



The Education Trust

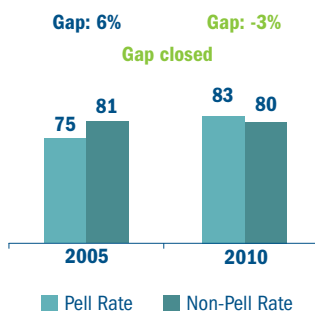
REPLENISHING OPPORTUNITY IN AMERICA

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

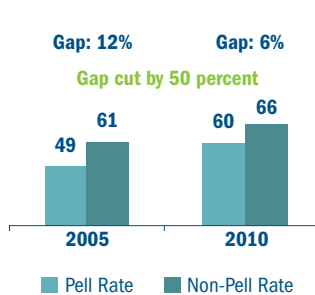
University of Wisconsin Eau Claire, Wisconsin



First-year retention rate for freshmen



Six-year graduation rate for freshmen



Source: Access to Success data set
Note: Includes full-time and part-time students

WHERE DATA DRIVE CHANGE: UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN- EAU CLAIRE

by Jennifer Engle

The University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire is one of 13 four-year campuses in the University of Wisconsin System, which takes part in the Access to Success Initiative. A comprehensive university that enrolls some 11,000 undergraduates in the state’s rural Northwest, UW–Eau Claire takes pride in its teaching mission and its focus on students.

When the A2S initiative launched, UW–Eau Claire had one of the largest graduation-rate gaps between low-income freshmen and their peers in the UW system: 12 percentage points. Yet by 2010, UW–Eau Claire had cut that gap in half to 6 points. More recent data show UW–Eau Claire retaining freshmen with Pell Grants to their second year at slightly higher levels than their peers (83, compared with 80 percent).¹ This near parity augurs a hopeful development: UW–Eau Claire could

entirely close the graduation-rate gap with this cohort.

System and campus leaders take pride in the progress UW–Eau Claire has made, and look forward to more positive news in the future. Under the mantle of the UW System’s More Graduates plan, UW–Eau Claire administrators have made a concerted effort to continue their improvement through the strategic use of data. Some of these efforts are too recent to account for past performance, but the sense of purpose and commitment shown by campus leaders suggests that UW–Eau Claire is well-positioned to reach its goals.

Building A Strategy For Change Through Data Analysis

When the UW System asked campuses to develop plans to reach the More Graduates goals, leaders at UW–Eau Claire turned first to their data. Examining their historical trends, the provost determined the university could not produce more graduates by admitting more students, particularly given budgetary and physical campus constraints. “We can’t bring more of them [students] in,” says Provost Patricia Kleine. “We have to focus on helping more of them finish.”

What’s more, UW–Eau Claire faces the challenge of helping a larger percentage of its students finish their degrees on time.

“Faculty [here] are exceptionally devoted to teaching. They take serving their students seriously. When we showed them the data that they weren’t serving their students well, it bothered them.”

— Patricia Kleine, provost and vice chancellor,
University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire

Jennifer Engle is director of higher education research and policy at The Education Trust.



While UW–Eau Claire’s six-year graduation rate (65 percent) stands well above the national average, its four-year rate (26 percent) puts the campus at the bottom of its peers nationally.²

Kleine and her staff delved into the data to understand why some of their students succeed, and others don’t. Using predictive modeling, they identified which factors correlated with students completing degrees at UW–Eau Claire. “But,” as Kleine says, “we didn’t look through a deficit-model lens,” which might explain or excuse low completion rates by students’ demographic or academic backgrounds. Instead, she says, “We looked at the factors we could influence.” These potential levers of change include the number of credits that students successfully attempt and complete each semester.

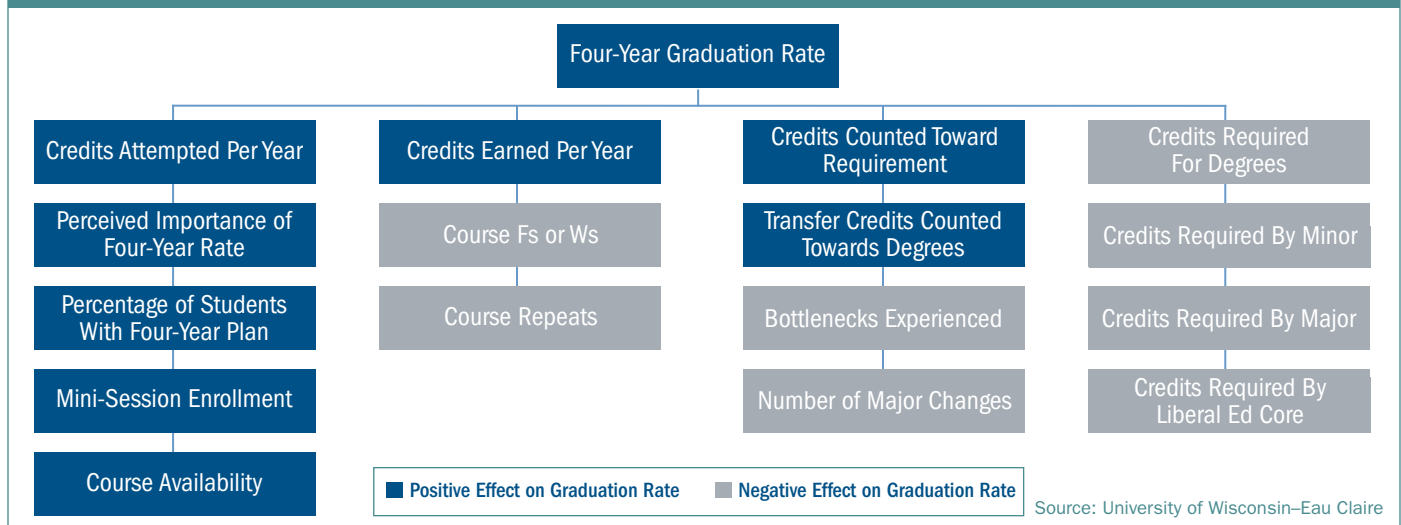
In its analysis, UW–Eau Claire identified leading indicators or milestones that, if achieved, had a high impact on whether students completed college in four years, but that low percentages of students were reaching. For instance, students earning 60 credits in the first two years were nearly

four times more likely to graduate on time than those who did not, yet only about 30 percent of students were doing so. Additionally, Kleine and her staff mapped these indicators to better understand students’ pathways to a four-year degree. This process helped them target their intervention strategies, such as providing support to students in courses with high failure, repeat, and withdrawal rates. UW–Eau Claire also worked to make bottleneck courses more readily available and to increase the use of four-year graduation plans.

Engaging Campus Culture to Support Student Success

While data convinced top administrators at UW–Eau Claire of the need for improvement, it failed to persuade others on campus, at least at first. Initially, a new focus on increasing efficiency and cost-effectiveness by improving the four-year graduation rate did not resonate with faculty and deans. “It wasn’t the culture of the institution for students to graduate in four years,” explains Kleine. Furthermore, the push to increase the number of graduates while decreasing time to degree raised concerns about “quantity versus quality,” she says.

PATHWAY ANALYSIS IDENTIFYING ROADBLOCKS TO GRADUATION AT UW–EAU CLAIRE



To address these concerns, Kleine used data to show that students who participated in “high-impact practices,” such as internships, undergraduate research, and study abroad, were actually more likely to graduate in four years. Indeed, these practices disproportionately helped low-income students, first-generation students, and students of color. What’s more, UW–Eau Claire faculty members already see the value of these practices. “If we can increase the number of students with those quality experiences, equity and quantity will result,” Vice Provost Michael Wick says. “Equity and quantity, through quality.”

Making Higher Success Rates A Shared Responsibility

To help deans and faculty engage with data, Kleine and her staff created an online data repository that lets each department interact with retention and graduation figures for students in their courses and majors. The repository allows users to look at current performance by subgroups, track trends over time, and compare results against other departments across campus. The repository has greatly increased use of data by departments, according to Kleine.

“We had been giving them [paper-based] reports for some time, but the repository made it more useful,” she says.

While the online format certainly helped generate support for data use among deans and faculty, it also helped that administrators provided figures on student success without prescribing solutions. “We give them the data, but we don’t tell them what’s good and bad about it,” Kleine explains. “We’re not telling them where the problem is; they identify the problem and we encourage them to solve the problem.” In this way, UW–Eau Claire administrators delegate much of the day-to-day leadership for improving success rates to faculty and deans. “If you let them come up with the solution, they will come up with much better solutions than we would,” Kleine says.

Supporting Innovation and Accountability

Although campus leaders at UW–Eau Claire entrust the faculty and staff with boosting student retention, they do not leave the success of these initiatives to chance. Building on their strategic planning and their robust data analyses,



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— Patricia Kleine, provost
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administrators have developed a set of key performance indicators (KPIs), to track how well each department is contributing to UW–Eau Claire’s More Graduates plan to increase four-year graduation rates — while narrowing achievement gaps.

Conclusion

The University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire clearly shows how the power of data can inform and ignite efforts to boost retention and completion on college campuses. UW–Eau Claire’s top leaders employ several key strategies for effective use of data:

- Conduct robust analyses to identify factors that affect whether students are succeeding, with emphasis on factors campus leaders can influence by changing institutional policy or practice (for example, student course-taking patterns).
- Map student course-taking pathways to a degree, in order to identify and remove roadblocks to graduation. This includes

improving gatekeeper courses, removing bottlenecks to course availability, and reducing excessive credit requirements.

- Help faculty and staff engage with data through user-friendly repositories that allow them to look at performance for all students and by subgroups, track trends over time, and make cross-campus comparisons.
- Spur innovation by providing funds to departments for retention programs, but tie the release of future funds to improvement on key data indicators aligned with the goal of increasing graduation rates and decreasing gaps.

With its proactive use of data, UW–Eau Claire is poised to reach its attainment goals by building on its past progress in student retention.

1. Education Trust analysis of the Access to Success data set

2. The Education Trust’s College Results Online (www.collegeresults.org), 2012.



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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.

Acknowledgment

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ACCESS
TO **SUCCESS**

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