



The Education Trust

REPLENISHING OPPORTUNITY IN AMERICA

The 2012 Midterm Report of Public Higher Education Systems
in the Access to Success Initiative



Florida State University Tallahassee, Florida

'GRADUATION IS EVERYONE'S RESPONSIBILITY': LESSONS FROM FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

by Jennifer Engle

Florida State University has long been recognized for providing a high-quality education to a diverse student body.¹ Located in the state capital of Tallahassee, the university enrolls more than 30,000 undergraduates, about a quarter of whom are African American (10 percent) and Hispanic (13 percent), and nearly 25 percent of whom are Pell Grant recipients.² In 2010, a series of Education Trust reports featured Florida State for boosting graduation rates of underrepresented minority students and for having consistently small or no gaps in its graduation rate.³

Nationally respected in both academics and athletics, Florida State could have chosen to pursue higher graduation rates simply by creaming the best students from across the country. As

it turns out, FSU campus leaders and staff work exceptionally hard to ensure the success of their students, particularly those from low-income and underrepresented minority backgrounds. This case study documents lessons learned from the university's retention efforts over nearly two decades.

Creating Conditions for Student Success

Since 1994, when former Provost Larry Abele and former Associate Provost Pat Haywood began these efforts in earnest, Florida State's first-year retention rate has increased nearly 10 percentage points.⁴ Overall graduation rates, meanwhile, have climbed nearly 13 points since 2000, which marks the first cohort (1994) affected by reforms. Graduation rates for underrepresented minority students have risen almost 12 percentage points since 2002, the first year disaggregated data are available.⁵

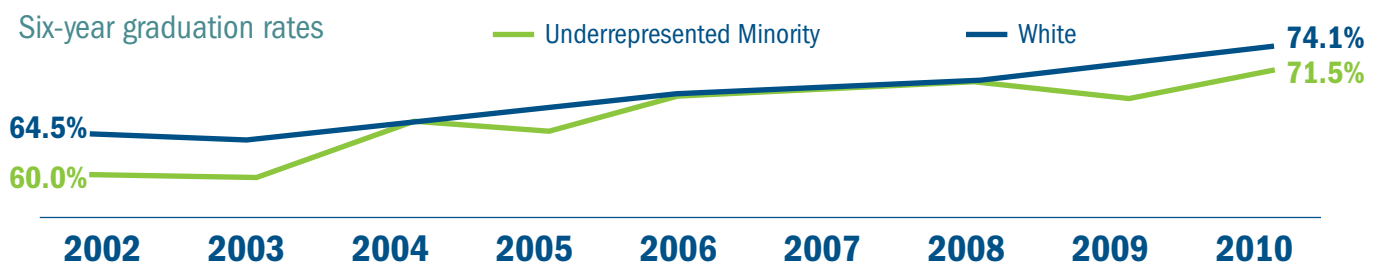
Abele posits three necessary conditions for increasing student success:

1. A person, by force of position or personality, drives the process.
2. Detailed data analysis undergirds improvements.
3. A cross-campus team meets weekly to assess progress.

The former FSU provost also argues for long-term, incremental reform. "My rule is that you have to go for five years relentlessly without blinking," Abele says. Despite FSU's eventual success, the first-year retention rate only increased by about one percentage point or less each year. In fact, the rate actually fell initially before increasing nearly every year since. "There's no silver bullet," Abele says. "You increase retention literally one student at a time."

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GRADUATION RATES INCREASE FOR ALL, WHILE GAPS REMAIN SMALL AT FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY



Source: College Results Online Note: Underrepresented minorities include African-American, Hispanic, and Native-American students.



As provost, Abele embraced retention as a top priority, but it certainly wasn't his only one. He credits the drive and determination of Associate Provost Haywood as particularly instrumental in the reform effort. Together, they institutionalized procedures and relationships that drove the process as much as they did.

Data: Mining and Minding Patterns of Performance

Under the provost's leadership, FSU effectively used data to identify patterns and potential problems, design interventions, and monitor results. They also routinely disaggregated data to target interventions to certain populations. A scientist by discipline and a self-described "data nut," Abele worked closely with the institutional research office to track student performance across campus. Despite his knowledge of statistics, he often looked at the data using nothing more than a simple spreadsheet and "common sense." As a result, campus leaders were regularly looking at the data, asking questions, and taking action.

Looking at year-to-year attrition rates, for instance, they noticed low-income students and students of color did not follow the same dropout pattern as their peers. White students at FSU experience the largest attrition rates in the first year, and progressively drop out at lower rates over time. By contrast, African-American males often post higher dropout rates in the second, third, or even fifth years. "At least initially, we threw everything into the first year and then realized you have to use your resources for the long term," Abele says.

People: Forging a Frontline Team

Florida State also assembled a strong team with representatives from across the campus that met weekly to "to go over, not the data, but the students within the data," Abele says. The team is charged with identifying roadblocks to student retention and assigning clear responsibilities to team members for removing them. Consisting of about 20 frontline people from offices including core services (admissions and financial aid), support programs (orientation and advising), and academic programs (undergraduate research and the library),



the team is chaired by the dean of undergraduate studies, currently Karen Laughlin. “The advantage of the team is that each person has a different perspective and different access to students,” Abele says, adding that meeting weekly means “you don’t go a month without knowing about a problem.” John Barnhill, vice president for enrollment at FSU, depicts the era before the team’s advent as one of isolated efforts. “We all used to do our own little thing trying to help kids,” Barnhill recalls, noting that over time the group evolved from working confrontationally to more collaboratively. Students also play a role in FSU’s retention efforts; the student body president, for example, frequently attends the weekly meetings. “If you pay attention,” says Abele, “you will see leadership emerge at all levels” to bolster retention.

The team eventually developed a series of 93 action steps tied to every month of the academic calendar. Action steps included e-mailing students whose grades dropped and meeting with students placed on probation. Each action step had a time frame and a person responsible for record-

ing and reporting student progress weekly. Advisors, in particular, were required to document every interaction with students by time of day, day of week, and method of contact. Campus leaders would review it all. “Monitoring data and responding to it can be a powerful cultural change on campus,” Abele says.

Actions: Implementing Successful Strategies

Other researchers have cited Florida State for its Center for Academic Retention & Enhancement, which recruits first-generation, low-income students and provides them with ongoing, intrusive support from entry through graduation.⁶ Founded in 2000, C.A.R.E. is integral to the campus retention strategy, particularly for underserved students, a number of whom enter less academically prepared than their peers. However, the university stresses the value of an effective support network for all students, as well as selected student groups, including the following core retention strategies.



“Monitoring data and responding to it can be a powerful cultural change on campus.”

— Larry Abele, former provost
Florida State University

VOICES FROM STUDENTS IN THE C.A.R.E. PROGRAM

“I don’t even know where I’d be, honestly, if it wasn’t for C.A.R.E.” — *African-American male junior*

“C.A.R.E. gives you those resources you need to have that confidence, whether it’s the success coach or the tutoring, so you know that you can do it. ... If you stay connected with the C.A.R.E. program, I feel there’s no way that you can fail.” — *African-American female junior*

“I’m intelligent, just like everyone else, but because I have no one [in my family] who went to college before me, I don’t know what to do. C.A.R.E. gives you that guidance and support. They don’t just throw you in the water and tell you to swim. They show you how.” — *African-American male junior*



“I’ve never seen a project fail for lack of money. I’ve seen it fail for lack of the right attitude: You have to be committed to this.”

— Larry Abele, former provost
Florida State University

Build a bridge. A robust set of first-year programs has significantly increased retention rates at FSU. These include mandatory orientation, living-learning communities, and freshman interest groups. In addition, the university offers a success course for students identified as dropout risks after their first semester, which boosts retention rates by as much as 9 percentage points. FSU also requires an intensive summer bridge program for C.A.R.E. students.

Chart a course. In 2003, FSU created an online guide that lists the courses that students need to take, term by term, for each academic major, to graduate on time. If students go “off the map,” a hold is put on their registration, forcing them to meet with advisors.

Support all along the way. FSU makes advisors a critical part of its retention strategy, carefully hiring, cross-training, and monitoring them, and deploying them where and when students need them most,

like the student center and the library on evenings and Sundays. Administrators also partnered with student government (which has a budget of \$12 million) to offer tutoring in the library five nights a week.

With the budget crunch on campuses today, some university leaders may be reluctant to invest in improving retention, but FSU administrators say they make that money back. By reducing first-year attrition rates since 1994, Abele estimates that his campus retained more than 2,000 additional students, resulting in a \$6 million gain in tuition alone. Retention programs over the same period cost about \$2.5 million, a significant return on investment for the campus and, above all, for students. “I’ve never seen a project fail for lack of money,” Abele says. “I’ve seen it fail for lack of the right attitude: You have to be committed to this.” Commitment to equity at Florida State has reaped impressive results.

1. Kevin Carey, “Graduation Rate Watch: Making Minority Student Success a Priority” (Washington, D.C.: Education Sector, 2008).

2. College Results Online (www.collegeresults.org), 2012.

3. Jennifer Engle and Christina Theokas, “Top Gainers: Some Public Four-Year Colleges and Universities Make Big Improvements in Minority Graduation Rates,” (Washington, D.C.: The Education Trust, 2010); Mamie Lynch and Jennifer Engle, “Some Colleges and Universities Do Better Than Others in Graduating African-American Students” (Washington, D.C.: The Education Trust, 2010).

4. Data provided by Florida State University.

5. College Results Online (www.collegeresults.org), 2012.

6. Carey, “Graduation Rate Watch.”



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THE ACCESS TO SUCCESS INITIATIVE

Launched in 2007, the Access to Success Initiative joins the leaders of public higher education systems in working toward two ambitious goals: increase the number of college graduates in their states and ensure those graduates more broadly represent their states’ high school graduates. Indeed, A2S leaders have pledged that by 2015 their systems will halve the gaps in college-going and completion that separate African-American, Latino, and American-Indian students from their white and Asian-American peers — and low-income students from more affluent ones. Now counting 22 member systems, 312 two-year and four-year campuses, and 3.5 million students, the A2S initiative remains the nation’s only concerted effort to help public college and university systems boost attainment.

About The Education Trust

The Education Trust promotes high academic achievement for all students at all levels — pre-kindergarten through college. We work alongside parents, educators, and community and business leaders across the country in transforming schools and colleges into institutions that serve all students well. Lessons learned in these efforts, together with unflinching data analyses, shape our state and national policy agendas. Our goal is to close the gaps in opportunity and achievement that consign far too many young people — especially those who are black, Latino, American Indian, or from low-income families — to lives on the margins of the American mainstream.

About the National Association of System Heads

The National Association of System Heads (NASH) is the association of the chief executive officers of the 52 public

college and university systems of higher education in the United States. Unique among higher education associations in its focus on systems, NASH seeks ways to leverage system capacity to meet current and future needs for higher education. NASH collaboratives, such as the partnership with The Education Trust, are voluntary, and bring together system and campus leaders interested in working together toward the common goal of improved effectiveness.

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