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Executive Summary
Executive Summary

Context

Half of all students who fail to earn a bachelor’s degree at the University of Kentucky drop out either during or just after their first year. This is particularly problematic when viewed in light of the fact that retention rates are widely regarded as an indicator of institutional effectiveness.

The graph below shows UK’s retention rates for the last 10 fall cohorts. The fall 2012 cohort has achieved the highest retention rate on record at UK. This marks the fifth year in a row that the retention rate has surpassed 80 percent. However, the retention rate has fluctuated up and down during the past 10 years and has not sustained an increase for two straight years.

The challenge surrounding retention rates at UK is thrown into sharp relief when UK’s rate is compared to those of the 11 benchmark institutions identified by the 2011 University Review Committee. As illustrated by the graph below, UK ranks second to last in first-to-second year retention rates, outranking only the University of Arizona:
In September 2013, extensive research was conducted on the retention issue at UK. This research is outlined in depth later in the report (see sections entitled Major Findings from UK’s Research on Retention and Best Practice Reports), but some of the findings are summarized in the following two flowcharts. The first depicts student behaviors and characteristics that lead to retention and the different measures of student success outcomes. This chart highlights student attributes and academic and social behaviors that influence retention. The second depicts institutional programs and policies that lead to retention and measures of program outcomes. This chart highlights the need for university programs to serve both all students and segments of student populations in order to influence retention and graduation.
Student Behaviors and Characteristics that Lead to Engagement and Success

Pre-College Factors Related to Later Success
- Rigor of High School Curriculum
  - Honors courses
  - Advanced math and science courses
  - AP courses taken and AP exams passed
  - International Baccalaureate program

Performance Indicators of Students
- Non-Cognitive Predictors of Success
  - Engaged academically in HS senior year (+)
  - Worked part-time (+)
  - Self-efficacy (+)
  - Parental support of family and friends (+)
  - Concerned about own ability to pay for college (+)
  - Engaged in community service (+)
  - Procrastination tendencies (-)
  - First-generation college status (+)

Academically and Socially Motivated Choices and Behaviors
- Choices and Behaviors in the Academic System
  - Commitment to coursework
  - Time management
  - Study strategies
  - Library and research skills
  - Note-taking skills
  - Oral communication skills
  - Written communication skills

First-Year Outcomes
- Choices, Behaviors, and Relationships in the Social Sphere
  - Lives on-campus
  - Develops network of friends
  - Participates in sponsored co-curricular activities
  - Visits home a limited number of times per semester
  - Not prone to homelessness
  - Works less than 15 hours per week at off-campus jobs

Academics and Socially Motivated Choices and Behaviors
- Skills for Achieving Academic Success
  - Time management
  - Study strategies
  - Library and research skills
  - Note-taking skills
  - Oral communication skills
  - Written communication skills

Admission to UK
- No
- Yes

Senior-Year Outcomes and Beyond
- UK Core Outcomes
  - UK students will be able to demonstrate...
  - An understanding of and ability to employ the processes of intellectual inquiry...
  - Competent written, oral, and visual communication skills...
  - An understanding of and ability to employ methods of quantitative and qualitative analysis...
  - An understanding of the complexities of citizenship in a diverse, multicultural...

CPE Performance Metrics
- Five Outcome Domains Associated with College Graduates (Kuch, 1999)
  - Cognitive complexity and reflective thought
  - Critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, and intellectual flexibility
  - Academic and social engagement
  - Self-efficacy
  - Gains in skills and knowledge domains

Surveys of Graduating Seniors and Alumni
- Self-estimates of gain in skills and knowledge
- Plans for the future
- Educational and employment status
- Reports frequency of civic and cultural activities

UK Core Outcomes
- Unemployment rate on students and graduates
- Job-related to one's major (undergraduate alumni survey)
- Job placement rates
- License exam results
- Percent of seniors who will attend graduate school

CPE Performance Metrics
- Six-year graduation rates
- Achievement gaps
- Underrepresented Students
- Unrepresented Minorities
- Income Students
- Net direct cost to Pell Grant
- Percent of credit earned through online learning
- Total number of credits earned by bachelor's degree recipients
- Number of students who receive transfer credit from KCTCS
Statement of the Issue

UK’s difficulty in maintaining steady progress in the area of retention necessitates a detailed plan of action. While UK has previously developed action plans to boost retention, the lack of continuity between plans and the lack of continuous institutional progress demands a fresh approach to the problem of student attrition.

Organization of the Report

This report begins by providing recommendations for immediate action – steps that can be taken Fall Semester 2013 and Spring Semester 2014. Next, the report provides recommendations to be implemented over a longer period of time. Finally, the report details the information used to generate these recommendations, including conclusions drawn by previous plans, an overview of major findings from UK’s research on retention, and a summary of UK’s current practices in the context of best practice reports.

Team

This report was composed by a diverse group of individuals committed to a comprehensive review of the information related to retention at the UK. Members of the team included:

- Eric N. Monday, M.P.A., Executive Vice President, Office of Finance and Administration
- Dan O’Hair, Ph.D., Interim Senior Vice Provost for Student Success
- Christine M. Riordan, Ph.D., Provost
- Benjamin C. Withers, Ph.D., Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education
- Don Witt, Vice Provost for Enrollment Management

Additional members, who organized and compiled the report, include:

- Hannah E. Eddy, M.B.A., Office of the Provost
- Vince Kellen, Ph.D., Senior Vice Provost, Academic Planning, Analytics & Technologies
- Bethany L. Miller, Ph.D., Director of Academic Retention, Office for Student Success
- Roger P. Sugarman, Ph.D., Director of Institutional Research
Recommendations for Next Steps
Recommendations for Next Steps

Immediate Actions

A major goal of this report is to begin improving retention rates now. The following recommendations are intended to be implemented immediately in order to identify current students who may be at risk of dropping out and to begin addressing these students’ needs today.

1. Obtain input on recommendations from a wider audience and then begin executing against the specific action items.

As EAB reports, “retention can no longer be owned by ‘anyone and everyone.’” To help ensure that the entire community takes a sense of ownership in retaining students, UK should obtain the input of a wider audience before executing against the specific action items recommended in this report. This audience should include the Deans, the Division of Student Affairs, and the Advising Network.

2. Conduct focus groups regarding pathways and barriers to success. Supplement focus groups with data-driven analysis of the retention impact of key programs on targeted populations.

Conducting focus groups of first- and second-year students, advisors, and other key staff will provide a well-rounded, qualitative understanding of rationales and perspectives surrounding retention at UK.

In addition, focus groups will provide students with a sense of ownership and “voice” in the retention process. As EAB states in *Encouraging Meaningful Student Involvement*, “Administrative engagement with the student body [is] central to the success of any initiative designed to evaluate or change student life … [by] welcoming the student body to participate in focus groups and town hall-style meetings, administrators can foster goodwill and allow students to feel a sense of ownership.”

The focus groups should be supplemented with data-driven analysis of the retention impact of key programs on targeted populations. A comprehensive review should be conducted to determine the effectiveness and impact of current activities and programs.

3. Implement an exit process for withdrawing students which includes an interview/intervention with an advisor.

Students who officially withdraw from UK should be required to complete an exit process which includes an interview/intervention with an advisor. This conversation would provide an opportunity for advisors to discuss the reasoning behind students’ requests to withdraw and to offer services and support to the student. The information garnered from the interviews will provide valuable information for UK to analyze when examining the factors that motivate students to withdraw.

4. Administer a UK Mobile micro-survey to first-year students to inquire about their intent to enroll for Spring Semester.
During the fifth or sixth week of fall semester, a UK Mobile micro-survey should be administered to first-year students to determine their intent to enroll in Spring 2014. Students who are undecided or who indicate that they are not returning should be contacted directly for possible intervention.

5. **Implement individualized retention plans.**

UK should identify current at-risk students and set up individualized reach-out plans for them. This task should be completed by the Director of Academic Retention in the Office for Student Success, with support from the Office of Institutional Research and in close collaboration with deans and advisors. The individualized plans for the fall semester should be designed and implemented immediately. A baseline report of students should be developed this fall so that the dropout rate from fall semester to spring semester can be assessed to determine whether the individualized plans helped. Implement a case management system to support individualized retention plans, collection of additional data (e.g., non-cognitive factors, student involvement with co-curricular activities), and management of small segments of students.

6. **Require Residence Halls to inquire earlier in Fall Semester regarding whether residents intend to return to the halls for Spring Semester.**

Residence Halls should inquire at the end of October to determine whether residents intend to return for Spring Semester. Students who are undecided or indicate that they are not returning to the Residence Halls will be contacted directly (for possible intervention).

7. **Administer an Attrition Survey in Spring Semester to all first-year students and sophomores in the spring who have not pre-registered for the fall semester.**

An Attrition Survey should be administered during Spring Semester to all first-year students and sophomores who have not yet pre-registered for the fall semester. Administration of this survey will provide several benefits. First, students who have simply forgotten to register will be informed that they have missed pre-registration. Second, the Survey will give Undergraduate Education the opportunity to contact those students who are not planning to return in the fall to see whether they can be encouraged to return. Finally, the Survey will help Institutional Research understand more about the dynamics of the students who are dropping out.

8. **Continue and strengthen calling system for non-returning students in Spring Semester.**

Students who do not return to UK in Spring Semester are currently contacted by telephone to determine if UK can help them reenroll or to document a deeper understanding of why they did not return. This program has been shown to have had significant impact on retention over the last several years, and should be continued and strengthened.

9. **Conduct a comprehensive assessment of bottleneck courses.**

The Office of Student Success, working with the Office Institutional Research, should conduct a full assessment of bottleneck courses immediately to determine which courses are causing holdups and should determine what actions need to be taken to eliminate bottlenecks.

10. **Analyze the impact of financial aid on upper class student retention and graduation.**
UK’s graduation rate of Pell grant recipients is 13 percentage points lower than UK’s average graduation rate. Research on the impact of financial need and upper division students will help pinpoint how financial aid can promote upper-division student retention and engagement.

### Timeline of Immediate Actions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mid-October</td>
<td>• Obtain input from wider audience (e.g., deans)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Conduct focus groups of first- and second-year students regarding pathways and barriers to success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Conduct comprehensive assessment of bottleneck courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Implement exit process for withdrawing students which includes an interview/intervention with an adviser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Implement individualized retention plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late October</td>
<td>• Administer UK Mobile micro-survey to inquire about students’ intent to return for Spring Semester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Residence Halls: inquire about students’ intent to return to the halls for Spring Semester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>• Review effectiveness of individualized plans and adjust system accordingly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Analyze the impact of financial aid on upper class student retention and graduation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring Semester</td>
<td>• Administration of Attrition Survey to all first-year students and sophomores who have not pre-registered for Fall Semester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Calling system for non-returning students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Summary of Immediate Actions

1. Obtain input on recommendations above from a wider audience and then begin executing against the specific action items.
2. Conduct focus groups regarding pathways and barriers to success. Supplement focus groups with data-driven analysis of the retention impact of key programs on targeted populations.
3. Implement an exit process for withdrawing students which includes an interview/intervention with an advisor.
4. Administer a UK Mobile micro-survey to first-year students to inquire about their intent to enroll for Spring Semester.
5. Implement individualized retention plans.
6. Require Residence Halls to inquire earlier in Fall Semester regarding whether residents intend to return to the halls for Spring Semester.
7. Administer an Attrition Survey in Spring Semester to all first-year students and sophomores in the spring who have not pre-registered for the fall semester.
8. Continue and strengthen calling system for non-returning students in Spring Semester.
9. Conduct a comprehensive assessment of bottleneck courses.
10. Analyze the impact of financial aid on upper class student retention and graduation.

**Longer-Term Recommendations**

Institutional research, conclusions gleaned from previous plans, and best practice reports on retention suggest that UK should pursue six major objectives to increase student retention:

1. Promote academic preparation and utilize effective recruitment efforts.
   a. During the admissions process, give more weight to high school GPA.
   b. If possible, recruit students with an ACT of 25.5 with movement toward 26.
   c. Aim for a mix of 36% nonresident and 64% resident with a class of 4800 – 5000.
   d. Implement a holistic admission approach that places UK in a category that can yield 87-90% first to second year retention and a six year graduation rate of 70-75%.
   e. Investigate the possibility of setting an admissions deadline for first-year students.
   f. Utilize a scholarship effort focused on outcomes.
   g. Create more college-focused sections of UK 101 and increase to two credit hours.
h. Continue to implement college-level, tailored readiness programs (e.g. Boot Camp) that prepare new students.

i. Build on themes that emphasize the UK’s expectations of success.

A student’s academic preparation plays a fundamental role in retention. Students who are academically prepared for the rigors of college are more likely to be retained. Students who apply to UK and other universities are generally admitted based upon a combination of high school grades and ACT/SAT scores. Institutional research at UK and elsewhere has repeatedly shown that the high school GPA is a stronger predictor of academic success than standardized test scores. Giving more weight to the high school GPA would result in a more academically prepared first-year cohort. At the same time, as an aspirational recommendation, UK should aim to recruit students with ACTs of 25.5 with a movement toward 26.

The goal in recruiting should be a mix of 36% nonresident and 64% resident with a class size of 4800 to 5000. UK should waitlist demand over 5000 which will allow the institution to respond to changing budget demands if needs arise. Overall, the goal should be a holistic admission approach that respects the institutional mission as a public research institution yet places us in a category that can yield a 87% to 90% first to second year retention and a 70% to 75% six year graduation rate.

Additionally, research indicates that the “last students in” – students who attended a summer advising conference late in the summer or not at all – had relatively low retention rates. Whether this gap is caused by psychological characteristics (e.g., a tendency to procrastinate, ambivalence about going to college), by the fact that these students are “last in line” for services (e.g., they are neither receiving first choice in housing, class sections and times, and financial packages, nor are they participating in full orientation programs), or by a combination of these factors, this concept certainly merits further exploration. UK should explore the possibility of setting an admissions deadline to help mitigate these factors.

Throughout the admissions process, UK must respect access for diversity while utilizing a scholarship effort focused on outcomes. Neither one dollar more nor one dollar less should be distributed than the amount merited by need with appropriate merit exceptions.

Students should be strongly encouraged to take UK 101, the freshman orientation seminar, which has been shown to help a number of different subgroups (e.g., 2nd quartile ACT, students with a high school GPA of 3.0-3.5, and out-of-state students). A greater number of sections should be offered, and the course should be increased to two credit hours to encourage increased participation.

Finally, throughout both the admissions process and students’ time at UK, the University should continue to build on common themes that emphasize its expectation that students will succeed. Important themes include the concept that admission is an achievement, that graduation within four years is an expectation, that the appropriate hour requirements are approximately 120 for most students, that there may be ticket access restrictions after four years, and that graduation should be celebrated with a class ring, etc.

2. Using a data-driven approach, tailor retention strategies to address individual student needs.

   a. Integrate student involvement data into one 360-degree view of the student, including real-time monitoring, student alerts and small-segment management.
b. Implement a policy for mandatory attendance taking in freshman courses and implement technology to capture student attendance and involvement in classes.

c. Set expectation for faculty and students to have at least one scored item in the first three to four weeks of class time.

d. Strongly encourage participation in Impact Programs for students who stumble.

e. Conduct specific assessment of high-risk majors.

f. Review current activities and programs to see if they are effective and impactful over time.

Programs to help students should be based on solid data rather than well-intended guesses. Traditional student data, such as GPAs and attempted versus earned credits, have a place in any system that assesses students’ likelihood of attrition. However, universities are learning that efforts to raise retention rates are more effective when they also address the ‘fit’ between the campus environment and students’ social and academic needs. Integrating student involvement data into one 360-degree view of the student is a promising retention initiative. The ideal system would allow for real-time monitoring, automated student alerts, identification and management of small segments of students who share needs. Involvement of retention leaders within each of the colleges will also promote a better fit of student needs with college-level or central unit services.

Viewed in this light, a policy for mandatory attendance taking in freshman courses and adoption of technologies to capture student attendance and involvement with the class could provide an important indicator of students’ overall likelihood to persist successfully in their education. To further promote the early detection of potential problems, an expectation should also be set for faculty and students to have at least one scored item within the first three to four weeks of class time. To insure the implementation of these recommendations, UK’s central administration and Senate should consider issuing an edict requiring mandatory attendance and scored items within three to four weeks. Integration of other student behavioral and mindset data can also help faculty and advisors develop tailored retention interactions with students.

When students stumble, UK should strongly encourage participation in Impact Programs led by the Center for Academic Success or First Year Experience. Early and effective intervention helps increase retention.

Specific assessment of high-risk majors (e.g., double majors, difficult professional majors, oversubscribed majors) should be conducted. There are several high-risk majors that need to be assessed more closely for admissions practices. For example, the College of Nursing has a secondary admissions policy, with hundreds of students are admitted each year as first-year students. UK should assess the retention rate of students who are not ultimately admitted into Nursing and determine whether the recruiting pattern on the front end should be changed. Similarly, while the College of Engineering has increased admissions, its retention rates have not improved. UK should examine whether these students stay at UK or leave. As a final example, there are several popular, fast-growing majors such as Kinesiology and Communications which have classes with waitlists. UK should identify majors and areas where student demand seems to exceed an area’s ability to provide classes in a timely fashion, and determine the support necessary to ensure that students in these programs are retained at UK.
Finally, as a comprehensive review and as an ongoing process, current activities and programs should be reviewed to see if they are effective and impactful over time.

3. Working with the colleges and faculty, develop a centralized system to connect students with resources needed for success.
   a. Create an Undergraduate Success Center that provides a “one stop shop” for academic and co-curricular services and activities.
   b. Create a first year experience office within the Success Center.
   c. Encourage involvement in at least one major organizational element through a quasi-mandatory Boot Camp.
   d. Modify Orientation to provide an increased academic focus.
   e. Expand “The Study” by opening a branch to the center of campus.
   f. Encourage students to live on campus.
   g. Explore innovative degree delivery systems.
   h. Develop programs to increase awareness of retention issues among faculty.
   i. Celebrate milestones.

Students who are bounced around from one administrative office to another are likely to become frustrated with what they see as an overly bureaucratic university. Developing an Undergraduate Success Center that provides a “one stop shop” for academic and co-curricular services and activities will maximize the probability that students are connected with needed information and services. Additionally, a first-year experience office should be created and housed within the Success Center.

Consequently, students should be more engaged academically and socially during their time at UK. Students should be encouraged to get involved in at least one major organizational element through a quasi-mandatory Boot Camp which is centered a theme of choice (e.g., academic, spirit, athletic, band, etc.). In addition, orientation should include a focus on Merit Weekend and other appropriate Orientation events. Orientation must have a significant academic focus, not just a focus on programmatic aspects and testing.

Similarly, bringing “The Study” to central campus by opening a new branch makes sense so that all students—including those residing in north campus dorms or off campus—can more easily access tutoring and mentoring services. Expansion of The Study will empower this department to serve more students by providing them with study skills, metacognition, learning strategies, supplemental instruction, etc. In addition, offices like CELT can provide training resources to improve faculty awareness of student retention and graduation issues and the role faculty can play.

Research has shown that first-year students who live on campus are more likely to be retained than their peers who live off-campus. Students who live on campus are more able to take advantage of academic resources, visit their professors during office hours, and form a network of friends. While research has not yet documented whether sophomores or upper division students could benefit from living on campus, the new residence halls on campus should accommodate many students who would not have had the opportunity to live on campus after their first year at UK. Second- and third-years will likely benefit from living in the new apartment-style housing, particularly if UK offers these students a light residential life focus, sophomore success center, etc. within the new residence halls.
Innovative degree programs, such as interdisciplinary degrees and flexible bachelor's degrees, should be explored for students who may be within a few credits of graduating. And, at every step of the way, UK should be certain to foster class loyalty by celebrating important milestones with students.

4. Strengthen the impact of academic advising by adopting a comprehensive, customized approach that fosters college and faculty involvement
   a. Develop an explicit, coherent organizational philosophy in regard to advising.  
   b. Identify retention leaders within each college to provide input into the overall advising philosophy, customize advising and retention solutions within that college and to encourage faculty participation 
   c. Expand efforts at interweaving successful academic advising, transition/alternate path counseling, and career counseling.  
   d. Develop a case management system to monitor and measure different student touch points.  
   e. Focus on students throughout their degree programs.  
   f. Create a Student Financial Management Center.  
   g. Increase resource and prioritization support for the SAP degree planner tool, enhanced mobile recruiting apps, etc.

The quality of advising influences students’ satisfaction and the time needed to graduate. At present, UK colleges have adopted a number of models for the delivery of advising, based on the role of faculty and professional staff. The University should consider developing an explicit, coherent organizational philosophy in regard to advising. This would include expanded efforts at interweaving successful academic advising, transition/alternate path counseling, and career counseling. A case management system should be developed to keep track of and measure different student touch points and advisor and administration follow-up actions needed. This system would offer advisors with a quick view of each student's history of academic and co-curricular involvement. Customized advising efforts would also focus on programs that involve more difficult entry requirements (e.g., Nursing, Engineering, etc.). The university should establish the organizational philosophy for advising with close involvement from colleges and faculty. Managing student needs and transitions requires good coordination and smooth process hand-offs between central units and colleges. Key to developing tailored retention activities will be the need to clearly articulating the role of faculty and staff advisors and personalize advising interactions in a way that respects the differences between colleges and programs.

Initiatives to develop a customized advising system should help seniors with 120+ credits focus on timely graduation. The case management approach should facilitate management of small segments of students so that tailored interactions can be effectively delivered. In addition, this approach should empower advisors to focus on students throughout their degree programs, not just during students’ last year at UK.

As research indicates and experience supports, financial issues contribute significantly to student attrition. To more effectively address students’ financial concerns, a Student Financial Management Center should be created and housed within Career Services or First Year Experience.

Finally, increased resource and prioritization support should be provided for the SAP degree planner tool. This support could be used to complete objectives such as redesigning SAP's registration/shopping cart tied to the degree planner and enhancing UK’s mobile recruiting apps. In addition, the support will aid in moving degree progress into SAP so that degree progress data also
can be used to identify students at risk. Integrate data from this and other student systems into an advising case management system, giving faculty and staff advisors access to all relevant student data.

5. **Establish a bold culture with an expectation of graduation within four years.**
   a. Launch a marketing and communications campaign which encourages students to graduate in four years.
   b. Investigate the viability of financial incentives for graduating in four years.
   c. Engage the student government in identifying ways to promote graduation and student success within the student body.

In *Hardwiring Student Success*, EAB discusses the idea of promoting a “culture of persistence” surrounding retention. A bold focus on graduation within four years must be an integral part of UK’s culture, and must not only be encouraged by the administration but also by UK’s student leaders. UK must clearly and courageously establish the idea that not taking a full load each semester is unacceptable.

To this end, a marketing and communications campaign should be launched, and efforts should be led by the student government to encourage students to internalize the importance of graduating within four years.

In addition, the viability of providing students with financial incentives for graduating in four years should be explored. As an example, The University of Tennessee at Knoxville has implemented a tuition model which requires all students who enroll as full-time undergraduates to pay for 15 credit hours per semester, irrespective of how many credit hours they take. UT’s website explains that the university “made this change so students are able to maximize the hours they take each semester and stay on track to complete their degree without cost as a limiting factor.”

6. **Promote greater engagement among upper-division students.**
   a. Increase students’ out-of-class contact and interaction with faculty through undergraduate research.
   b. Create capstone courses for seniors.
   c. Strengthen academic standards in upper division courses.
   d. Address needs and promote interests of upper-division students through campus-based activities.

Greater engagement in upper-division students is necessary for higher graduation rates, and NSSE results show UK seniors are significantly less engaged than their Carnegie peers. Greater efforts should be made to increase students’ out-of-class contact and interaction with faculty through undergraduate research. The creation of capstone courses should be encouraged as a way to improve seniors’ ability to synthesize and organize ideas and experiences into novel and differentiated interpretations. Academic standards should be strengthened in upper division courses by explicitly communicating to students the number of hours they are expected to prepare for class through studying, reading and writing.

At the same time, upper division students would thrive socially if campus-based activities pegged to their needs and interests were promoted.

7. **Improve evidence-based continuous improvement to ensure that accurate, recent data is always available.**
8. Integrate accountability at all levels.
   a. Ensure that improving the retention rates across all years and the graduation rate are major goals of the Associate Provost of Undergraduate Education.
   b. Integrate retention accountability metrics into the yearly performance scorecards and goals of the Deans and Colleges, as well as into other units (e.g., Student Affairs, UGE, International Center).
   c. Implement accountability metrics to ensure that the Office of Institutional Research is held accountable for producing standard and usable reports for each of the colleges and for the overall institution and that the Office of Student Success is responsible for designing early detection systems.
   d. Require each College to designate a faculty-led committee to oversee retention, with direct-line accountability to the associate deans of undergraduate education.

In *Hardwiring Student Success*, EAB identifies “creating accountability for success” as one of five key concepts essential to increasing retention rates. UK should ensure that accountability procedures are integrated at all levels, and throughout each step of the process.

**Summary of Longer-Term Recommendations**

1. Promote academic preparation and utilize effective recruitment efforts.
   a. During the admissions process, give more weight to high school GPA.
   b. If possible, recruit students with an ACT of 25.5 with movement toward 26.
   c. Aim for a mix of 1/3 nonresident and 2/3 resident with a class of 4800 – 5000.
   d. Implement a holistic admission approach that places UK in a category that can yield 87-90% first to second year retention and a six year graduation rate of 70-75%.
   e. Investigate the possibility of setting an admissions deadline for first-year students.
   f. Utilize a scholarship effort focused on outcomes.
   g. Create more college-focused sections of UK 101 and increase to two credit hours.
h. Continue to implement college-level, tailored readiness programs (e.g. Boot Camp) that prepare new students.

i. Build on themes that emphasize the UK’s expectations of success.

2. Using a data-driven approach, tailor retention strategies to address individual student needs.
   a. Integrate student involvement data into one 360-degree view of the student, including real-time monitoring, student alerts and small-segment management.
   b. Implement a policy for mandatory attendance taking in freshman courses and implement technology to capture student attendance and involvement in classes.
   c. Set expectation for faculty and students to have at least one scored item in the first three to four weeks of class time.
   d. Require participation in Impact Programs for students who stumble.
   e. Conduct specific assessment of high-risk majors.
   f. Review current activities and programs to see if they are effective and impactful over time.

3. Working with the colleges and faculty, develop a centralized system to connect students with resources needed for success.
   a. Create an Undergraduate Success Center that provides a “one stop shop” for academic and co-curricular services and activities.
   b. Create a first year experience office within the Success Center.
   c. Encourage involvement in at least one major organizational element through a quasi-mandatory Boot Camp.
   d. Modify Orientation to provide an increased academic focus.
   e. Expand “The Study” by opening a branch to the center of campus.
   f. Encourage students to live on campus.
   g. Explore innovative degree delivery systems.
   h. Develop programs to increase awareness of retention issues among faculty.
   i. Celebrate milestones.

4. Strengthen the impact of academic advising by adopting a comprehensive, customized approach that fosters college and faculty involvement
   a. Develop an explicit, coherent organizational philosophy in regard to advising.
   b. Identify retention leaders within each college to provide input into the overall advising philosophy, customize advising and retention solutions within that college and to encourage faculty participation.
   c. Expand efforts at interweaving successful academic advising, transition/alternate path counseling, and career counseling.
   d. Develop a case management system to monitor and measure different student touch points.
   e. Focus on students throughout their degree programs.
   f. Create a Student Financial Management Center.
   g. Increase resource and prioritization support for the SAP degree planner tool, enhanced mobile recruiting apps, etc.

5. Establish a bold culture with an expectation of graduation within four years.
   a. Launch a marketing and communications campaign which encourages students to graduate in four years.
   b. Investigate the viability of financial incentives for graduating in four years.
   c. Engage the student government in identifying ways to promote graduation and student success within the student body.

6. Promote greater engagement among upper-division students.
a. Increase students’ out-of-class contact and interaction with faculty through undergraduate research.

b. Create capstone courses for seniors.

c. Strengthen academic standards in upper division courses.

d. Address needs and promote interests of upper-division students through campus-based activities.

7. Improve evidence-based continuous improvement to ensure that accurate, recent data is always available.
   
a. Measure central and college-level retention programs.

b. Review program measures semi-annually.

c. Promote iterative team learning and application of findings through a regular and easily-accessible reporting system for retention.

8. Integrate accountability at all levels.
   
a. Ensure that improving the retention rates across all years and the graduation rate are major goals of the Associate Provost of Undergraduate Education.

b. Integrate retention accountability metrics into the yearly performance scorecards and goals of the Deans and Colleges, as well as into other units (e.g., Student Affairs, UGE, International Center).

c. Implement accountability metrics to ensure that the Office of Institutional Research is held accountable for producing standard and usable reports for each of the colleges and for the overall institution and that the Office of Student Success is responsible for designing early detection systems.

d. Require each College to designate a faculty-led committee to oversee retention, with direct-line accountability to the associate deans of undergraduate education.
A Chronological Look at Previous Plans
A Chronological Look at Previous Plans

Overview

Over the past five years, several university groups have convened to examine ways to improve retention and graduation at UK. Overarching themes among the groups’ recommendations include:

- **Community.** All groups concluded that retention efforts depended on the efforts of the entire UK community. High-impact faculty-student interactions, and a sense of belonging fostered through student participation in programs centered on small groups, were consistently highlighted as essential to student retention.

- **Collaboration.** The groups noted the importance of building and nurturing relationships with outside groups to achieve a variety of retention-related objectives - from improving student pipelines to increasing on-campus activity by employers.

- **Personalization.** Engagement and retention require an approach that is tailored to the individual student. The groups agreed that program development must be driven by students and their needs and dreams for the future.

- **Innovation.** The groups determined that UK should remain on the cutting edge of innovation and technology by developing a 21st century approach to learning and communications.

- **Continuity.** Seamless transitions and clear pathways for students are necessary from point of entry to graduation. The idea of a “one-stop shop” for student success was raised by multiple groups.

- **A Data-Driven Approach.** The groups agreed that improving persistence and completion relies heavily upon accessible and consistent data and analytics.

This section provides a chronological look at the various groups and a summary of their recommendations.

**Key Findings**
In 2007 and 2008, a task force appointed by Provost Kumble Subbaswamy studied issues pertaining to retention and graduation. This task force, the Provost’s Retention Workgroup, created the Retention Strategic Plan, a life-cycle framework strategic plan to improve entry, persistence, and timely graduation of UK students.

The Workgroup identified the following objectives:

- **Attract and enroll more high-ability students** from all societal segments to UK. This was to be achieved through initiatives such as enhancing the visibility of undergraduate programs and initiatives to potential students, providing robust opportunities for undergraduate research and creative activities with faculty, and creating programs that educate potential students and parents on what it means to be a student at UK.

- **Ensure a seamless transition from high schools and community colleges to a degree path** at UK. Strategies included marketing and developing dual-enrollment programs and the Academic Readiness Program, expanding transition courses for transfer students, promoting summer advising and orientation programming, and increasing scholarship and grant program funding for at-risk students.

- **Build partnerships with P-12** to enhance preparation of students for college success. Initiatives included reducing the number of incoming first-year UK students from KY high schools requiring development education, correctly placing 100% of first-year students in the Academic Readiness Program, developing dual-credit programs with high schools, and developing STEM programming to enhance teaching and learning in high schools that prepares students for university learning.

- **Provide high-quality, professional advising** and advising-based services for all undergraduate students. This objective focused on academic advisors, including hiring practices, their visibility on campus, the expansion of their ranks, the development of a career ladder, continuous professional development, etc.

- **Provide effective university-wide student academic and co-curricular support and resources** to aid in student success and graduation. Strategies included increasing the use of student tracking technologies and communication campaigns, increasing utilization of academic enhancement services, developing an Undergraduate Success Center to provide a “one stop shop” for academic and co-curricular services and activities, developing an Early Alert System, and enhancing grade reporting.

- **Provide effective first-year programming** to enhance academic success and institutional connection. Strategies to be used to achieve this goal included providing access to first-year seminar programs for all incoming students, offering more activities, and fostering collaborations between different departments on campus.

- **Enhance the role of faculty in student success.** This goal included strategies such as helping faculty understand their impact on student retention and encouraging faculty to develop pedagogical approaches that enhance engagement in and out of the classroom.

- **Develop programming to ensure continued progress towards degree attainment.** Strategies included establishing programs/traditions for sophomores, offering re-recruitment incentives, and offering innovative programs for non-traditional students.

- **Provide major and career counseling** to ensure that students are progressing through a major with a clear vision of their career goals. Strategies included focusing on increasing use
of online services, developing strong relationships between career staff and colleges, providing career-focused courses, and expanding opportunities for credit-bearing learning experiences.

- **Enhance programming to identify at-risk students** and intervene proactively to enhance persistence. Methods to be used to achieve this objective included increasing retention rates in the Academic Readiness Program, implementing an integrated model for undergraduate student employment, providing proactive advising, and enhancing the Financial Early Alert system.

- **Ensure rigorous and meaningful cutting edge academic programming** that tracks the development of knowledge and its application to better prepare students for success. Strategies included increasing the number of faculty involved in undergraduate research project and certificate programs, developing innovative interdisciplinary certificate programs, and expanding opportunities for internships, Study Abroad, service learning, etc.

- **Provide multiple opportunities for students to explore job and career possibilities.** Strategies included increasing participation rates in community and service learning projects, providing opportunities for alumni mentoring and interaction, integrating real-world learning, and encouraging systematic involvement from employers.

**University Review Committee (2011)**

The 2011 University Review Committee, convened by President Eli Capilouto, was comprised of a diverse group of academic and administrative representatives with a collective institutional knowledge spanning several strategic planning efforts. The Committee was charged with leading a discussion about how UK could build on its strengths and recent achievements to best serve its constituents over the next decade.

The Committee identified undergraduate retention and graduation as a principal challenge, noting that UK’s retention and graduation rates were significantly lower than those of peers. The Committee also drew attention to the results from the Student Attrition Survey, which suggested the undergraduate experience may not have been adequately challenging in some areas. Using as case studies peers who had made significant improvements in six-year graduation rates over a ten-year period, the Committee suggested the following initiatives to improve the undergraduate experience:

- **Expand Honors Program.** This expansion would provide challenge and a positive social environment to higher-ability students, as well as further supporting retention efforts.

- **Increase scholarships.** An increase in both merit and need-based aid would facilitate UK’s efforts in recruiting and retaining high-quality students.

- **Improve residential housing experience.** A more engaged, personal and scholarly living situation would ease students’ transition to living away from home and support their ability to study effectively.

- **Continue to innovate the delivery of classes.** An innovative approach to large classes, use of technology, courses, and use of faculty and instructors will help UK develop a 21st century approach to learning.

**Student Success Task Force Report (2012)**
The Student Success Task Force met during the summer of 2012 and was comprised of students, administrators, faculty and staff. The Task Force was charged with developing a coordinated response to improve UK’s retention rate and to improve student outcomes generally. Two particular areas of focus included an identification of best practices in student retention and an examination of how to improve retention after students’ second year of college.

The Task Force identified “connecting students to UK’s network of support and helping them feel like they belong” as a fundamental key to retention. Barriers to a successful UK support system included the difficulty of connecting with students early in their academic careers, a failure to utilize existing resources because of their low profile or difficulty to navigate, a lack of an internalized vision of success among the student body, an advising apparatus that was not sufficiently organized and proactive, and a program-centered rather than student-centered approach to support programs.

The Task Force’s final recommendations included:

- **Develop a new student success model** that focuses on strategic admissions, clear pathways, academic achievement, meaningful engagement, persistence & progression, and post-college performance and ensure it is widely embraced and understood by the faculty, staff and administrators. This model will also help to establish two enablers, information and communication, that will better enable the collaborative groups of the model to interpret data and communicate more effectively.

- **Enhance recruitment strategies of high-value students** and establish a transfer office to facilitate transfers of mature, low-risk, high-achieving students—who are in their 1st or 2nd year of college but enrolled elsewhere—to the University of Kentucky.

- Publicize and market the University’s strengths and talents, to include the Chellgren Center, the Honors Program, living learning programs and education abroad opportunities.

- Create a centralized testing center to increase the utilization of student assessment and testing services that are currently inefficient, underutilized, or non-existent.

- **Bring “The Study” to central campus** so that all students—including those residing in north campus dorms or off campus—can more easily access tutoring and mentoring services.

- Enhance and improve the newly created (October 2012) student success online resource center website so that it becomes the major portal for information and resources aimed to students and those committed to their success.

- Search out and **develop collaborative relationships with strategic partners** who share a common goal in improving student outcomes.

- **Expand the summer academy for high-risk students** to help prepare them for the academic rigors of college-level work.

- Improve the communication delivery of data and analytics to best leverage it to the university’s advantage.

- Identify the timeline for financial aid to better understand financial barriers that students encounter.

*Retention Improvement Report (2012)*
During August 2012, faculty, staff, and students from a wide variety of Colleges and departments convened to generate ideas on how to achieve greater levels of student success at UK, focusing on how to empower and involve as many people as possible in improving retention. The group agreed on three common principles to student success: a “one student at a time” mentality, ongoing smaller-scale improvements, and “it takes a village to retain a student.” The group’s global retention ideas included:

- Encouraging employees to view student success as their main job
- Weaving post-UK success into everything from recruiting to graduation
- Capitalizing on small settings that already exist at UK (e.g., UK101, WRD/CIS classes) by providing employees with retention training
- Creating a one-stop shop for student services
- Creating a retention-focused office under the Provost
- Providing academic and social gathering places throughout campus
- Faculty involvement in retention improvement
- Flexible Bachelor’s degree and four year degree plans
- Reasonable academic progress for all students (not just those with certain types of aid)
- Human Resources is a significant (but underutilized) resource for retention improvement
- Communication platform for retention is needed

Detailed recommendations were also provided for the specific areas of Academics, Satisfaction, Finances, Early Success Stage, Immediate Success Stage, and Final Success Stage.
Major Findings from UK’s Research on Retention
Major Findings from UK’s Research on Retention

Overview

Over the past 13 years, the Office of Institutional Research has developed many reports to help the University community develop a better understanding of why some students leave UK before earning a bachelor’s degree. This section provides an overview of the major findings from this research.

Key Findings

1. **A student’s academic preparation is the single most important predictor of retention.**

   UK’s research on student retention demonstrates the importance of academic preparation in helping students adjust to the demands of university life and thrive academically during their first year. The single most important predictor of fall-to-fall retention is a student’s high school GPA. Over the past five cohorts, students who earned high school GPAs of 3.75 or above achieved retention rates ranging from 88.8 percent to 90.7 percent. Students who earned high school GPAs of 3.00 to 3.25 were retained at rates varying from 70.3 percent to 76.1 percent. The high school GPA accounts for a greater proportion of variance in the first-semester GPA at UK than all other measures combined, including standardized test scores, demographic variables, and non-cognitive predictors. The first-semester GPA is the strongest predictor of whether a student will return the following fall to UK.

   Another measure of academic preparation, the ACT Composite score, is also a significant predictor of first-semester GPA and retention. In one of the earliest studies on retention at UK (IR Brief, January 2001), students who arrived at UK with ACT Composite scores of 28 and above were twice as likely to graduate as students who earned Composite scores below 18. In 2013, students who
scored in the upper quartile on this exam achieved retention rates ranging between 88.1 percent and 91.1 percent over the past five years, while students who scored in the lower quartile were retained at mucha lower rates, ranging from 72.4 percent to 75.3 percent.

2. Demographic variables play an important role in retention.

Female students are somewhat more likely to be retained than male students. Over the past five years, female retention rates have varied from 79.2 percent to 85.8 percent, compared to a range of 77.2 percent to 83.0 percent for men. In an early study conducted at UK (IR Brief, April 2002), male students reported experiencing significantly less challenge academically than females. Males were twice as likely as females to indicate that their final year in high school was “not at all challenging” (19.5% versus 10.0%). Two explanations for this gender difference seem plausible. First, high school males may be better prepared academically than females and may simply be bored with the low-key demands of their coursework. Second, a substantial number of males may have mentally “checked out” during their senior year and are academically disengaged from their classes. The preponderance of evidence (e.g., high school grades, self-reported time spent studying or preparing for class) supports the latter explanation.

Students who are members of an under-represented race/ethnicity (i.e., African American, Hispanic or Latino, American Indian/Alaska Native, or Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander) have achieved somewhat lower retention rates than students of well-represented races (i.e., white, Asian). Under-represented students’ retention rates have ranged from 71.3 percent to 79.8 percent over the last five years, compared to well-represented students whose retention rates have ranged from 80.6 percent to 83.0 percent.

The University of Kentucky has offered the Freshman Summer Program (FSP) as a way to improve the retention rates of African American students since 1985 (IR Brief, October 2006). In 2003, UK expanded the target population for this program to include Hispanic, American Indian, first-generation and low-income students. Students admitted to the program have the opportunity to earn up to six college credits and attend information sessions and workshops that familiarize them with campus resources and skills critical to their academic success. In an effort to understand how the FSP program contributes to students’ success, the Institutional Research Office found that FSP was positively associated with fall semester GPA. On average, after holding all other variables constants, FSP students achieved a 0.21 higher fall semester GPA than African American students who did not participate in the program. FSP program was not a significant predictor of spring GPA or the second fall term GPA, suggesting that the effects of the program may begin to dissipate late in freshman year. Relative to students who did not go through the program, FSP students had higher first-year grades, which—in turn—were found to be the best predictor of fall-to-fall retention.

Students from low-income families who are recipients of Pell Grants are less likely to be retained (five-year range: 72.3% to 76.9%) than students who did not receive Pell Grants (five-year range: 82.0% to 84.1%). First-generation students are also somewhat at-risk for dropping out or transferring. First-generation students had retention rates over the last five years varying from 72.5% to 75.2%, compared to a range of 81.5% to 83.9% for students whose parent(s) had attended college. Students from Kentucky are somewhat more likely to be retained than nonresident students (five-year range: KY students 81.2% to 82.8%; nonresident students 77.1% to 80.7%). Students from Fayette County had higher retention rates (82.2% to 86.0%) than nonresident students and students from elsewhere in Kentucky.
3. Non-cognitive indicators are correlated with a student's satisfaction with UK and the likelihood of attrition.

UK’s fall and spring surveys of first-year students have documented the importance of non-cognitive indicators in developing a nuanced appreciation of retention. Relative to their dissatisfied peers, first-year students who were satisfied with UK were less likely to feel lonely, isolated from others, or worried about meeting new people, and were more likely to be socially engaged (IR Brief, November 2002). Moreover, satisfied first-year students were less likely to report feeling unmotivated, lacking in energy, or stressed out. Compared to students who earned relatively lower first-year GPAs, academically successful students were less likely to score high on a ‘stress index’ consisting of six traumatic life events (e.g., serious financial difficulties, serious illness or injury, ‘break-up’ with romantic partner).

In 2010, the Office of Institutional Research piloted a new student Attrition Survey to learn more about the expectations and experiences of non-returning freshmen and sophomores. Four of five (84%) first-year students planned to attend another institution, 14% wanted to take a break from college, and 2% did not plan to enroll in college. Students’ responses to the survey differed by their first-year UK GPA (GPA<3.0 vs. GPA>=3.0). Responses to detailed follow-up questions on reasons for leaving UK suggested academic performance was the single most important reason for students with GPAs less than 3.0 (63% vs. 11% of students with GPA>=3.0). On the other hand, students in the higher GPA group most frequently selected “I wanted to be closer to home, family, or friends” (56%) and “It has been difficult for me to meet and make friends” (53%). In both groups, a high percentage of students selected ‘large class sizes’ as an important or very important reason for leaving UK (41% in GPA>=3.0 and 40% in GPA<3.0).

4. Campus-based initiatives and organizations are critical to making students feel like they belong at UK and can thrive here.

The literature on student involvement and engagement suggests that students who are integrated academically and socially into the fabric of university life are more likely to persist until they earn their degrees. At UK, several institutional research studies have touched upon this theme.

Students who live in residence halls are significantly more likely to return for a second year of college than students living off-campus (IR Brief, February 2011). Students who lived on campus were more likely to perceive the campus environment as ‘supportive’ on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) than students who lived off-campus. Relative to their peers who lived off-campus, students in the residence halls were more likely to report gains in personal and social competence and in general education on NSSE.

Participation in Living Learning Programs (LLPs) is correlated with lower rates of attrition. An evaluation of the impact of LLPs at UK (IR Brief, fall 2011) showed that first-year students in LLPs were academically better prepared than their cohort peers. Even after adjusting for high school GPAs and ACT scores, students participating in the LLPs still had higher first fall GPAs and higher retention rates than their counterparts in the 2008 cohort. Analysis of UK’s Survey of First-year Experiences revealed that LLP participants were more likely to: declare a major during their freshman year; find their academic work interesting; and be successful in adjusting to academic demands of college. Compared to their cohort peers, students participating in LLPs indicated they had greater academic self-confidence and more meaningful interaction with faculty. Finally, LLP
students reported more interaction with diverse students and were more likely to develop close friendships or personal relationships with other students.

Student involvement and engagement theories would predict that participation in clubs and campus-based organizations can boost retention because they promote a sense of belongingness and a network of friends and acquaintances. Institutional research evaluated the impact of Greek organizations on retention rates in 2011. The first to second fall retention rate was higher for students belonging to a Greek organization than for students who had not joined a fraternity or sorority. For the fall 2008 cohort, 88.5% of the Greek students and 77.1% of the non-Greek students returned to UK for the second fall. For the fall 2009 cohort, 90.8% of the Greeks and 78.2% of the non-Greeks came back the next fall. For the two cohorts, Greek students also earned higher first-year GPAs (2.91 and 2.97) than students who were not members of a fraternity or sorority (2.69, 2.72). Adjusting for HS GPA, ACT scores, and demographic variables did not substantially change the effect of Greek membership on the retention rate, but it significantly lowered the difference between Greeks and non-Greeks’ average first-year GPAs, particularly between the Greek and non-Greek students living in campus housing. This finding may suggest that Greek students are more committed to UK, and even those who are less academically successful prefer not to leave.

5. **Effective retention strategies must address the attrition of students at every significant point in the academic pipeline.**

Most retention research at UK and at other universities has focused on variables that affect the likelihood a student will return for a second year of college. At UK, the University Review Committee issued a 2011 report that drew attention to two important trends. While UK’s first-year attrition rate had decreased in recent years, the percentage of students who drop out either during or just after their sophomore year had increased (the graph below illustrates the share of students lost each year, by cohort). To understand why students left UK at some point in their sophomore year, the Office of Institutional Research developed a regression model to predict why some students drop out at this time and analyzed a recently developed Attrition Survey (Unpublished IR Brief).
Cumulative GPA after the second fall was a strong predictor of retention from the second to the third year; the probability of retention increased with the value of GPA. Students who had a downward academic trajectory (i.e., a declining GPA (1st fall < 1st year < 2nd fall), were retained at a lower rate. Students with a higher number of earned credit hours had a higher probability of being retained for the 3rd fall. Students with a higher number of withdrawals had a lower probability of being retained from the 2nd to 3rd year. Students who took courses that received lower ratings for instructor quality on course evaluations tended to have lower retention rates, particularly those who were in classes that averaged evaluations of 3.00 or less. Students who took more courses taught by full-time faculty were more likely to be retained. First generation students were less likely to be retained. Interestingly, after controlling for all other variables, women were less likely to be retained from the second to the third year. High school academic variables—HS GPA, ACT, and the number of deficiencies—were strongly related to the 2nd to 3rd year retention when considered separately, but they became non-significant when included in a model with academic variables at UK.

The findings from the Attrition Survey administered to students who were not returning to UK has shed some light on students’ reasons for transferring or stopping out. The following reasons for leaving UK were selected by the highest percentage of sophomores: “My academic Performance” (42%), “I wanted to be closer to home, family, or friends” (38%), “Lack of motivation” (36%), “Stress of College Life” (35%), “I spent less time studying than I should have to be successful academically” (33%), “Quality of courses” (33%), and the “Quality of teaching” (32%). The three most common reasons for leaving given by students with a GPA equal to or greater than 3.0 were: “I wanted to be closer to home, family, or friends” (47%), “I am more serious about my education than most undergraduates at UK” (31%), and “Course availability” (31%). The three most common reasons given by students with a GPA less than 3.0 were: “My Academic Performance” (54%), “I spent less time studying than I should have to be successful academically” (46%), and “Lack of motivation” (44%).

6. Special issues in the retention of upper-division students demand our attention.

Two important issues concerning the retention of upper division students warrant our attention. First, six-year graduation rates of African American students are still well below the graduation rate for the entire cohort. African American graduation rates in the 2004 cohort were nearly 20 percentage-points below the overall rate. We can be gratified that the gap for African American students has narrowed considerably over the past two years and was under 8 percentage-points for the 2006 cohort. However, this achievement gap requires our continued vigilance.

Another issue that deserves the attention of the UK community is the academic disengagement of juniors and seniors, as measured by NSSE. While the very positive survey results for first-year students produced a sense of gratification in 2012, the findings for our seniors should be a cause for concern and reflection. Seniors reported being less engaged than students at other doctoral research institutions on three of the five benchmarks—Academic Challenge, Enriching Educational Experiences, and Supportive Campus environment. Seniors did not differ from their peers on the remaining two benchmarks. These findings suggest we might want to re-examine our strategic planning efforts directed at improving the experience of students during their upper division years. The graph below illustrates retention rates by reporting year:

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Summary of Key Findings

1. A student’s academic preparation is the single most important predictor of retention.
2. Demographic variables play an important role in retention.
3. Non-cognitive indicators are correlated with a student’s satisfaction with UK and the likelihood of attrition.
4. Campus-based initiatives and organizations are critical to making students feel like they belong at UK and can thrive here.
5. Effective retention strategies must address the attrition of students at every significant point in the academic pipeline.
6. Special issues in the retention of upper-division students demand our attention.
Best Practice Reports
Best Practice Reports

Overview

A myriad of studies exist focusing on retention and graduation theories, strategies, and organization. This section centers primarily on research conducted by the Education Advisory Board, particularly *Hardwiring Student Success: Building Disciplines for Retention and Timely Graduation*. Using as a guide EAB’s *Top Lessons from the Research* and *Understanding Your Current Practice*, current UK programs and strategies are compared to best practices.

Key Findings

1. **Accountability is essential for decreasing attrition.**

   EAB notes that retention can no longer be “owned by everyone and no one.” When accountability is absent, partnerships are jeopardized, conflicting messages arise, duplication occurs, and resources are underutilized. Over the past five years, UK has made significant efforts to stress everyone’s responsibility in impacting student persistence and completion rates. Overall, these efforts have been successful: the student success message is becoming pervasive, spanning all Colleges and units.

   Based on a review (during Summer 2013) of retention organization practices at five UK benchmarks, six research universities participating in the Educational Advisory Board, and the best practices outlined in *Hardwiring Student Success*, UK has proactively organized its student persistence efforts. This centralized approach establishes a single source of responsibility for retention, facilitating consistency and collaboration across campus.

   While a centralized structure is in place at UK, obstacles do exist. Within the past five years, there have been four groups charged with examining retention, often with little consideration of previous work and/or recommendations. Moreover, there has not been a significant assessment of the effectiveness (cost and/or performance) of initiatives and strategies; nor has there been a comprehensive examination of the barriers unintentionally created by missing, inconsistent, outdated, and/or convoluted information, procedures, and policies. Work also needs to continue on promoting student persistence as a continual process; first to second year retention is only the first step, but is often the primary concern. Four-year degree completion (rather than one-year retention or six-year graduation) should be the focus for the university community.

2. **Intervention for at-risk students must occur early and often.**

   While midterm grades have traditionally been used as a barometer to identify at-risk students, best practice research indicates that the first five weeks are critical for adequate intervention. Universities must establish early alert and warning systems with quick turnaround for contacting students, and data regarding student pre-entrance characteristics must be available by the third week of classes. Additionally, many universities are requiring class attendance for first-year courses and graded assignments within the first three to four weeks of classes. This time-sensitive approach places much responsibility on faculty, advisors, and those overseeing data analytics.
UK’s Student Alert Referral System ([http://www.uky.edu/UGE/alert.html](http://www.uky.edu/UGE/alert.html)) is instrumental in identifying students with academic and behavioral issues that present obstacles to student success, but the effectiveness of the system is dependent on faculty participation. Once an alert is made, emails are instantaneously sent to the student and his advisor (academic issues) or to the Students of Concern committee (behavioral issues). For academic issues, advisors reach out to the student promptly, usually by email. The student is instructed to contact his advisor and/or his instructor to resolve the academic issue in question. Though outreach to the student for academic issues is fairly instantaneous, the timeline depends on when (or if) the student responds to the alert. For behavioral issues, the SOC committee determines promptly whether immediate action or continued monitoring of the situation is required.

Mandatory class attendance tracking for first-year courses has been recommended by both the Retention Improvement Committee and within the 2009 – 2014 Retention Strategic Plan. While UK 101 classes have implemented this requirement, it is not mandatory for all first-year courses.

Summary information regarding enrollment and the freshmen cohort are available within the first three weeks of class; however, disaggregated data at the college and department level or by special populations and targeted groups are not typically available until later in the semester. Recurring recommendations suggest improving delivery of data and increasing data access, integrity, and sufficiency. Finalizing current efforts toward the new degree audit system, advising hub, Hobsons Retain, and an online student success dashboard would facilitate greatly student level data, assessment, and management toward persistence and completion.

Engagement alerts have also become more prevalent. For example, Residence Life and Living Learning Programs use alerts to indicate inclusion/exclusion in residence halls, Student Involvement to indicate participation/non-participation in student organizations, Greek Life to identify decreasing involvement in a fraternity or sorority, and Colleges and departments to identify participation in discipline-specific programs. While many programs and organizations use informal measures of tracking and participation, UK does not have a formalized system established for engagement alerts. With the importance of engagement pervading the research, it is reasonable to conclude that UK may want to explore more formalized and systematic ways to track and measure involvement and engagement.

3. Financial issues must be proactively addressed with solutions that are tailored to the student.

As research indicates and experience supports, financial issues contribute significantly to student attrition. The offices of Financial Aid and Student Account Services, in collaboration with the Financial Ombud (all under Enrollment Management), work diligently to provide the best packages and payment options to students and parents. These areas provide a student-oriented approach in the administration of aid programs by being responsive to the needs of students, families, and other constituents. These areas offer Financing Your Future workshops allowing students to learn more about how to best finance their college education, and work to proactively discover and resolve student financial concerns throughout the semester. For example, students with impending holds are notified and offered counseling and/or alternative plans. This outreach allows students to register and can easily resolve student concerns and/or outstanding balances.
Additionally, new financial strategies have been implemented to maximize scholarship opportunities. An online scholarship search tool provides detailed information in a readily accessible format regarding all scholarship opportunities on campus (first year and beyond). Enrollment Management stacks scholarship opportunities up to the cost of attendance to ensure that UK is offering the most competitive scholarship packages possible. Guest Pay has also been implemented, allowing students to provide access through myUK so that they (and parents/guardians) can access student account statements and can make credit card payments.

Increasing scholarship and grant opportunities fosters student persistence by increasing university attractiveness and commitment by new students and motivating and incentivizing students in years two through four. Attention may be warranted for offering student success scholarships, during years two through four, to those students exhibiting success and/or overcoming barriers; and/or increasing opportunities for emergency grants for students at-risk of leaving as a result of financial issues.

4. UK must provide and promote clear pathways toward completion.

Research emphasizes the importance of investment in retention beyond the first year, as attrition regularly occurs in years two through four. To promote clear pathways toward completion, universities are establishing Degree Maps in various forms: four year plans providing semester by semester course progressions to complete all program requirements within four years; milestone maps including mandatory course completions, minimum GPA requirements, and suggested actions for remaining on course to graduation; and what-if maps offering course progressions for those considering double majors, study abroad, alternative majors, and/or other opportunities. At UK, the course completion requirements for all programs are outlined online: [http://www.uky.edu/registrar/major-sheets](http://www.uky.edu/registrar/major-sheets). Many programs also offer more detailed four year programs, although this practice has not been implemented university-wide. Even fewer programs offer milestone maps and what-if maps, suggesting an opportunity for exploration and expansion of these research-based ideas.

Complementing Degree Maps is the (recurring) need for good data analytics. Not only must retention analyses occur, but also degree progression analysis: how many credit hours are students completing each semester? Are earned credit hours advancing students toward completing a degree? What courses are serving as gatekeepers or roadblocks to program success? What are DEW rates by department, course, and instructor? What sequence of courses provides optimal success? What online or summer courses can/should be offered to get students back on track? How can we reduce time to degree without sacrificing curriculum/content? What innovative approaches can be implemented regarding large classes, use of technology, and course delivery?

The role of advising in degree completion cannot be emphasized enough. Advisors and their relationships with students play a critical role in student success. UK has a well-established and highly respected advising operation, particularly within Undergraduate Studies. Continuous professional development is promoted for academic advising staff, and includes The Advising Network ([http://www.uky.edu/studentsuccess/advising-network](http://www.uky.edu/studentsuccess/advising-network)) and the creation of an online, campus-wide advisor manual to be launched in Spring 2014. Advising at UK is based on providing meaningful relationships and responding promptly to varying student needs.
A growing trend within the research recommends stronger connections between academic advising and career counseling, with the goal of providing seamless transitions between academic and career planning. This concept offers another research-based idea for UK to explore, and would serve as a valuable asset to help students determine their best path, stay on course, determine visible goals, and discover career opportunities.

Best practice consistently supports fostering high-impact faculty student interaction. These interactions can be vital in developing student academic self-concept and fostering motivation and achievement. Programs and initiatives encouraging frequent and individual contact between students and faculty, whether in informal or formal settings, can prove to be beneficial for all those involved. Faculty members taking an interest in student academic progress could potentially make significant contributions in increasing intellectual and professional development. While UK offers opportunities for faculty student collaborations, more development should be encouraged in this area; particularly, in connecting students earlier in their academic career (freshmen and sophomores).

5. **A portfolio of programs should be utilized to aid off-course students.**

UK currently offers several intervention programs which have been successful in helping off-course students. Examples include advisor outreach to students who did not priority register for the upcoming semester, a peer-to-peer information network for rising sophomores, transcript monitoring for those requesting transcripts (who may be considering leaving), withdrawal policies (currently being expanded) providing exit interviews and alternatives to withdrawal, Hobsons Retain (currently being re-implemented after years of non-use), a student retention CRM technology solution, tailored communication plans for students at-risk, and many others.

Recommendations from the Retention Improvement Report and Retention Strategic Plan suggest that UK consider providing flexible Bachelor’s degrees or a Bachelor’s in Interdisciplinary Studies that work in concert with Project Graduate. Project Graduate identifies students with a large number of completed credit hours that are at-risk of leaving or have withdrawn from UK. Flexible degree programs or a BIS degree, that challenge students and prepare them for life beyond the academy, may offer incentives to stay and/or return to UK.

**Summary of Key Findings**

1. Accountability is essential for decreasing attrition.
2. Intervention for at-risk students must occur early and often.
3. Financial issues must be proactively addressed with solutions that are tailored to the student.
4. UK must provide and promote clear pathways toward completion.
5. A portfolio of programs should be utilized to aid off-course students.
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