

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Improving Our Graduation Rates

The Report of the Graduation
and Retention Subcommittee of
the Council of Undergraduate
Deans

Twin Cities Campus
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Overview

The University of Minnesota-Twin Cities has five- and six-year graduation rates that lag substantially behind those of other public research universities that we consider our peers. While graduation rates have improved in recent years, our six-year graduation rate, at 51%, is among the lowest in the Big Ten and (according to *U.S. News and World Report*) the lowest among the 50 top-ranked public universities.

While we have known for many years that our graduation rates are low, and while graduation rates have been a concern to the University, we have not focused on comprehensive and systematic efforts to improve our graduation rates. We have often excused the situation by saying that our graduation rates were low because we were an urban institution, because our students have to work more than other students, or because of a host of other reasons. This report examines all of those reasons and argues that none is sufficient to explain why our graduation rates trail those of comparable institutions.

We argue in this report that the University must make a conscious, focused effort to address this problem, for the sake of both the students and the institution. We make recommendations in four major categories: communicating clear and explicit institutional expectations, making a commitment to help students stay on track, removing institutional barriers and providing incentives for success, and balancing access with success. Each of these areas has specific suggestions that will need further discussion by various University policy groups and other members of the University community.

While we believe that our recommendations are an important starting point, we also want to challenge others to bring forward additional suggestions. Student success, measured in terms of timely graduation, needs to be a shared priority. We need the commitment and ideas of faculty, staff, and students to move us forward on this important agenda.

Background

In December of 2000, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education Craig Swan asked Gerald Rinehart, Assistant Dean of Carlson School of Management and Chair of the Twin Cities Council of Undergraduate Deans (CUD)^{*}, to appoint a subcommittee of CUD to work on retention and graduation issues on the Twin Cities campus. The Subcommittee was co-chaired by Rinehart and Swan, and included members suggested by representatives from CUD. The list of committee members is included as [Appendix 1](#).

The appointment letter to the committee included the following observation and charge:

Through hard work in all colleges we have made significant improvements, especially in graduation rates. At the same time there is still a significant distance to go before we are in the company of colleges and universities where we think we belong. I am concerned that we not rest on our laurels, but rather be sure that we are doing everything we can to help students succeed through graduation. Retention is a prerequisite to graduation.

I am asking the subcommittee to come forward with specific and practical recommendations of action steps that will enhance retention and graduation. In order to improve graduation rates we first have to retain students. Are there things that we should be doing to would help improve retention?

The committee met first on January 25, and continued to meet regularly through spring semester. A preliminary draft outline of this report was presented to CUD in June for discussion and comment.

This report has two functions: to clarify why the members of CUD are concerned about retention and graduation at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, and to present an array of possible approaches to address this problem. We recommend the immediate implementation of some of these possible solutions, and offer others for further consideration in various other committees and policy-making groups. We hope that this report will spark discussion throughout the campus, and will lead to greater awareness of the issues we are facing and the options available for addressing these issues. We also hope that other ideas for additional action items will be suggested as part of these discussions.

^{*} The Council of Undergraduate Deans is a group of associate/assistant deans who have responsibility for undergraduate education in their respective colleges. It meets monthly to discuss issues of common concern across colleges, and quarterly via ITV with counterparts at the other campuses. The Council has no formal statutory authority and works largely by consensus.

PART ONE: Graduation and Retention Information

Defining the Issue

Under President Yudof's leadership, the University has made important progress in building programs to support and encourage student retention and graduation. Building on the Undergraduate Initiative of the early 90s, we have worked together to create a variety of freshman year experiences (e.g., New Student Convocation, freshman seminars, living-learning communities) that have improved freshman year retention and satisfaction. Nonetheless, the University's retention and five- or six-year graduation rates lag far behind those of our peers. [Table 1](#) shows comparative graduation and retention rates for other public Big Ten campuses, as well as for selected other public universities. Not only does the University of Minnesota have the lowest five-year graduation rate in the Big Ten, it ranks 50th—dead last—in six-year graduation rates among the top 50 national public universities (*U.S. News and World Report*, September 2000).

As many studies have shown, graduation rates are affected by many “input” factors, including the quality of the admitted student body. We know that because of its commitment to access, the University of Minnesota admits a larger number of students who are less qualified by traditional measures than is the case in many of our peer institutions. But various statistical models have been developed that look at an institution's **predicted** graduation rate based on the test scores of its incoming students and controlled for institutional spending. *U.S. News and World Report's* data for the top 50 public universities shows Minnesota's actual graduation rates below its predicted rate after controlling for the quality of the incoming class as measured by average high school rank and the proportion of part-time students (*U.S. News and World Report*, September 2000). Only 11 of the top 50 publics underperform their predicted graduation rate, and Minnesota is the only Big 10 institution in that group. For ^a

^a In August, 2001, the University of Minnesota issued updated graduation and retention statistics based on a standard methodology used nationwide in IPEDS reporting. We are now using a standard cohort (“first time/full time”) that is more comparable with other institutions. This new methodology shows a small increase in graduation rates over the figures used by the committee in the creation of this report (for example, six year graduation rates are 53% under this methodology), but the revised figures do not change the basic trends and comparisons included in this report. See [Appendix 6](#) for information on the methodology change and on updated graduation and retention statistics.

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TABLE 1 Graduation and Retention Rates for Big Ten and Selected Other Public Institutions							
<i>All Undergraduates (* indicates value is for degree-seeking students)</i>	<i>* Age 25 or Older</i>	<i>Part- time</i>	<i>* Live Off- Campus</i>	<i>* 1st Year Retention</i>	<i>* 4-Year Graduation Rate</i>	<i>* 5-Year Graduation Rate</i>	<i>6-Year Graduation Rate</i>
Univ Minnesota-Twin Cities	14%	16%	81%	83%	24%	42%	51%
Big 10 Publics							
Indiana Univ	5%	9%	55%	86%	41%	62%	66%
Michigan State Univ	6%	13%	56%	86%	24%	57%	66%
Ohio State Univ	14%	15%	78%	79%	19%	49%	56%
Penn State Univ-Main Campus	5%	6%	64%	93%	60%	78%	80%
Purdue Univ-Main Campus	6%	7%	57%	87%	28%	59%	67%
Univ of Illinois-Urbana	2%	3%	67%	92%	49%	72%	78%
Univ of Iowa	11%	13%	71%	83%	33%	59%	64%
Univ of Michigan-Ann Arbor	4%	6%	63%	94%	62%	81%	84%
Univ Wisconsin-Madison	7%	11%	76%	91%	35%	67%	73%
Other Top 30: Public							
Cornell Univ	2%	na	45%	95%	81%	89%	90%
SUNY at Stony Brook	15%	10%	49%	83%	32%	50%	54%
Univ of Calif-Berkeley	8%	7%	62%	95%	48%	77%	81%
Univ of Calif-Los Angeles	9%	5%	70%	95%	38%	73%	79%
Univ of Calif-San Diego	6%	2%	67%	93%	45%	74%	78%
Univ of Calif-Santa Barbara	6%	4%	76%	87%	41%	65%	70%
Univ of NC-Chapel Hill	5%	6%	60%	94%	62%	78%	83%
Univ of Texas at Austin	9%	13%	85%	88%	30%	59%	65%
Univ of Washington	17%	16%	83%	90%	37%	63%	69%
Top 30 Privates (average)	1%	5%	27%	95%	78%	87%	

example, Purdue's predicted six-year graduation rate is identical to ours—55%. But their actual six-year rate is 64%, while ours is 51%. See [Appendix 2](#) for more information on these rankings.

The *U.S. News and World Report* data also show that even our freshman retention rates, which have improved dramatically, are still near the bottom of the Big Ten, with only Iowa and Ohio State lagging behind. And our current freshman retention rates (84%), do not presage a dramatic long-term increase in our four-, five-, and six-year graduation rates. Timely graduation depends upon retention, average credit loads and how those courses meet degree requirements. Over the course of 4-5 years, small differences in retention make a large difference in overall graduation rate:

80 percent retention and full load = 41.0% 4 year grad rate

83 percent retention and full load = 47.5% 4 year grad rate

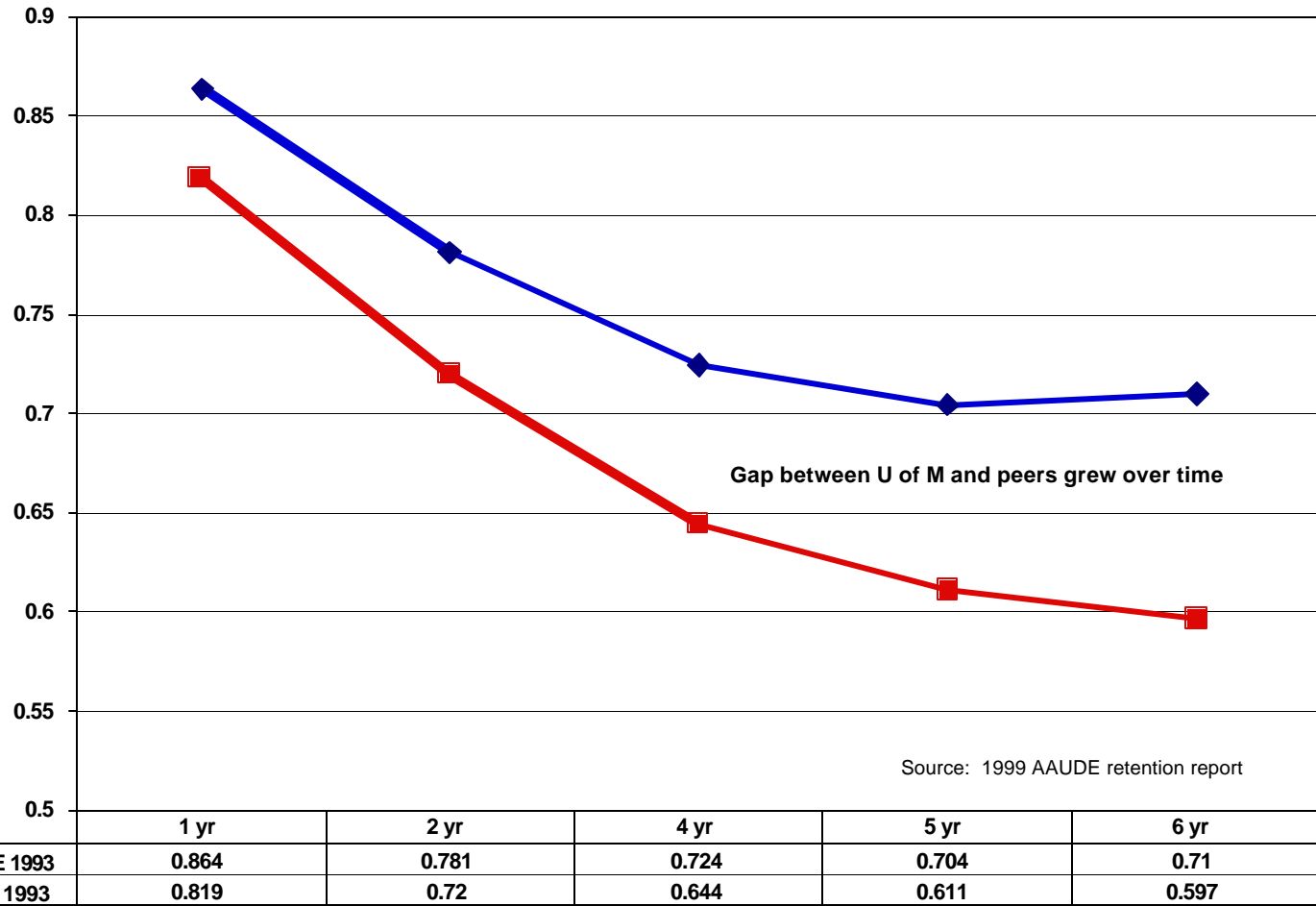
90 percent retention and full load = 65.6% 4 year grad rate

While all institutions, Minnesota included, have the highest rates of attrition from the freshman to sophomore year, The University of Minnesota-Twin Cities has a higher-than-average attrition in the junior and senior years, a time when most other institutions are at a more steady state. [Graph 1](#) shows the University's retention rates graphed against those of other AAUDE institutions (institutions participating in the Association of American Universities Data Exchange).^{*} While we start slightly lower, the differences continue to increase, becoming dramatic in the fifth and sixth years when other institutions level off or even (in the sixth year) increase their rates.

It is not within the scope of this report to look at factors related specifically to retention and graduation of students of color, but we do want to note that, as is the case in most institutions, our graduation rates for African-American, Chicano-Latino, and American Indian students lag behind the average for all students, and behind the rates for Asian-Americans and white students. This is one of many topics that merits continuing attention and effort. However, we believe that the issues raised in this report affect all students, including students of color, and that the recommendations included in this report will help all students. See [Appendix 3](#) for more information on graduation and retention rates by ethnic group and by college.

^{*} The AAU is a group of 62 research universities. Participants in the AAUDE tend to be the public university members.

**Success Rates (Continuing + Graduated) of 1993 New Freshman Cohort
U of M vs. AAUDE average**



Source: 1999 AAUDE retention report

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^aWhy Do We See Low Graduation and Retention Rates as a Problem?

As the committee pursued its charge, members of the committee were encouraged to discuss retention and graduation with faculty, staff and students in their colleges or offices. To the surprise of most members of the committee (who felt that it was self-evident why our retention and graduation rates need attention), reports came back to the committee of people in the university community who did not define our low graduation rates as a problem. “Why shouldn’t students take as long as they want?” they asked. “As long as they get an education, isn’t that what matters?” The committee felt that it was important that we address this question directly, rather than assuming the “self-evident” response. We reviewed a variety of studies and data, and we offer four important categories of reasons to support our assertion that the current low retention and graduation rates are an important issue that requires serious and concerted attention.

Academic/social reasons for students

Students come here not just to take courses and to accumulate credits, but to complete a degree. When Admissions officials talk with prospective students and their parents, discussions often focus on majors, graduation, and post-graduate opportunities. Not only do students expect to complete a degree, but when they arrive both they and their parents (in the case of traditional-age students) also articulate expectations that they will be done in four years. A nationwide longitudinal study (CIRP), in which the University participates every other year, asks incoming freshmen how long they expect to take to get their degrees. In the latest CIRP study (1999), 77.6% of our entering freshmen said that they expected to complete their U of M degree in 4 years or less (Higher Education Research Institute, 1999).

There is also ample evidence, at the University and at many other institutions, to suggest that students who complete their studies in a more timely way (4-5 years) have more intensity in their academic experience, more involvement with the institution, and greater satisfaction with their educational experiences. Study after study has shown that retention (and ultimately graduation) is positively correlated with both student-student and student-faculty interaction. Alexander Astin, in *What Matters in College?*, notes: “practically all the involvement variables showing positive associations with retention suggest high involvement with faculty, with fellow students, or with academic work” (Astin, 1993). A recent study by the Campus Involvement Center showed that the activities “most influential in creating a feeling of community were attending class, interacting with faculty and other students in the classroom, interacting with classmates outside of the class on projects/assignments, and socializing with classmates outside of class” (Gormley, 2001). This clearly supports the notion that more intense involvement with academics leads to a greater sense of involvement in the university, and hence a greater likelihood of satisfaction and degree completion. Similarly, there are negative correlations for working too many hours (more on this later), working off-campus, and commuting.

Another issue is that we are losing students after we, and they, have invested substantial time and money in their education. When we looked at the population of students who were registered in spring 2000 but not again in the next year, there were more than 1500 students with a GPA of 2.0 or better who had stopped out or dropped out: Of these, 200 had completed 120 credits, which is the number of credits required for most degree programs. And many of the “missing” students had been very successful academically: Fully one third (560) had completed at least 30 credits with a GPA of 3.0 or better. It appears that we are losing successful students, some of them late in their college careers.

The most critical finding in the literature is that students who take longer—and especially students who stop out for one term or more—are much less likely to complete a degree.

Research completed by Stephen DesJardins at the University of Minnesota, as well as national research (Adelman, 1999) shows that stopping out for even a term raises the risk of non-completion. In fact, Adelman notes that continuous enrollment is the single most important behavioral predictor of ultimate attainment of a baccalaureate degree. And DesJardins showed that the longer you take to complete the degree, the less likely you are to complete it (DesJardins, 2001).

Financial costs to students

Because we charge tuition by the credit, there is a tendency for students to think of the cost of college as “the same” whether they take 10 credits or 16 a term. The former is simply spread over a longer period of time. But there are many costs that are not taken into consideration in this kind of equation. First, there are the direct, out-of-pocket costs above and beyond tuition. Student fees now run more than \$250 per semester, and must be paid by anyone enrolled for 6 credits or more. A student who takes 12 semesters to graduate rather than 8 pays an additional \$1000 in student services fees alone. Technology fees are charged each semester to students with more than six credits. In addition, there are expenses such as driving and parking, and other small costs of being a student. And all these charges, along with tuition and fees, inevitably increase over time. The longer a student takes to graduate, the more each term will cost.

Second, beginning in 1999, the University’s tuition structure was changed to provide a substantial price break (half-price) for each credit more than 12 that a student enrolls in each semester. A student who takes 15-16 credits a term and graduates in four years saves 10% in tuition compared with a student who takes 12 credits a term and graduates in five years. At current tuition rates this savings amounts to \$2160.

Third, there are important opportunity costs to taking longer to graduate. Students who take longer sacrifice lifetime earning potential by entering the job market later and thus being a year or two behind in their lifetime career path. More importantly, students who do not graduate at all do not benefit from the degree effect on lifetime earnings. Each year in college increases incomes on average over high school grads. Graduating adds an addition 10% to

20% premium. Economists estimate that baccalaureate degree holders earn a lifetime average of around \$900,000 more than high school graduates. So if the completion of the degree, as opposed to years of education, adds 10% to 20%, then the effect on lifetime earnings of the baccalaureate degree (as opposed to simply accumulating the same number of credits and not graduating) is about \$90,000 to \$180,000 (Park, 1999).

Financial costs to the institution

Many people reason that because students still need to take the same classes, whether for four years or seven, the cost to the institution is the same. But in fact, a student who is taking 12 credits a semester often uses as many university resources, *other than classes*, as a student who is taking 16 credits. That student still meets with an advisor, talks to a librarian, needs study space, participates in intramural sports, talks to a financial aid counselor, goes to the writing lab, uses e-mail, and registers for classes. Although the cost of each transaction may be small, the aggregate costs to the institution of providing good service are significant. It is important that we, as a public institution, act as responsibly as possible in trying to minimize those costs.

The University’s reputation and ranking

While we might deplore the attention given to national rankings, they are a fact of life in higher education. Parents and students are consulting the rankings in ever greater numbers when making college choices. Most national rankings put significant weight on graduation rates, and ours always pull us down. For example, 20% of *U.S. News and World Report's* rankings are based on six-year graduation rates and freshman retention rates. Because people pay attention to such rankings, they affect college choice, especially among the best students, who have more college options. If they don't think an institution is competitive, they will vote with their feet and go elsewhere.

The loss of good students is obviously a concern for the institution, but it ought to be of concern to the students as well. Students who are admitted to the University of Minnesota want their degree to come from an institution with the best possible national ranking. Institutional ranking and reputation have an effect on graduate school admission and on hiring decisions. Also, the quality of the student body contributes to the quality of the education the institution can provide. When students are well-prepared and intellectually engaged, classes are more interesting for both students and faculty. It is in the best interests of both the institution and the students if our graduation rates, and hence our rankings, are improved.

Why Are Our Graduation Rates So Low?

For years, we have known that our graduation rates were low but have accepted the status quo because we assumed that the factors leading to this low graduation rate were beyond our control. People spoke about the fact that we were in an urban setting, that our students have to work more, that our students commute, that our students are simply busy doing interesting things, or even that the Midwest is “different.” The committee examined each of these assumptions and found substantial cause to question each of them as a defining and insurmountable factor in our low graduation rates.

Assumptions

Assumption 1: The “urban factor.” Urban institutions offer a challenge because there are more distractions for students (including easy accessibility to a wide range of jobs), more complexities of attending college, and more people living at home and/or commuting. But when we look at the urban location *per se*, it becomes clear that other urban research universities face the same issues, but nevertheless maintain a much better graduation rate. The committee reviewed statistical work that tried to explain variation in graduation rates across institutions and explicitly included an “urban factor.” The urban variable was never statistically significant. Two examples will help to make this clearer. UCLA has an 80% graduation rate (although their students admittedly have a considerably higher admissions profile). But the urban institution with which we have the most in common, both demographically and culturally, is the University of Washington. Their students are fairly similar to ours in admissions profile, they have a similar percent of part-time students (16%), a similar percent of students living off-campus (around 80%)—but 6-year graduation rates at the University of Washington are 72%. Ours are 51%. (See also [Appendix 3](#).)

Assumption 2: The “Midwest factor.” It is sometimes alleged that students from the Midwest are more independent, more likely to combine work and school, less likely to be supported by their parents, and that this accounts for our students taking longer. But all the other major midwestern research universities—including Iowa, Wisconsin, Iowa State, Indiana, Purdue, and Illinois—outperform us in terms of graduation rates.

Assumption 3: “Commuter campus.” It is true that many of our students live off-campus: we have the highest percentage of students living off-campus of any school in the Big Ten (81%), though Ohio State (also in an urban area) comes close with 78%, and Wisconsin has 76%. But the University of Texas at Austin and the University of Washington in Seattle both have proportionally more students living off-campus, yet they also have much higher five-year graduation rates (59% and 63% respectively, compared with our 42%). And we are less a “commuter campus” than the phrase “off campus” suggests: 77% of our freshmen now live in residence halls, and many other students, although technically living off-campus, live within walking distance of campus. In recent survey, about 60% of students reported that they lived within 3 miles of campus, and nearly the same percent indicated they did not consider themselves commuter students (Harrold, 2001). In the last 20 years, there has been a dramatic decline in the percentage of students who consider themselves commuter students—from 58% in 1981 to 42% in 2001.

Assumption 4: “Doing interesting things.” The theory is that if students participate in wonderful opportunities like study abroad, research opportunities, or internships, they will necessarily take longer to graduate. First of all, this isn’t necessarily the case—students in other public and private colleges and universities do all these things and still graduate in four years. And secondly, even if it were true, that would mean that we would see a higher graduation rate at five, six, or even seven years. But our graduation/retention rates do not catch up with other institutions at these points.

Assumption 5: Work. Work is an extraordinarily complex issue, and one that the committee has not had the opportunity to study thoroughly. (The issue of work as a risk factor in completing degrees is discussed in more depth below.) There is conflicting evidence about whether our students work more than students at other public four-year institutions. The CIRP survey cited above asks students about both their work hours in high school, and their work plans while in college. More Minnesota students said they worked 11-20 hours a week in high school (40%) than the national average for public institutions (31%). And more Minnesota students say that they will get a job to help pay for college (57%) than students in other public universities (39%). In addition, U of M students are more concerned than others about financing their education (only 27% of UM students reported that they had “no concerns,” compared with 35.5% in public institutions nationally). But in the same study, our students report levels of parental income similar to the national norms, so if our students do work more, it is not yet clear why. Do they actually get less financial support from parents than other students, or do they make lifestyle choices that require more work?

It should also be noted that students everywhere are working more. In a study published in 1998 using national data from students who began college in 1989, 67% of students attending public four-year colleges worked, for an average of 26 hours per week among those who did work (Cuccaro-Alamin, Choy, and Carroll, 1998). In the Student Interest Survey just completed, 25% of University of Minnesota students said they did not work, around 50% said they worked off campus, about 21% worked on campus, and 4% worked both on and off campus. The average hours worked for students who did work was 19.6, which is actually less than the national average reported above. Students who worked off-campus averaged almost 23 hours per week, while students who worked on campus averaged 13 hours per week (Harrold, 2001). So we do not have conclusive evidence that our students actually work more than they do at other schools. It would be very helpful to supplement this information with a more detailed study on the extent to which our students are different from other research institutions with regard to amount of time actually worked, and reasons for work.

Factors Identified by the Committee

The five assumptions described above each reflect the university environment, but we believe that even in the aggregate they cannot fully account for the substantial difference in graduation rates between the University of Minnesota and its peer institutions. What other factors can we identify that might help us make decisions about how to improve our graduation rates?

Committee members repeatedly observed that “something happens” after students begin school here to change their attitudes about making progress toward a degree. Of the Minnesota students in the CIRP survey, 83% say they expect to register for 15 credits or more each term. Yet only about 40% do. Similarly, more than 40% of students sign up for the [Four-Year Graduation Guarantee](#), but only 25% have been graduating in four years. Clearly, students’ stated expectations cannot be a guide to actual behavior. It is natural for people to overstate their expectations, but why do we fall so short? Defining this amorphous but very real “something” became a major task for the committee. Our analysis suggests that this phenomenon has four components.

Lack of clear and explicit institutional expectations. For many years, we as an institution did not articulate an explicit expectation that students should or could graduate in four (or five) years. We assumed (and many people still assume) that the length of time students take is their private business, that since they are paying, they should be able to do what they want, and that there is no institutional interest in creating different expectations. As explained above, however, this overlooks many costs to both the student and the institution, including the very large cost to students of not finishing at all. Our lack of clear institutional expectations led to a set of institutional policies that were rather *laissez-faire* in requiring students to meet certain expectations. One example of this is that until 1999, we did not require students to declare a major by a certain point in their degree program, and consequently we found some students with 150 quarter credits and no major. Now we ask students to declare a major by the semester in which they complete 60 semester credits.

Another small example of a failure to communicate expectations is that we did not consistently offer clear road-maps to help students understand what they had to do to finish in four years. Nor we did not make any effort to create a sense of class identification (e.g., “class of 2002”). Now we begin with New Student Convocation and give students a sense of expectations about their graduation date, as well as providing advisers and students with better information about what students need to do to graduate in four years. As part of the [Four Year Graduation Guarantee](#) and in conjunction with the change from quarters to semesters, all majors have developed [four year plans](#) showing students a sequence of courses that will lead to graduation in four years. At the same time, it is less clear that this information is well known to students or a regular part of advising sessions.

At Minnesota, we have consistently created policies that allowed maximum flexibility and maximum choice for students. But maximum flexibility when combined with minimum expectations can be a recipe for lackluster performance. While we want to maintain flexibility and allow for individual student needs, we have learned that it is not effective to create policies that will allow for every possible permutation of student circumstances. We need to state our expectations, support those expectations with policies, and create a reasonable system of appeals to handle the exceptions.

Our inability or unwillingness to create expectations for students has led to a culture in which students do not meet the same kinds of standards that students in other institutions meet. For example, our students simply take fewer credits than students in many similar institutions take. At the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the average is 13.9 credits per semester, and U of M it’s 13.04. This seems like a minimal difference, but it means that 20% of our students would have to take one more 4 credit course per semester to come up to Wisconsin’s rate. This would be a dramatic shift in student behavior, and it is not something that will happen without clear communication and a change of institutional culture.

The lack of the machinery and the commitment to help students stay on track. As we discussed ways to deal with the “non-graduation culture” on campus, it became clear that we lack mechanisms to sense when a student is off track toward graduation and to intervene in a timely way. We do not have in place enough early warning mechanisms to identify students in academic trouble, or to identify students who have missed out on crucial “checkpoint” courses, or students who have simply drifted away from a credit load and attendance pattern that will keep them progressing toward a degree. Our peer institutions with higher graduation rates all have more of these mechanisms. Furthermore, we sense that the lack of such mechanisms reflects a lack of institutional commitment to seeing students through to the successful completion of their studies. We believe that some advisers and faculty do not see their jobs as entailing any responsibility for student graduation.

Institutional barriers and institutional incentives. Because we are a highly complex and highly decentralized institution, it is difficult to look over students’ shoulders and understand all the policies and requirements that students need to meet. Students have not only course requirements and deadlines, but also college policies, financial aid policies, institutional policies, and a host of other complexities to address. Each one may be highly reasonable in itself, but the overall effect may be conflicting messages to students and real barriers to progress. We need to be highly vigilant about an array of barriers that the institution may inadvertently put in students’ ways. With the active cooperation of CUD and the guidance of SCEP, we made a giant step forward in 1999 in developing a set of common policies that cut across colleges and that eliminate some of the complexity of different standards and policies in different colleges (for example, differences in how probation is defined). We must continue to identify and eliminate those barriers that have minimal educational value but frustrate and defeat students.

We also need to take a further look at how our policy actions and institutional incentives align with our expectations. The “half-price-over 12 credits” policy is a good example of how policy can be realigned to provide incentives that support expectations.

Access as a historical value. The University of Minnesota has traditionally been a critical point of access to higher education for students who could not otherwise get a college education. There was a time—70 years ago—when the U was the major public educational option for most students in Minnesota. However, with the development of the MnSCU system over the last 30 years, access to higher education is now much more widely available. But the citizens of the state of Minnesota, and the legislature, continue to see access to the University as an important value, if not an entitlement. This creates a dichotomous identity for the University. On the one hand, we want to be among the very best public institutions, so that we can effectively serve the best students and assure that they don’t have to leave the state to get a great education. At the same time, we want to provide a path that will allow students to come to the U and prove themselves, even if they have not done well in their prior education. That path into the University is provided by General College, which is the major point of access to the U for underprepared or at-risk students. It is part of the Minnesota story to provide a second chance and to allow people to try, and the President has affirmed the importance of General College in meeting this goal. But as General College has grown, we cannot ignore the fact that one-sixth of our entering freshmen now come in through GC, which means that one student in six who begins at the University did not meet the admission requirements expected by the other colleges. And for whatever reason, the fact is that these high-risk students have historically had six-year graduation rates under 25%. It is difficult to raise the institutional graduation rate with when a large cadre of students admitted as freshmen are graduating at such a low rate.

Why Do Students Leave?

The committee determined at its first meeting that we needed more information to understand why students do not complete degrees at the University. Ron Matross and Ron Huesman, University staff members and members of the committee, undertook a study that used both a record analysis and a phone survey to look at characteristics and attitudes of students who had been registered in spring 2000 but did not register again in either fall 2000 or spring 2001. A full copy of the report, describing methodology and detailed results, is included as [Appendix 4](#).

Around 300 students were eventually contacted in the phone survey (26.2% of the original sample of 1153). Based on one question about whether students intended to return to the university at some time, Matross and Huesman divided respondents into two groups: dropouts and stopouts. The latter were students who expressed some intention of coming back to the University. The stopouts comprised 58% of the sample and the dropouts (those with no intention of returning) 42%. Not surprisingly, dropouts tended to be predominantly freshmen and sophomores, while stopouts were predominantly juniors and seniors. The majority of dropouts (56%) were now enrolled in another institution, while the majority of stopouts (71%) were employed.

Respondents were asked their reasons for leaving, both in a free answer format and as a response to a list of possible reasons. Matross and Huesman provide a detailed analysis of these responses, but they also present the following cogent summary and discussion, which we quote almost in its entirety:

In particular, we learned that Minnesota dropouts and stopouts score high on many of the known dropout risk factors: They tend to work heavily, live off campus, not be involved in campus activities, and receive little financial support. Within this general pattern, we can discern three broad subgroups each of whom requires a package of interventions:

The underperformers. Some students are unable to cope with their college work and find themselves candidates for academic dismissal or leave of their own accord. They tend to encounter trouble early and often, in numbers beyond what would be expected from their academic records. With the exception of some high risk students in General College, the University generally admits students whose previous academic records should allow them to succeed academically.

The survey excluded those in academic trouble, but it is likely that the reasons for individual academic failure are diverse, ranging from inadequate high school preparation to poor study habits to personal problems. While we should try to identify at risk students before they enter, it may be most fruitful for the University to develop early warning systems for identifying students in trouble and intervening with them. Mid-term grades and alerts, and study skills classes are two such interventions

The disenchanted. Another group of students leave because they are dissatisfied with something about the University's programs and environment. The survey found that the dropout group was heavily populated with such students. When they go, they are gone for good, and search for a different college. These students cite as their primary reasons for leaving problems with course availability, inadequate advising, and an unfriendly environment. They tend to be younger and more traditional in their approach to college. Compared to stopouts they are more likely to live on campus, receive parental support, and work less, and be involved in campus activities. (Compared to students in general, however, they are less likely to be live on campus and be involved in campus activities.)

It is with this group that the University has probably made the most headway in improving retention. Initiatives like the Freshman Experience program, freshman seminars, improved course access, and living-learning communities have appeared to have increased the satisfaction of students and improved freshman-to-sophomore retention. There is more to be done, though, to further reduce the number of disenchanting dropouts. Noteworthy in this regard is the finding that 40% of the dropouts were sophomores. The transition to an upper-division major may be a particular source of problems, deserving of special scrutiny and intervention.

The drop-ins. Perhaps the most difficult group for whom to shape interventions is the large stopout group. These students don't cleanly dropout the way the disenchanting students do. It is more like they "drop in" to college, while they center their lives in the workplace. They are not unhappy with the University; they just don't make it a primary focus of their lives. These students work long hours, commute to campus, take lighter credit loads, pay their own college expenses and have little involvement in college activities. They leave, intending to come back, primarily because of the demands of their jobs and their perceived need to earn money.

By most accounts, Minnesota has a larger drop-in student population than nearly all other major research universities. It can be argued that their style of attendance should not be a concern. Students who center their lives in the workplace may be learning valuable career skills, as well as holding down their levels of loan debt. As long as they earn their degrees, they may be better off in the long run than students who earn their degree in four years but incur a large amount of loan debt. The problem is that too many of the drop-ins don't earn their degrees.

The discussion of "drop-ins" continues with some very important observations about institutional choices in how we attempt to work with these students. Basically, the choice Matross envisions relates to the character of the institution—we describe the University as an "urban research institution," but the question is whether we want to put more emphasis on the "urban" piece or the "research" piece. Both require substantial time, effort, and funds, and take us in different directions. It is hard to imagine having enough time or money to do both extremely well. One moves us toward serving more part-time, older than average students, with more attention to fitting education around the demands of work. This scenario includes more evening and weekend classes, less emphasis on campus involvement, more investment in distance education and work-related learning. The other requires serving more traditional-aged students with a focus on creating a more intensive undergraduate education that draws on the best that a research university has to offer. While we can and will always do some of both, the question is where we want to put our energy and our heart.

PART TWO: How Can We Improve? Issues and Recommendations

The committee considered a range of possible suggestions for change, from the most radical and sweeping to the most minute and mundane. Some of each will be described below, but ultimately the course advocated by most committee members—though not by any means unanimously—is a more incremental approach. There may be many other possible ideas that the committee has not considered, and we invite continued discussion of other options.

Our recommendations attempt to address each of the four issues we identified in the first section of this report: communicating clear and explicit institutional expectations, developing an institutional commitment to help students stay on track (and developing the strategies and “machinery” to help support that commitment), reducing institutional barriers and developing incentives, and balancing access with success.

Communicating Clear and Explicit Institutional Expectations

We have made progress in communicating expectations to students, and in devising educational programs to support those expectations. Beginning with the creation of Residential College in 1995, and continuing with the [Four-Year Graduation Guarantee](#) and an integrated approach to students’ first-year experience (New Student Convocation, Freshman Seminars, and Living-Learning Communities), we have focused on helping students make the adjustment to the University and connect to faculty and other students. Preliminary data on freshman seminars, while not conclusive, show that students who took them are retained at a higher rate than students who did not take them. We are making progress, especially with first-year students. But there is much more to be done.

Academic progress

We need to be sure that students and parents have a clear understanding of the difference between “academic progress” and “good standing.” Students can take courses and remain in good standing at the University without making significant academic progress toward their degree. Academic progress means that students are taking classes that meet requirements and help them to attain a degree. It requires that students have timely access to good advising and that they have quick and easy access to their APAS reports. There is progress on making the APAS reports available on the Web, and we support and encourage this effort. It would also be helpful if all students were aware of the availability of the “checkpoint plans” for each major that were developed as part of the Four-Year Graduation Plan. These checkpoint graphs provide a very quick and easy reference to help students understand how to plan their programs to stay on track for timely graduation. We must assure that all of these plans are updated and accurate, and that every student and adviser knows where to find them on the web (<http://www.irr.umn.edu/fouryear/alphachk.htm>).

Reaching Out to Students Who Live at Home

We need to communicate with parents and students about risk factors when students live at home. We have often talked about commuter students or students who don’t live on campus, but the real risk factors are more closely associated with students who live at home (about 15% of our freshmen, compared with 9% nationally in four-year publics) (CIRP, 1999).

Several research studies suggest that students who live at home do not make as strong a commitment or connection to college as students who live on or near the campus in a collegiate environment (Astin, 1993). While we recognize that living at home may be viewed as a financial necessity for some students, both students and parents need to know that there are real risks involved in this choice. Students who live at home need to make a special effort to become as fully integrated as possible into the life of the University. Some institutions require freshmen to live on campus because of the importance that early integration into campus life has for long-term success. While we do not advocate such a requirement, nor do we have the residence hall space to support it, we want to assure that the University has good programs to support the students who live at home and help to integrate them with the campus, and that students and parents take steps to minimize the risks of living at home.

Also, because the University is located in the state's major population center, we have a much higher percentage of students who can maintain a strong connection with their former environment—51.7 % of UM students are 50 miles or less from home, compared with 27.3% at other public universities across the country. This closeness to home allows students to maintain what one member of the committee called a “commuter psychology”: students who do not feel as if they have “gone away to college” may be tempted to view their time on campus as a continuation of high school. Even students who live on or near campus may maintain strong ties to home, to high school friends, and to activities away from the University. Such ties may weaken their connection to the University and hence their commitment to completing a degree.

Financing a college education

Most importantly, we need to do more to help students, and the parents of prospective and admitted students, understand not only the costs of college and ways to pay these costs, but also the trade-offs involved in various choices. Again, this is a complex issue and there is no one formula that is right for all students or families. But there is important, basic information that we can share that will help people make choices.

Prospective students and their parents seem to need more information about college costs and the options for paying them. The Minnesota Higher Education Services Office (HESO) distributes two very useful publications that help explain how to finance college. One (*Get Ready!*) goes to all Minnesota elementary schools for distribution to fifth graders; a second (*Focus on Financial Aid*) goes to high schools for distribution to all seniors at the beginning of their senior year. Both are available on HESO's website at <http://www.mheso.state.mn.us> Despite these excellent efforts, the level of misinformation and anxiety about college costs remains high. A recent study sponsored by the American Council on Education summarized extensive research about “what the public thinks and knows about paying for college.” Most people, even parents of prospective college students, overestimated the cost of attendance, underestimated the amount of aid available, and in general did not understand options available to them, or, in the study's words: “The gap between the importance that the public places on getting a higher education and the knowledge that it has about how to afford it is staggering” (Ikenberry and Hartle, 1998). The report of the National Commission on the Cost of Higher Education, also issued in 1998, urges colleges to do more to communicate with families about the costs of college and what can be done to offset them. The HESO website contains excellent resources on financing education, and we need to assure that we are providing such information through both the Admissions and Financial Aid offices, and in a way that connects to families' concerns.

One of the pieces of information that we should consider developing to help students and parents make decisions is a brochure or handout that provides information about work, and about work versus loans, and about the costs of not graduating in four or five years. We should also include information about the financial returns on the investment of completing a college degree.

What do we know about work? Most students work, and in general, work is not harmful to the completion of a college degree (or even to completion in four years), provided it does not exceed about 20 hours a week: “The consensus seems to be that a modest amount of work while enrolled enhances retention, that work on campus certainly intensifies involvement and contributes to completion, but that an excess of work (particularly off-campus) is negatively related to persistence” (Adelman, 1999). For students who work more than 20 hours a week, especially in off-campus jobs, there is good evidence that progress is slowed, grades are lower, they are less engaged in learning, and they are at greater risk of dropping out or stopping out. While we recognize that work is important in cultivating many excellent skills, we need to encourage students to limit work hours to 20 or fewer per week and to seek on-campus jobs.

Similarly, while we don’t want to encourage high levels of loan indebtedness, we want to show students that there **may** be financial advantages to assuming some loan debt in return for a quicker graduation and earlier full-time employment. The Institute of Technology has developed a simple chart that balances the cost to their students of staying longer in school (with no loans and more hours of paid work), versus taking on some loans, working less, and being employed earlier. For some students, the latter is a more economical proposition. A study on “Postsecondary Financing Strategies: How Undergraduates Combine Work, Borrowing, and Attendance,” noted that borrowers were generally more likely than non-borrowers to attend full-time, and also that borrowers persisted (i.e., stayed in school) at a higher rate than non-borrowers (Cuccaro-Alamin, Choy, and Carroll, 1998). We also know that on a statewide basis (i.e., not just at the University), loans make up a smaller portion of the total of grants and loans for Minnesota undergraduates than they do nationally, although the increase in borrowing by Minnesota undergraduates between 1997 and 1999 was greater than the increase in student borrowing nationally (MHESO, Highlights of Financial Aid Survey, 1999).

There is a great deal more we need to know about our students and how much they work, why they work, where they work, how much they earn, and what their expenses are (including the growing costs of credit card debt). The last extensive study of this sort at the University of Minnesota was done in 1989, and student habits have changed considerably since that time. Nevertheless, even in the absence of this detailed information, we know that there is much we could say to students and parents about work, loans, and the financial advantages of finishing a degree in the most timely manner possible.

Making The Commitment to Help Students Stay on Track

Faculty, advisers, and other staff members interact with students on a daily basis and help them to make an array of decisions about their lives and their education. We need to be sure we provide faculty and staff members with information that will help them understand the consequences—to the student and to the institution—of too many students taking too long to graduate. Of course, there will always be some students who need to take six or more years for very good reasons, and we want to be able to respond to these legitimate needs. But for many of our students, there are strategies that would help them move through their degree programs in a more timely way.

The people who work directly with students are their best advocates, and they want to help students make choices that are good for them. For many years, that has often meant providing students with maximum flexibility while setting minimum expectations. But our graduation rates indicate that that this approach has not, in fact, proven to be an effective way of helping students complete degrees. If the people with direct student contact are convinced of the need to change—for the benefit of students—it will be easier to achieve an improved graduation or retention rate. If in fact we come to believe that this is important, there is much that all of us can do to assist students to make choices that will lead to this goal.

As part of these discussions, each college needs to look closely at the resources it assigns to advising, and must assure that all students have timely access to effective advising. Most of the strategies discussed below depend for their success on the active involvement and intervention of advisers in the colleges and departments. But many of these advisers are already working at capacity, and most college offices cannot take on an array of additional work without seeing a deterioration in quality and timeliness of service. If these strategies are to be effective, colleges need to assure that they have adequate advising support to implement them, and adequate technological support to free up adviser time for working with students.

The committee explored a number of strategies that might be implemented quickly and that have promise of helping students make good academic decisions. These can be clustered into four major areas: full-year registration for freshmen, e-mail reminders to students, mid-term grades, and drops and withdrawals.

Full-year registration for freshmen

The committee supports the development of a program of full-year registration for new students when they attend New Student Orientation in the summer. In other words, we think freshmen should leave orientation not only with a fall schedule of courses but also with a spring schedule. We believe that this will reduce student and parent anxiety, especially for those students whose fall schedule does not include all the courses (such as composition) that many students expect to take in the first semester. We also think that it will simplify scheduling and encourage students to focus first on their academic commitments, with work as a secondary focus. The Provost's office is already beginning exploratory discussions with colleges on this subject.

E-mail reminders

Over the past year, we have been experimenting with various types of e-mail reminders to students in specific situations. Copies of various sample e-mails are included as Appendix 5. Based on these pilot tests, we advocate that the registrar's office and undergraduate colleges cooperate to send the following reminders to students:

- before registration, remind all students about the half-price tuition for all credits over 12.
- after the registration queue is complete, remind continuing students who haven't registered to register immediately or to contact their adviser if they have questions.
- for students approaching 60 credits without a major declaration, remind them of the 60 credit policy, offer assistance, and encourage them to see an adviser if they need help.
- for students not successful in gaining admission to their desired major or college, stay in communication with them to offer continuing assistance in selecting another option.

- for students who have 110 credits and haven't registered or haven't filed for graduation, develop a strategy (beginning with an e-mail) that gets students in to see an adviser about their academic progress.

Mid-term grade reports

Many institutions on the semester system use some sort of formal mid-term warning or grade report for students who are not doing well in their classes (such reports are uncommon on the quarter system because of the tight time frame). For example, five of the Big Ten schools have some form of mid-term grade reporting, and these take various forms. They are intended to be a "wake-up call" for students in trouble, and for that reason most institutions report mid-term grades only for students who are on a path to earn less than a C- grade. In some institutions, these are sent only to freshmen, and in others to all undergraduates. In one case, mid-term grades are reported only for a set of courses (12) that are taken predominantly by freshmen and that are seen as key "gatekeeping" courses for academic progress. The intent in all of these cases is to give students a serious warning of possible failure while there is still time for the student to take the appropriate steps to rectify the situation.

The committee recommends that SCEP adopt a policy of requiring faculty to submit mid-term warnings for freshmen (or, alternatively, for all students) likely to earn a D or F in any 1xxx course. This can be set up as a web-based system for ease of data entry, and this will allow the registrar to notify students and advisers as appropriate. Grades should be collected around the sixth week so that students can be notified in a timely way and encouraged to seek help. Instructors would need to be sure that these courses are structured in a way that allows appropriate evaluation by the sixth week. Advisers should be copied on the e-mails, which will give them an aggregate picture of student performance across all courses. This policy should be required for freshmen and recommended for all students. The warning need not differentiate between the D or F grade, but needs to be unambiguous, and also to direct the student to helpful resources. (Note: General College currently uses mid-semester grades and has had a positive experience with them.)

To assist students who get warnings, we also recommend (and have initiated discussion with the College of Education and Human Development) that in addition to current semester-long study skills courses, half-semester study skills courses ought to be offered in the second half of the semester through the LASK program.

Drops, withdrawals, and incompletes

Members of the committee were concerned that the use of mid-term grades might create a flurry of withdrawals at the eighth week, rather than creating the desired effect of students seeking academic assistance. The committee reviewed other institutions' practices with regard to "late drops" or withdrawals, and queried whether the introduction of mid-term grades had increased the number of drops. Most said that mid-term grades had not dramatically increased the number of drops.

In general, the drop/withdrawal policies at other Big Ten schools are fairly similar to ours, with one or two exceptions where they are more stringent. At the University of Minnesota, students may drop courses with no transcript record for the first two weeks of a semester, but from weeks 2 to 8, a drop is recorded on the transcript as a W grade. After week 8, a student may generally not drop a course except under unusual circumstances, and with the approval of the college's scholastic committee.*

Common sense and logic clearly tell us that a student who has too many W grades is not on track for a timely graduation. Adelman's extensive study takes this observation a big step

* with the exception of the one-time late drop, which a student may use once at any time in his/her academic career at Minnesota.

further, noting that too many drops lead not only to delayed graduation but actually to dropping out:

We found that a high DWI (Drops-Withdrawals-Incompletes) index worked significantly against degree completion. The situation could be ameliorated by institutional policies that both restrict the extent of withdrawals, incompletes, and no-credit repeats *and* pay closer attention, in advisement, to student credit loads and time commitments (Adelman, 1999).

In response to concerns such as this, we looked at the 1994 entering cohort of University of Minnesota students, comparing number of W grades on the record with students' 4, 5, and 6 year graduation rates. The data showed that one or two W grades had no apparent effect on graduation (and in fact students in GC or CLA with one W grade graduated at a higher rate than those with none, though this was not true for IT students). However, for all students there was a clear correlation between high numbers of W grades (3 or more) and lower rates of graduation. For example, we found that non-GC students with one drop had a 61.8% six-year graduation rate, while those with three or more drops had a 36.7% six-year graduation rate. For students who entered through GC, the effect was similar: 33.3% of those with one W graduated in 6 years, but only 16.3% of those with three or more Ws did so.

These data, combined with national studies, indicate that we need to give serious consideration to W grades as an indicator of risk for students. For that reason, we recommend consideration of several strategies related to student withdrawals:

- Approval by faculty before students can drop a course between week 2 and 8. At the present time, students can withdraw from a course without having a conversation with anyone—faculty or adviser. No permission is required. The faculty members of the committee argued that faculty are likely to be in the best position to help a student develop strategies for success in their course. If students withdraw without a discussion with faculty, there is no opportunity to consider such strategies. If such a requirement is to be effective, it cannot devolve into a stamp or departmental signature—it must require real faculty involvement and commitment to making this process work. We encourage SCEP to take up this issue as soon as possible.
- E-mail notification to the adviser when a student's credit load drops after week 2. Right now, there is nothing that rings alarm bells for advisers when students drop courses—and especially when they drop below 12 credits. We can develop an automatic system that will e-mail a student's adviser of record as soon as that student's credit load drops below 12 after the second week of the semester. The adviser can then assure that the student is aware of possible consequences (including loss of financial aid or scholarships), and that the student is getting support in making the best decision.
- Identification of courses where W grades are frequent and plans to help students succeed in these courses. When we looked at University of Minnesota data, we found that W grades comprised 6% of all grades in 1xxx classes and around 5% in 3-5xxx courses. For last year, those designators with the highest percentage of W grades (more than 7%) at the 1xxx level included Japanese, Math, Computer Science, OMS (business statistics), Philosophy, Humanities, Statistics, Music, and French. Some of these are extraordinarily difficult courses with small numbers of students (Japanese, for example), but there may be intervention strategies for each of these that will help students persist in larger numbers. Colleges need to take responsibility to examine these grade patterns and suggest how we might help students stay in courses and succeed.
- Limitation on total number of W grades a student can earn in his/her college career. This is a more radical strategy and would put a policy in place that would

reinforce the concern about students taking too many W grades. Penn State limits W grades to four in a student's undergraduate career. While most students don't even use 3, this policy nonetheless causes students to take the withdrawal process very seriously, and to carefully decide whether they can finish a course or use one of their limited W grades. In addition, when students take a W grade at Penn State, instructors must designate that W grade as WP (withdrawn-passing), WF (withdrawn-failing) or WN (withdrawn—no grade), and these grades are recorded on the transcript. SCEP should consider whether either of these options would be of assistance in reducing the casual use of W grades. However, such a policy should only be considered in combination with advising interventions such as those mentioned above.

Finally we encourage SCEP to review the use of I grades and assure that faculty are giving these grades appropriately. Under Senate policy, I grades are to be given only when the student is unable to complete a course because of illness or emergency. An I grade requires a contract for completion between the student and the faculty member. I grades should not be given when a student simply misses required work or skips the final. SCEP should assure that faculty are aware of these policies and in general compliance with them.

Removing Institutional Barriers and Providing Incentives for Success

With the implementation of common policies, the development of web registration, the use of e-mail to communicate with students (for example, sending study lists by e-mail), and a variety of other policy changes and new procedures, we have already made significant steps toward creating a policy and administrative environment that supports timely graduation. At the request of SCEP, the administration has also asked colleges to examine the time to degree for each major, and to consider whether there are barriers in our requirements that could be reduced or eliminated while maintaining rigorous degree programs. But more could be done. This section discusses a variety of possible policy changes or administrative actions that might be taken to help achieve the goal of improving our graduation rate.

- Develop incentives for colleges to focus on graduation/retention, or sanctions if they fail to improve. Financial consequences (either in the form of incentives or in the form of fines) have the potential to provide an impetus for colleges to examine their graduation rates and develop college-specific strategies that will address each college's own particular culture and students. This also gives colleges a different way to look at enrollment management issues, since better retention has implications for the number of students admitted to the college. For this recommendation to work, the colleges will need regular cohort progress reports by college, distributed each semester (these are under development and will soon be available)
- Develop additional incentives for students to complete their degrees in a timely fashion, or (alternatively) additional "costs" for students who drop/stop-out, or reduce their credit load. An example of such a policy at the University is the reduced per-credit cost for more than 12 credits. Some institutions have policies to require timely completion. They may require that students formally declare themselves to be either full-time or part-time, and that full-time students adhere to certain academic progress requirements. For example, UC-Berkeley has a stringent academic progress policy that essentially requires students to complete an average of 30 credits per year, although the actual implementation is slightly more lenient ("take the number of semesters you have been enrolled on the Berkeley campus, subtract one, and multiply by 15.") Students who are in college more than eight semesters may not continue beyond the semester in

which they complete more than 130 credits. Students who wish to register for fewer than 13.5 credits in any semester must have permission from the dean.⁷ While we doubt whether a policy as rigorous as Berkeley's is appropriate for Minnesota, SCEP should consider whether there might be an academic progress policy that would be suitable for the U of M.

- Find better ways to identify students who may be at risk of stopping out or dropping out. We know about many risk factors—academic underpreparedness, living at home, working too much—but there are other pieces of information that would help us identify these students so that advisers could work with them in a different way. For example, we do not now use the full range of information we have on students from the questionnaire that accompanies the ACT test. Some of the questions on the questionnaire are good surrogates for identifying students at risk of dropping out. We should develop a strategy to use the available information to identify these students and intervene.
- Pay more attention to retention in the junior and senior years. Given the problems that we have with students who leave late in their academic programs, we should consider encouraging colleges to develop strategies addressing issues or programs such as entry into the major, junior seminars, special scholarships or other aid programs for juniors, and various other forms of assistance to students who have completed at least two years of college. This might also include a special review to assure that all checkpoints have been met and that the student is on target for graduation.
- Continue to work to increase grant-based student aid such as scholarships, to help students reduce their dependence on work.

Balancing Access with Success

The committee encourages the administration to continue to work closely with General College to assure that the students admitted to GC are those who have the best chance of graduating from a research university. This may mean reducing the size of the class admitted to General College, or focussing more explicitly on the research about factors in high-risk populations that will lead to success. We want to assure that student success, here and throughout the University, is defined in terms of graduation, not just persistence from term to term. General College is an important portal to the University, but despite many resounding successes, most of the students who come through that portal still do not graduate in six years. As General College has honed its mission over the past ten years, it has learned a great deal about how to help at-risk students. It has even won a national award for its retention programs. GC is doing the job that the University has asked it to do. But as an institution, we need to come to grips with our identity and decide what proportion of our student body should be admitted through General College, and we also need to understand and accept the implications of those decisions and their effect on admissions practices, graduation rates and student success.

⁷ <http://ls-advise.berkeley.edu/rr/units.html#minmax>

Conclusion

This report attempts to provide a basic compendium of information about graduation and retention rates at the University of Minnesota, to argue that these rates are too low, and to present some possible approaches to addressing this problem. The success of any of these interventions will depend in part on the institution's willingness to take this issue seriously and continue to explore both the nuances of the problem (for example, more studies on specific issues such as students' work behaviors) and the larger questions of institutional identity and focus. We need comments and discussion from students, faculty, and staff as we address these issues. We have presented more questions than conclusions, and we hope that CUD, SCEP, MSA, and other policy-making and administrative groups will seriously consider what further steps should be taken.

We present this report as the opening of a dialogue that we hope will ensue. We welcome discussion, disagreement, revision, or any response at all—except apathy. President Yudof, in presenting his budget to the Regents this summer, has said that we are at a crossroads in terms of our institutional stature and identity. We hope that the issues raised here will be taken seriously by the University community, and that we can move ahead together to address them. And as President Yudof has noted, with our tuition rising there will be an expectation that we will deliver even better service. Improved graduation rates must be part of that expectation. If there is consensus that the University's graduation and retention rates are a problem, then we must move at all levels— administration, faculty, staff, and students—to pursue solutions. If the members of the academic community do not perceive these numbers as problematic, then we must be able to explain to the public, to the legislature, to parents, and to students, why it is acceptable that the University graduates only slightly more than half of the students who begin here as freshmen. We as a committee do not find this acceptable, and we hope others agree and are prepared to act.

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