



Student Success at UNC Charlotte

A Series of Working Papers

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The Student Success Working Group

Tamara M. Johnson, Ph.D.
Office of Academic Affairs

As North Carolina's urban research university, The University of North Carolina at Charlotte is committed to offering internationally competitive programs of research and creative activity, exemplary academic programs, and focused community engagement initiatives. Part of UNC Charlotte's mission is to provide an accessible and affordable quality education that equips students with intellectual and professional skills, ethical principles, and an international perspective. In recent years, the University has been challenged to graduate accomplished, capable, and engaged citizens while juggling budget constraints, increasing enrollment, and a diversifying student population with a wide range of resource needs.

In response to these challenges, the Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, Dr. Joan Lorden, established the Student Success Working Group (SSWG) in 2011 to identify key initiatives to improve student success at UNC Charlotte. The philosophy behind the working group is intertwined with the UNC Charlotte's Quality Enhancement Program's (QEP) Student Learning Outcomes which emphasize a commitment to success, inquiry, and self and cultural awareness. These QEP Student Learning Outcomes engage first year students as active partners in their educational experiences by providing them with the resources to set personal and professional goals, develop and evaluate their own learning, and understand themselves and their role in local and global communities.

A collaborative effort, the SSWG brings together senior administrators, faculty, academic affairs staff (from Enrollment Services, Academic Services, the Atkins Library, Information Technology Services, International Programs, University College, and Academic Advising), and student affairs staff (Housing and Residence Life, Parent and Family Services, Student Activities, and Assessment). In a desire to bolster student success by improving undergraduate retention and time-to-degree rates, the SSWG focused its initial energies on the experiences of both first-time, full-time freshmen and transfer students. Focusing on students' experiences their first year on campus engages them early and creates momentum for a successful tenure at UNC Charlotte by introducing them to the University's academic culture and resources. The SSWG has since broadened its focus to discuss strategies that will enhance the success of all UNC Charlotte undergraduates. Members of the SSWG share information from across campus about who UNC Charlotte students are, where they come from, how they perform academically after arriving at UNC Charlotte, and what resources and processes the University can provide to help them succeed.

The working papers in this *Student Success at UNC Charlotte* series discuss topics related to improving the student experience. Reports will highlight existing programs at national and peer institutions, successful policies and programs that have been recently implemented at UNC Charlotte, challenges associated with executing these initiatives, and future directions for improvement.

UNC Charlotte Student Profile

Diversity

UNC Charlotte is a growing campus; total student enrollment increased from 17,241 in the 2000-01 academic year to 26,232 in 2012-13, 21,179 of whom are undergraduates. In 2012-2013, the majority (90.1%) of UNC Charlotte undergraduate students attended high school in (or are residents of) North Carolina.

Our student population is not only increasing, but is also diversifying. The percentage of ethnically diverse students has increased over six percentage points over the past 12 years to represent 29.3% of the student body. In Fall 2012, African-American students represented 17.0% of the student body, Asian and Asian-American students were 5.1%, Native American students were .5%, and the Hispanic student population increased to 6.7% (see Figure 1).

In Fall 2011, 31.8% entering students were first-generation college students, a percentage that has been steadily declining from 38.65% in 2007 (see Figure 2). This figure is based on the number of students who self-identified as first-generation upon entering the University. The numbers of military-affiliated students using Veterans Administration educational benefits has almost doubled since 2007, increasing from 398 in 2007 to 765 students entering in Fall 2012 (see Figure 3). Likewise, the number of adult students (24 years of age or older) has increased from 4,008 to 4,893 entering in Fall 2012 (see Figure 4). To accommodate working professionals, the University's Distance Education Program offers fully online degree programs to serve diverse student needs.

A diverse student population with different backgrounds, life experiences, and educational needs requires faculty and staff members to develop innovative approaches to pedagogy and academic support so that knowledge is accessible and academic success is possible for all students.

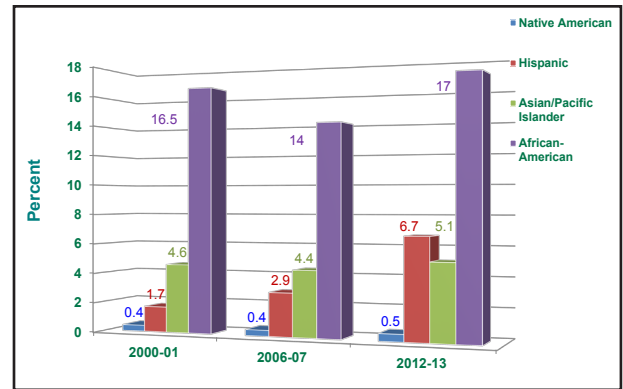


Fig. 1. Minority Presence

Source: UNC Charlotte Institutional Research

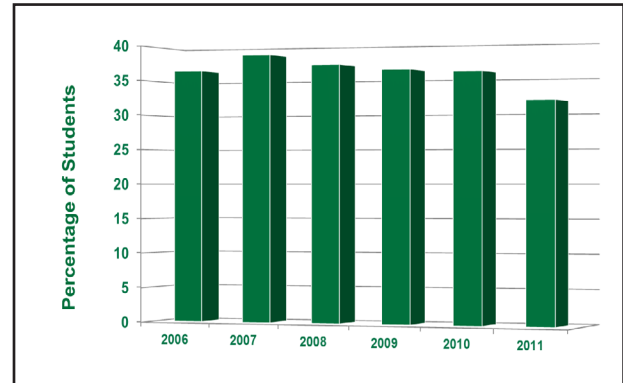


Fig. 2. First Generation Students

Source: Building Educational Strengths and Talents

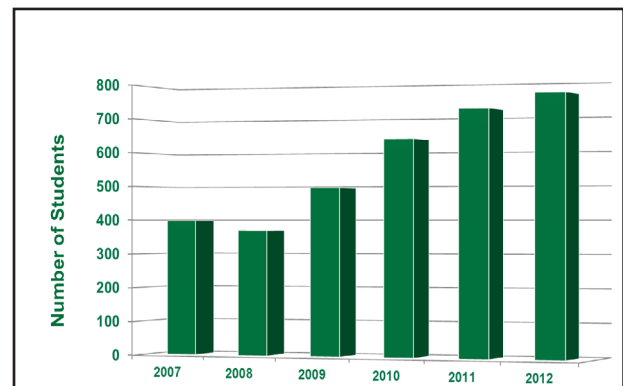


Fig. 3. Veterans Administration--Educational Benefits

Source: Veteran Student Services

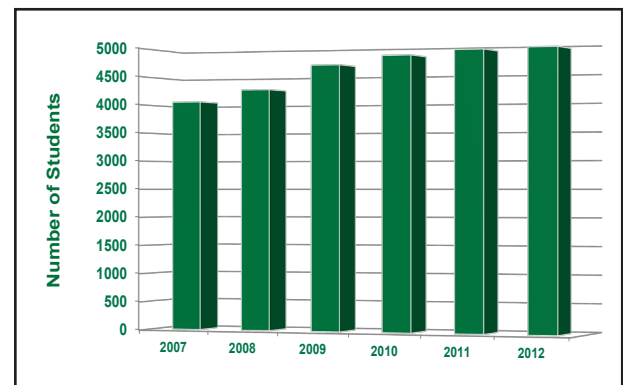


Fig. 4. Adult Students--24 Years of Age and Older

Source: UNC Charlotte Factbook

Performance Metrics

In October 2011, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that approximately 68% of U.S. high school graduates go to college, but only about 40% of those students graduate after four years, a rate that has been consistent for years ^{1,2}. With rising tuition costs and declining budgets, it is costly for students, for universities, and in the case of public institutions, for state tax payers to have students leave the university without earning a degree. If the goal of an institution of higher learning is to prepare graduates to make positive economic, social, and political contributions to society, then it is the responsibility of the institution to ensure that each student is offered a quality education and a clear pathway to timely graduation. It is within this discursive framework that the University of North Carolina Board of Governors elected to shift the measure by which UNC-system institutions are allocated part of their funding from a focus on enrollment to a focus on academic performance metrics. For UNC Charlotte, these performance metrics include:

- 1- Year Retention, First-time, Full-time Freshmen (FTFTFR)
- 6-Year Graduation, FTFTFR
- 4-Year Graduation, FTFTFR
- 4-Year Graduation, Transfer Students (entering as FTTR)
- Degrees Awarded to Pell Recipients
- Degree Efficiency
- Undergraduate Attempted Hours
- STEM/Health Degrees Awarded
- Financial integrity
- Alumni participation in annual giving

These performance metrics are not independent of one another. This working paper series will focus on the SSWG's attempt to address the first seven of these performance metrics involving retention and graduation rates, while simultaneously raising academic standards.

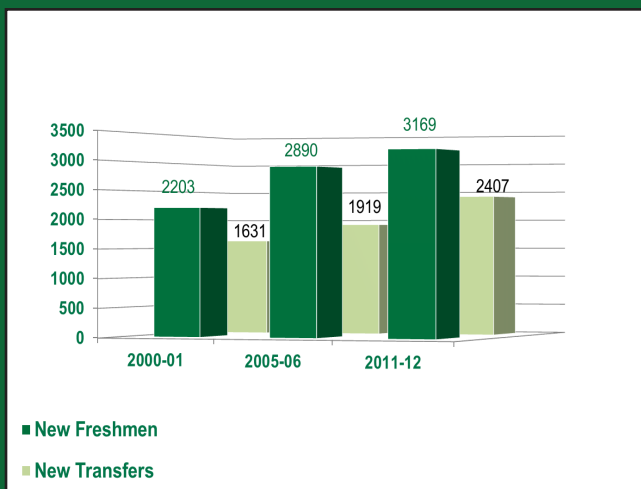


Fig. 5. Entering Class, Fall Semester

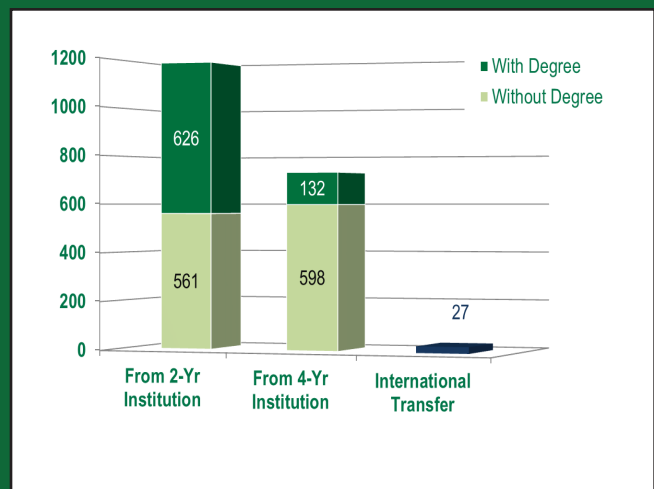


Fig. 6. Profile of Transfer Class (Fall 2011)

Source: UNC Charlotte Institutional Research

Retention and Graduation

In Fall 2012, 3,541 students were admitted as first-time, full-time freshmen, and 2,568 students were enrolled as transfer students. This entering class had an average weighted high school GPA of 3.71 and an average math and verbal combined SAT score of 1074. Of students transferring from a two-year institution and entering in 2012, over half (53%) had a degree when they enrolled at UNC Charlotte. Only (15.7%) of students transferring from a four-year institution had earned a degree before enrolling. While these measurements may help us understand our student population and identify potential resources, they are not the sole predictors of success. Members of the SSWG work collaboratively to streamline existing programs, processes, and resources to improve student achievement while developing, implementing, and assessing new ones.

Of the 3,169 first-year students entering in Fall 2011, 77.1% re-enrolled in Fall 2012, reflecting a slight decrease in retention over the previous two years. Overall, the University's retention rate for first year students has remained stable (77%-78%) for several years despite significant growth in the student body. UNC Charlotte's 2009 retention rate ranked 11th among peer institutions and was above the average peer institution retention rate of 75.5%. UNC Charlotte's target retention rates for Fall 2012, 2013, and 2014 cohorts are 77.9%, 78.3%, and 78.7% respectively. These targets are calculated in consultation with UNC General Administration. The SSWG is working to identify policies and practices that will allow the University to achieve these retention goals.

The average Grade Point Average (GPA) of the 2010 cohort of first-time, full-time Freshmen is 2.84. According to UNC Charlotte Institutional Research data for 2008-2010, a first semester GPA below 2.0 negatively affects first semester retention and can be detrimental to a student's decision or ability to remain at the University beyond the first year.

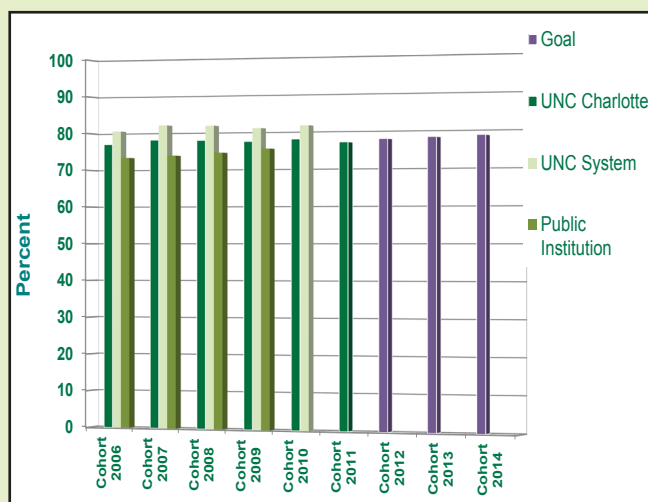


Fig. 8. Performance Metrics -- Retention

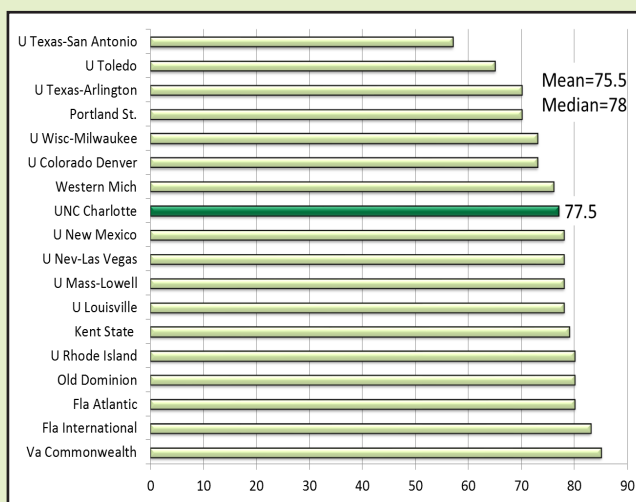


Fig. 7. Peers' Freshmen Retention Rates (2009 Cohort)

Source: Institutional Research; Office of Academic Affairs

Of first year students entering as a cohort in 2008, 25.0% graduated from the University in four years. Again, the four-year graduation rate has fluctuated between 25% and 27% since the 2003 cohort. UNC Charlotte four-year graduation rate of 26.3% for the 2006 cohort ranked third among peer institutions, well above the 19.9% peer average. UNC Charlotte's target four-year graduation rates for Fall 2009, 2010, and 2011 cohorts are 25.25%, 25.50%, and 25.75% respectively.

The University's six-year graduation rates of the 2004 cohort average of 55.1% are also well above the peer institution average of 45.4%. Of first-year students entering in 2005, 58.8% graduated from the University in six years, up from 50.5% for the 2001 cohort. UNC Charlotte's target six-year graduation rates for Fall 2007, 2008, and 2009 cohorts are 53.3%, 53.6%, and 54.0% respectively.

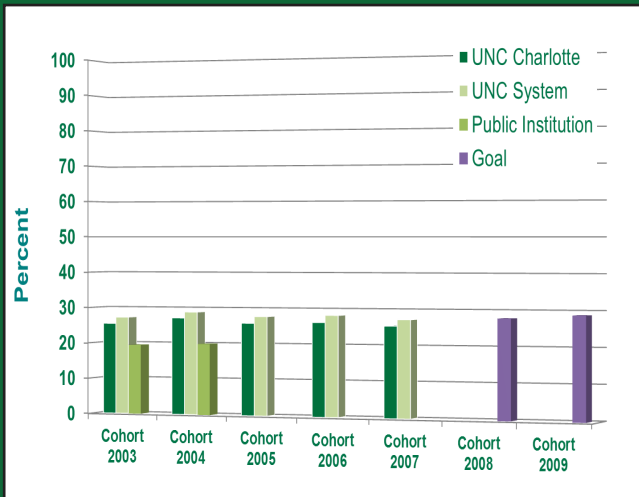


Fig. 9. Performance Metrics -- 4-Year Graduation

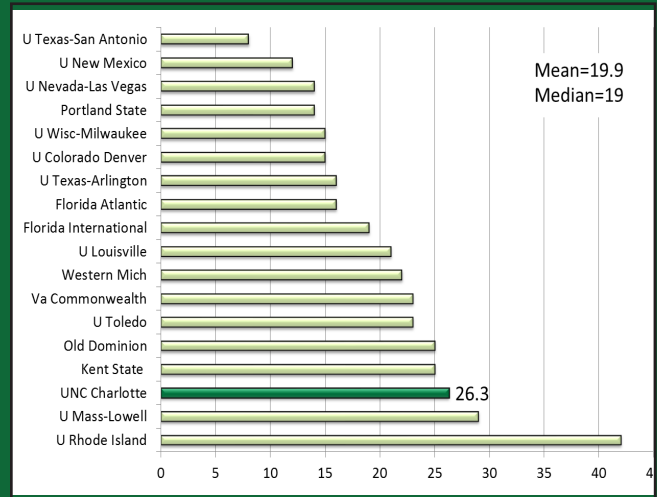


Fig. 10. Peers' 4-Year Graduation Rates

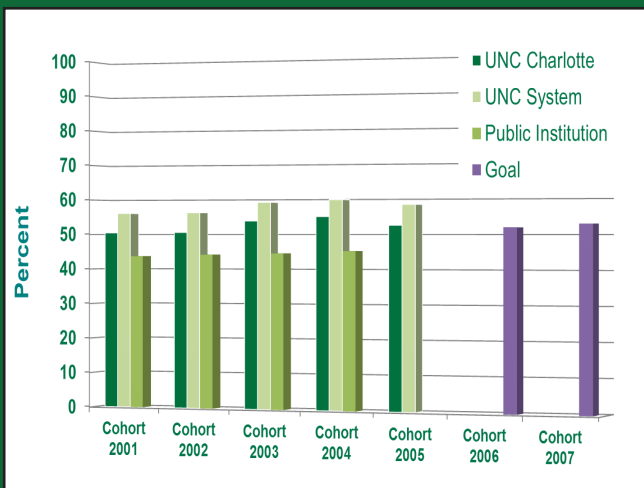


Fig. 11. Performance Metrics -- 6-Year Graduation

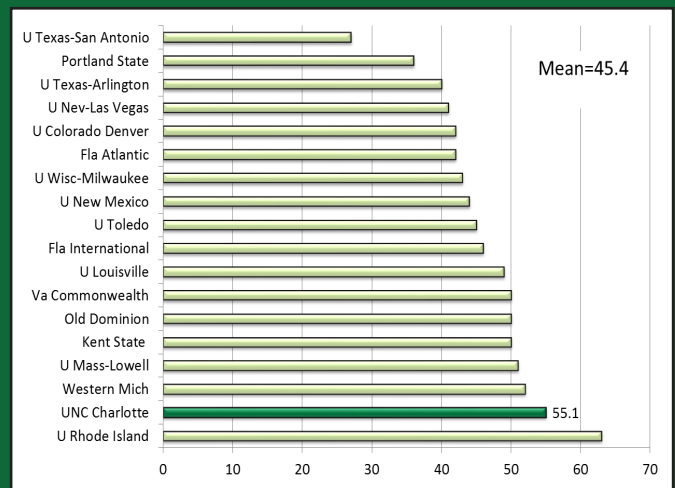


Fig. 12. Peers' 6-Year Graduation Rates

Source: Institutional Research; Office of Academic Affairs

Financial Aid

A major factor in student enrollment, retention, and timely graduation is the affordability of earning a college education. Expensive tuition costs will keep many American students from applying to college, and many enrolled students rely on financial aid packages or part-time employment to pay for an education. Changes in tuition and financial aid policies at the state and national level will increase the financial burden on students and may adversely affect student success and persistence³.

At UNC Charlotte, 14,578 undergraduate students (57.7%) received financial aid for the 2011-2012 academic year. The average unmet need for 2011-12, after the disbursement of need-based loans, was \$4,273. Upon graduation, the average UNC Charlotte undergraduate is approximately \$18,000 in education-related debt. In 2011-12, UNC Charlotte had the largest number of Pell Grant⁴ recipients in the UNC system with 9,033 students eligible for U.S. Pell grants that year; however, the year-round Pell Grant was eliminated for 2012-13, erasing approximately \$10 million in funding for UNC Charlotte students. In total, \$16.92 million in federal and state grants was eliminated for the 2012-13 academic year, contributing to a 17% reduction in need-based grant funding at the University. Rising tuition costs and shrinking grant packages will encourage us to explore programming possibilities to help students graduate on time.

Toward Student Success

Conversations in the SSWG identified areas that, when addressed rigorously, have the potential to advance student success. Therefore, the SSWG focused on refining policies and processes in the following areas:

- New Student Start-Up
 - Orientation Messages
 - Early Warning Systems
 - Freshman Seminars and Learning Communities
- The Road to Recovery: 49er Rebound
- Access and Active Learning
 - Large Course Redesign
 - Community Engagement and Experiential Learning
- Retaining High Performing Students
- Clarifying Progression: Prescriptive Degree Maps

Working papers in the *Student Success at UNC Charlotte* series discuss these areas and their effects on the first year student experience. Each report highlights national and peer experiences with these topics, successful policies and programs that have been recently implemented at UNC Charlotte, the challenges of implementing these initiatives, and future directions for improvement.

Endnotes

¹ “College Enrollment and Work Activity of 2011 High School Graduates.” United States Department of Labor: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Posted 19 April 2012. Accessed 19 Oct. 2012. www.bls.gov/news.release/hsgsec.nr0.htm.

² Beckie Supiano, “College Enrollments Continue to Climb, While Graduation Rates Hold Steady.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Posted 2 Feb. 2011. Accessed 19 Oct. 2011. www.chronicle.com/article/College-Enrollments-Continue/126191/.

³ For a discussion of the relationship between financial aid and retention, see: Stephen L. DesJardins, Dennis A. Ahlburg and Brian P. McCall, “Simulating the Longitudinal Effects of Changes in Financial Aid on Student Departure from College,” *The Journal of Human Resources* 37, No. 3 (2002): 653-679.

⁴ Pell Grants are need-based grants for undergraduate education provided to eligible students by the U.S. federal government.