**Overlooked Opportunities for Improvement**

Faculty and staff have chosen the general topic of targeted retention strategies for our Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). We have identified our QEP team (more on that later), and we are putting together some internal and external resources that will help us identify our greatest opportunities to help our students progress and graduate.

The strategies that come out of the QEP process will likely be institution-wide initiatives targeting large groups of students. What is often overlooked in processes like this are the “small” opportunities to make big impacts. To illustrate, we offer the following story:

*Dr. Phynn teaches BW 220: Introduction to Underwater Basket Weaving. At the end of the semester, students are evaluated on a final project in order to provide assessment data for a particular SLO. Dr. Phynn has 20 students complete the project. Eighteen students (90%) score “meet expectations” or higher.*

Most of us would be happy with 90% of our students meeting or exceeding our expectations on a final project. We would report our data to our assessment coordinator, assume we’re doing a great job, and move on to preparing the next course.

*Dr. Phynn examines her class more closely. She begins with the two students who failed to meet expectations. Digging a little deeper, she finds that one of the students has consistently struggled with basic tasks throughout the semester, so it is no surprise that a final project that combines those basic tasks would be difficult for the student to complete satisfactorily. The other student’s work was satisfactory up until about 4 weeks ago, when his work schedule changed; the student has struggled to keep up with assignments since then.*

We’ve now identified why those two students were unsuccessful. But that’s not the whole story, either.

*Dr. Phynn looks at her class roster from the beginning of the semester. She began with 30 students in the class. Over the semester, ten students drifted away. If she had taken those ten students into account in her assessment, she would have a success rate of 60% (18/30)—which leaves a lot of room for improvement.*

**Why did those students leave? She investigates and finds:**

- Some were transfer students who had taken the BW 101: Basic Basket Weaving Techniques prerequisite at their community college, but the community college class only spent 2 days covering basic underwater basket weaving skills as opposed to the 2 weeks her own department devotes to those skills.
- Some were first-generation students who had little experience with planning their course schedule. They did not realize how big the campus was and how far away the underwater facilities were from their previous class, so they were late almost every class period.
- Some were low income students who did not receive their financial aid early enough to purchase the supplies needed for class. By the time they had purchased those supplies, they had fallen behind in developing foundational skills.
- Some were marginalized students who were afraid to speak up in class.

And the successful students? Most were white, non-Pell eligible, non-first-generation
students who had started their college careers at the institution.

Missed opportunities abound here. A quick refresher, either in class or using supplemental instruction, of those skills learned in BW 101 that apply to this course could have helped everyone, especially those transfer students. A quick intervention with those late students in order to review their schedule could have helped them move some classes around so that the schedule would be more manageable. Providing some basic supplies during the first two weeks of class might have helped those with financial aid issues without singling them out. Small group activities could have encouraged those marginalized students to participate more fully.

Small interventions could have big results. As you are finishing your courses, collecting your final sets of assessment data, and analyzing the results, don’t forget to consider the unsuccessful students, especially those who drift away and did not participate in your assessments at all. What are they missing that you could provide?

The Big Picture—Where Are UTM’s Opportunities for Improving Retention and Graduation Rates?

This is the question we are hoping to address through our QEP. To begin, let’s examine some of our current graduation statistics for our students. (Source: [https://www.utm.edu/about/_pdfs/Diversity%20Retention%20Graduation%20Rates%202020-21.pdf](https://www.utm.edu/about/_pdfs/Diversity%20Retention%20Graduation%20Rates%202020-21.pdf).

The table in the next column provides the percentages of first-time, full-time undergraduate students who began their studies in Fall 2014 and earned bachelor’s degrees in six years or less.

Note that our overall graduation rate for the 2014-2020 cohort is 53.7%, which is fairly decent, but it does leave a lot of room for improvement. But looking at subcategories provides a grimmer picture—only 43.5% of Pell Grant recipients, 46.6% of Black students, and 44.8% of Hispanic students graduated within 6 years.

What about retention rates? The freshman-to-sophomore (fall 2019 to fall 2020) retention rate for full-time students was 73.8%, meaning that we lost more than 25% of the students we recruited for Fall 2019. In the same time frame, the retention rate for Black students was 71.3% and for White students was 74.1%.

(You can dig into more graduation and retention data here: [https://www.utm.edu/departments/irp/statistical_reports.php](https://www.utm.edu/departments/irp/statistical_reports.php).)

Our QEP team will be digging into this data, asking questions, and identifying strategies to improve retention and graduation rates. Our thanks to these people who agreed to serve on the QEP Committee:

Jamie Mantooth – Chair
Emalee Buttrey – Faculty Co-Chair
Erik Nordberg
Henri Giles
Janet Wilbert
Dawn Wilkins
Jamye Long
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Don’t forget to think about what you, your department, and your college can do to help your students succeed as you complete your assessment reports.

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