

***Division of Academic Affairs***  
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Retention Efforts at Ferris State University  
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**Retention at Ferris State University**

In the 2005 publication *Achieving and Sustaining Institutional Excellence* the authors conclude that institutions that place a high priority on the first-year experience of students are, indeed, successful when it comes to retention and increased graduation rates. The importance of institutional commitment is echoed in another 2005 publication *Challenging and Supporting the First Year Student*, in which the editors conclude that the emphasis on student learning, inside and outside the classroom, is essential to success, and in order to succeed, there must be a comprehensive university effort. Retention of students, of course, encompasses more than retaining first-year students. Graduation rates are the ultimate test of effective retention. A key for successful retention is creating and sustaining a culture and environment that enhances student success. We at Ferris State have been working hard toward that end, making significant progress and recognizing that continued efforts and initiatives will lead to enhanced retention and graduation rates.

A recent report of the House Fiscal Agency on State University Graduation Rates provides insight to the factors affecting graduation rates. They identified the following factors:

- Estimated median SAT or ACT equivalent of freshman class
- Admissions selectivity
- Carnegie classification
- Percent of undergraduates receiving Pell Grants
- Public vs. private sector
- Number of full-time equivalent (FTE) undergraduates
- Student-related expenditures per FTE student
- Percent of FTE undergraduate students age 25 or over
- Status as a historically black college or university
- Percent of undergraduates who are enrolled part-time
- Status as a commuter campus

Of these factors, the one identified to have the highest level of influence on graduation rates is the percent of undergraduates receiving Pell Grants. At Ferris nearly one-third of the students are on Pell Grants, the second highest percent of all state universities in Michigan.

In building on the literature and on our experience we add the following variables as key factors:

- First year experience
- Ability to change majors without significant consequences
- Flexibility and availability of academic offerings
- The number of hours students work
- The quality of advising

The House Fiscal Agency report indicated that Ferris State University ranked near the bottom of the 15 Michigan Universities in terms of six-year graduation rates. In a comparison of universities nationwide of similar size, percent of students on Pell grants, similar median SAT scores and Carnegie Foundation class identification, Ferris again ranked poorly, 14<sup>th</sup> out of 16. The array of six-year graduation rates among this group ranged from a low of 33.1% to a high of 55.8%.

The comparative retention and graduation data were based on Higher Education Institutional Data Index (HEIDI) which reports only completion of bachelors degrees. The State recognized this as a limitation of the data since completion of associate degrees is not accounted for, so in order to account for this limitation, an alternate degree completion measure was developed, measuring universities' ratio of degree completions to fiscal year equated students (FYES). This measure captures all enrollment and degree completions at each university. FSU ranks higher using this measure falling in the middle (#9) among the 15 Michigan public universities.

Our increased admission standards from an ACT of 15 or 2.25 GPA in 2002 to an ACT of 17 or GPA of 2.5 in 2006 has and will impact retention and graduation rates. However, it is clear from the data that we have more work to do in improving our graduation rates.

For that reason, the Division of Academic Affairs has approached the issue of student retention in an intentional and comprehensive manner, responding to the president's vision to create a learning-centered campus. Two years ago, the division began a comprehensive analysis. Based on this review, a variety of initiatives have been undertaken with the goal of increased student retention and improved graduation rates. The initiatives we have developed are aimed at enhancing student success and maximizing each student's potential. We believe they will impact retention and graduation rates. Below we have listed some of the more significant initiatives and academic support programs that we believe will enhance retention in years to come.

### **Academic Affairs Retention Initiatives**

1. **Academic Advising.** Academic Advising exerts a significant impact on student retention. One national study suggested that effective advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience. The Vice President for Academic Affairs charged a team on advising to examine current practices on campus with the goal of improving overall academic advisement. Initiatives have included the installation of a web-based Academic Advising Guide; advisor training workshops; support for a team of 14

taskforce members to attend the National Academic Advising Association's annual conference

2. **Hours to Graduation:** We have addressed the curricular barriers to degree completion by charging the academic colleges to review their requirements and work to reduce the total credits required to graduate to an absolute maximum of 128 hours with the goal of reaching 120 hours for graduation. The colleges answered the charge. So far, twenty-five programs reduced their credit hours, eliminating a total of 127 credit hours from degree requirements. Other programs are still in the process of curricular review.

3. **General Education Review:** We have encouraged colleges and programs to review general education requirements with an eye toward making them more flexible in order to permit students to change majors without having to "redo" that work thus making it more attractive to change programs within Ferris rather than transfer credits to another university.

4. **Grants:** We have two grant proposals currently under review, each focusing on retention of minority students.

5. **Learning Communities:** We have supported the "Learning Community" concept to support retention efforts at Ferris. Learning communities, sometimes called Living/Learning Communities or Freshman Interest Groups (FIG), are not a new concept to Ferris. We have an 8-year track record of success with the Justice Learning community. This community involves approximately 80 freshmen in pre-criminal justice who take a block of courses together. This year the students will also be housed in the same residence hall, creating a living/learning experience for the freshmen. The Criminal Justice program has been able to successfully track the increase in retention of students who take part in that community. Students in that community also have higher GPAs than the students who do not take part. Part of the Academic Affairs Divisional Plans for 2005-06 includes the creation of a living/learning community for Visual Design students, a living/learning community for Career Undecided students and a series of tied-courses (a modification of the learning community model) in the College of Arts and Sciences.

6. **Student Engagement:** Student Engagement has been identified as a key theme at the heart of student retention. The frequency and quality of contact with faculty, staff, and other students is an important predictor of student persistence. We have identified student engagement as a major thrust in the divisional plan. In an effort to better understand student engagement at Ferris, we collaborated with Student Affairs to study the National Student Survey of Engagement (NSSE) data to help direct effective programming within the division. Divisional support of the American Democracy Project (ADP) is aimed at increasing student engagement. The VPAA initiated and led the University's participation as one of eight universities nationwide to take part in the three year campus phase of the Political Engagement Project (PEP), an initiative of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and the *New York Times*.

7. **Assessment:** We have taken a number of steps in relation to program assessment and assessment of learning outcomes in order to assure quality educational experiences that will

impact student retention. One of the myths regarding student retention is that retention means lowering standards. Quite the opposite is true. Students demand a challenging academic experience. A recent national poll published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* revealed that in regard to the facilities on a campus, the two most important factors affecting students' decisions to attend an institution were the facilities that house the student's major and the quality of the library. While student unions and recreation centers are of interest to students, today's student is buying an education and in making that choice, the quality of the academic environment is key. Toward that end, Academic Affairs has supported increased efforts in learning outcomes assessment; has revised the Yearly Administrative Review of programs; has increased support of Academic Program Review; and has intensified support of individual programmatic accreditation self studies.

8. **Support Services:** Academic Affairs supports a number of academic support initiatives aimed at improving student retention: FSUS ( year-long freshman transition seminar); Academic Support Center; Writing Center; Structured Learning Assistance (SLA) program.

9. **Flexible Curricula:** We have worked with programs to increase the flexibility of their curricula within the freshman and sophomore years in order to make transfer from program to program easier for students who change their majors.

10. **Faculty Mentors:** We have worked with faculty to increase their understanding of their role as mentors to students outside of the classroom.

11. **BIS degree:** We have added a new degree option, the Bachelors of Integrated Studies, a flexible degree that allows students to tailor individualized programs of study drawing on academic course work from various colleges and departments within the university.

12. **0+4 Degree Programs:** We have conducted an analysis of our degree programs and have begun moving away from the 2+2 concept to a 0+4 degree model where appropriate. Establishing the four-year degree as the norm should decrease the "cooling" effect that associate degrees can have on degree completion and encourage more students to continue toward bachelors completion.

13. **Social Norming Campaign:** A comprehensive Social Norming Campaign for alcohol education is regularly conducted. These efforts include posters, radio spots, and class presentations. Recently in conjunction with Athletics, a grant was submitted and was received by Ferris to provide student advisors for classroom presentations and community building. Student Affairs bought an alcohol prevention tool for the FSUS 101 class. This intervention tool allows the student a self-guided confidential feedback on alcohol risks. It allows the student to evaluate and assess alcohol use on multiple occasions.

14. **Welcome Calls:** The Communication Center calls each new student to welcome the student and to provide any needed information that the student may require for an easy transition to the University. Those students with identified problems will be directed to professionals on campus. A personal note is sent to the student along with the Social Norming message of the semester. Later in the semester, every new student is called to

assess student transition to the University. Each student can win a pizza if they correctly identify the Social Norming message.

**15. Student Leadership:** Students Affairs sponsors many student leadership and campus activities designed to enhance community and engagement with the University. Recently, a Greek Life Task Force was launched evaluating the Greek life and making suggestions for improvement. A survey was conducted that evaluated the Greek life experiences on campus. These data will be utilized to enhance not just the Greek system but the overall activities of registered student organizations. A number of registered student organizations are professional groups that enhance the interaction between students and their curriculum, and outside activities.

**16. Welcome Week:** A full week of Welcome Week activities is provided that seek to engage the student in both learning and recreational activities such as Meijer Madness, special presentations, and continuing orientation.

**17. Minority Student Awareness:** The Minority Student Affairs Office regularly engages students in Native American, Hispanic, and African American events. Further, recent efforts have been made to engage charter school students before they come to the University. The College Day Program prepares students to enter the University and to learn about college life before entering the University. Another grant has been submitted by the Office of Minority Student Affairs with State government called “Gear-Up” which will allow the University to prepare educationally disadvantaged students for college matriculation and success.

**18. Assessment:** In addition to conducting basic research into student engagement by administering the NSSE (National Survey on Student Engagement), the NCHA (National College Health Assessment) was conducted to evaluate health practices by Ferris students on alcohol consumption and other drug practices. These data provide support for the Social Norming message for alcohol abuse prevention.

**19: Transfer Scholarships:** Four new Transfer Scholarships were implemented and administered during this year to assist high quality transfer students to enter the University. Four major scholarships were provided.

Transfer Academic Excellence Scholarship – 3.7 cumulative GPA, 24 accepted transfer credit hours, renewable for second year if student maintains a 3.5 cumulative GPA or higher, enrolled full-time in an undergraduate, degree granting program on the Big Rapids campus.

Transfer Academic Achievement Scholarship – 3.3 cumulative GPA, 24 accepted transfer credit hours, renewable for second year providing the student maintains a 3.25 cumulative GPA, enrolled full-time in an undergraduate, degree-granting program on the Big Rapids campus.

Non-Resident Transfer Scholarship – 3.3 cumulative GPA , at least 24 accepted transfer credit hours, must be non-resident, renewable for a second year if student

maintains a 3.25 cumulative GPA, enrolled full-time in an undergraduate, degree-granting program on the Big Rapids campus.

International Transfer Scholarship – 3.3 cumulative GPA, at least 24 accepted transfer credit hours, renewable for a second year if student maintains a 3.25 cumulative GPA, enrolled full-time in an undergraduate, degree-granting program on the Big Rapids campus, must be an international student.

**20. Harm Reduction Program:** The Harm Reduction Program is for students who have run into recurrent difficulty relating to alcohol and other drugs on or off campus. The Harm Reduction Program's goal is for students to learn a set of practical strategies that reduce negative consequences of Alcohol, Tobacco, and other Drug use. All students are required to attend one (50 minute) individual appointment with a counselor and then six (50 minute) group sessions. The small group format allows for discussion and facilitation by a trained professional.

**21. Community Interaction:** A variety of committees are dedicated to interaction with the community on important student issues such as the Greek Life Task Force and the Campus Community Task Force. These task forces involved local community leaders in planning and enhancing the overall town-campus community.