contacts between the Student Success Center, advisors, faculty, and students.**

There are many vendors that sell software programs that combine student information systems (e.g. Banner), Blackboard, and other resources (e.g. tutoring software) to track students and offer a digital method of sending in alerts. Skyfactor Mapworks and Hobsons Starfish, among others, appear to be effective tracking tools and are widely used by several universities. A digital platform could make Early Alert reporting simple, synchronized, and effective. It could be worthwhile to invite these vendors to campus to provide a demonstration of the capabilities of their programs.

However, as a low-cost means of piloting an Early Alert program, faculty and staff could use a Google doc form or other survey tool as a simplified means of sending in Early Alerts to the Student Success Center

- **Encourage faculty and staff to use the Early Alert System as a means for guiding students to take action and use campus resources.**

Faculty need to become active partners in this retention initiative by flagging first-year students' problems with attendance, missing assignments, below-C grades, and other issues. Faculty workshops on the reasons for and practice of sending in Early Alerts would help to foster a campus culture where student retention is every faculty member's concern. All faculty members will need to be trained on this new system, and new faculty members should receive instruction as part of their orientation to campus.

Enhanced Advising:

Many universities are adopting an "intrusive advising" approach when working with first-year students. At-risk students often do not know that they need help before it is too late. "Intrusive advising" would entail more check-ins with advisees early in the first-semester and throughout the first year.

With the assistance of the Early Alert process, faculty advisors should be able to check in on first-semester advisees prior to mid-term grades and the registration period. With interventions by Student Success Coaches and advisors, students will gain more guidance about behaviors and decisions that will lead to improved student success.

Advisors can also help their advisees by offering them more directive advice on their path towards graduation. Providing advisees with course plans can help students visualize themselves moving towards graduation within a set time period.

Additional recommendations for advising:

- **Consider developing standardized university advising practices.**

Currently, advising practices at FMU vary widely. Standardized policies and additional training for faculty advisors would provide students with greater uniformity in the advising process as well as improved assistance in navigating federal financial aid restrictions. Departments with large numbers of majors could consider group advising practices to assist with course registration. The Student Success Center could also be used to provide supplemental advising assistance to undeclared majors.

- **Encourage advising practices that stress degree completion.**

Students would benefit if each department posted standardized four-year degree plans for each major within the university catalog. Such plans would help students be more informed about the requirements needed for graduation. Student Success Coaches and academic advisors can further assist by stressing degree completion during their appointments with students.

- **Foster departmental activities that enhance career development and students' sense of belonging at the university.**

Some departments currently offer social activities that provide majors with opportunities to socialize with faculty and each other. The Fine Arts barbecue, the History majors' welcome-back breakfast, and the English department's Pastries with Profs are a few examples. Students need more of these types of interactions to feel they belong at the university. Fostering this sense of connectedness will also help students feel more comfortable in seeking academic and career advice from faculty members.

- **Enhance coordination with the Office of Career Development to provide career guidance to undeclared majors.**

The Success Center should establish a timeline by which students with undeclared majors have mandatory sessions at the Office of Career Development to do some career planning. The Office of Career Development offers personal inventories that can guide undeclared majors towards specific career pathways. A coordinated advising effort by advisors and Success Coaches could enhance students' connections with this office, leading to improved campus-wide career counseling and more informed student choices about majors, coursework, and professional options.

Recommendation #3: Supplement academic support facilities on campus.

Academic support facilities need to be able to handle student referrals from Student Success Coaches and the Early Alert System. Both the Tutoring Center and the Writing Center need additional support in order to fulfill these requests.

Tutoring Center:

The Tutoring Center needs additional support in order to manage the subject-specific tutoring needs on campus, particularly for math.

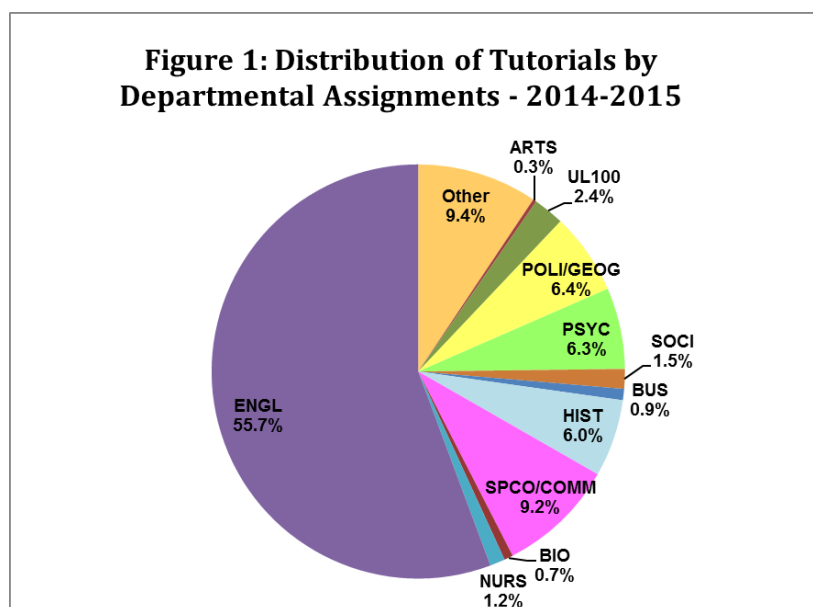
Specifically, the Tutoring Center director needs to have full-time oversight of the activities of the center. This is also needed so the Tutoring Center director can recruit and foster student staff, offer appropriate and specific tutor training, provide direct student support, and report back to faculty on student visits. Expanded hours and online availability would also help to support students who need academic assistance at FMU.

Writing Center:

The Writing Center, operated through the English department, has been successful in offering writing support for students across campus. During the 2014-2015 academic year, the Writing Center offered more than 3300 tutoring appointments, reaching over one-third of the FTE population. The Write on Target program, in which first-year writing students are paired with an undergraduate tutor for weekly appointments, has proven to be a successful mentorship model on our campus.

However, with the proposed English 101 and 102 courses and changes to the composition sequence, the Writing Center will lose approximately 40% of its current faculty tutoring staff in the Fall 2016 semester. This loss may increase once the transition from English 111/112/200 to English 101/102 is complete. The Writing Center needs additional funding to hire new student tutors to fill in this staff gap.

In addition, 44.3% of Writing Center appointments during the 2014-2015 academic year were for writing projects outside of the English department. The demands for help with writing projects outside of English have increased to a record level. (See Figure 1.)



Additional funds for student tutors are needed not only to maintain the Writing Center's current level of support but also to enhance the writing support offered to students in all campus disciplines.

Summer Funding:

University students need year-round academic support services. In recent years, limited funds have been made available to operate the Writing Center during Summer 1 and 2. The Tutoring Center has not been open during summers at all. Students who enroll in summer courses at FMU need to be able to access both of these academic support services. First-year students who fail courses and retake them during the summer would benefit from having tutoring assistance available to them during this time.

Recommendation #4: Provide additional support to gateway courses.

"Gateway courses," or general education courses that are populated with high numbers of first-year students, need particular attention at our university. Student retention after the first year depends in part upon success in these courses. We recommend reviewing and providing additional support to gateway courses with a F/W/CO rate of 20% or higher. (See Table 2.)

Course	Fall 2014 F/W/CO Rate	Fall 2015 F/W/CO Rate
Math 111S	61%	73%
Math 110S	60%	42%
Math 105S	59%	71%
Economics 203	40%	34%
Math 111	38%	32%
Biology 103	30%	15%
Biology 105	23%	28%
Political Science 103	20%	9%
English 112	19%	21%
Theatre 101	19%	23%
Psychology 206	17%	14%
Political Science 101	16%	10%
Business 150	15%	16%
Chemistry 101	14%	21%
English 111	13%	12%
Math 110L	11%	18%
Music 101	9%	9%

In particular, we are concerned about the high F/W/CO rate in the self-paced courses. As shown in Table 2, the F/W/CO rate for several math courses in Fall 2014 and Fall 2015 was particularly high.

We recommend offering pedagogical support to gateway courses with high F/W/CO rates. We do not want departments to lower their standards; rather, we encourage departments to pursue practices that improve learning outcomes. University support in the form of faculty travel funds to pedagogical conferences or workshops could aid departments in developing strategies to address this issue.

Additional recommendation for gateway courses:

- **Encourage instructors of gateway courses to offer more assessment opportunities early in the semester.**

Academic advisors and Student Success Coaches would have better information on student performance if more early, low-risk assessment opportunities were offered in gateway courses. This information could be used to trigger Early Alerts for struggling students so that interventions impact student performance in a timely manner. Students would also benefit from seeing grades earlier in the first semester so they would be able to adjust their behaviors in time to improve their grades.

Recommendation #5: Conduct a review of the university's course withdrawal policies.

Students who have an excessive number of course withdrawals delay their paths towards graduation. Students who delay their progress are more susceptible to interference from other life events that can further delay or halt their progress towards graduation. We recommend that several policies related to withdrawals should be reviewed, including 1) the timeline for withdrawals in the semester calendar, 2) the total number of withdrawals a student is permitted to take, and 3) grades of W vs. WF. Further research on the correlation between excessive W grades and retention should also be investigated.

In addition, students with a high number of withdrawals could be flagged by the Success Center for additional coaching. The Early Alert system could guide students to the assistance they need before it becomes necessary to take a W in a course.

Recommendation #6: Create an ad hoc faculty Retention and Graduation Rate Committee to monitor ongoing retention activities and student academic support services.

The committee could be comprised of approximately two elected faculty, the Coordinator of University Life, the Director of the Writing Center, the Director of the Success Center (or Tutoring Center), and the Associate Provost for Enrollment Management.

The committee would monitor implementation of the previous five recommendations and promote activities to enhance retention across campus.

Conclusion

Thank you for including faculty members in the ongoing conversation about retention at FMU. We believe that improving retention should be a campus-wide goal that involves the collective efforts of all faculty members. We would also like to assist in fostering this collaborative ethos and building these new retention initiatives on our campus.

The committee would welcome the opportunity to meet with you should you have any questions about the recommendations in this report.