

Campus Retention Working Group Report
Gustavus Adolphus College
November, 26 2008

Campus Retention Working Group Charge

The formation of the group by Provost Mary E. Morton came about after conversations at Administrative Council meetings and between the Vice Presidents in the spring of 2008. The group was convened and charged by the Provost to examine retention at Gustavus Adolphus College. In the past 20 years, retention committees had formed for short periods of time and then disappeared. Being aware of the reasons why students leave the College may influence strategic planning. Questions to be addressed and answered include: What does retention mean? What is the Gustavus retention rate? How do we compare to our comparison schools? What is being done to track retention? What are best practices in the field?

The group was also charged with making a recommendation to the new Enrollment Management Council as to whether a Retention Committee should be an independent entity or a sub-group of the Enrollment Management Council. Along with the make-up of the committee and its responsibilities, the group was asked to recommend what types of information the committee should have access to and what information it should provide to the Enrollment Management Council (EMC) and the President's Cabinet.

The group is to conclude its work and submit a report to the Provost by the end of November, 2008.

The Campus Retention Working Group

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Retention Committee History at Gustavus Adolphus College

Retention in our context is the number and percentage of students returning for another term or year. Retention is tracked for a cohort of students from entry to completion of the degree requirements usually within five years.

March 1990 – A series of Enrollment Task Force Recommendations (background unknown and in a file in the Registrar's Office) for retention and admission were made:
Retention - It was recommended that a regular review of students who leave Gustavus for reasons other than graduation, academic dismissal or medical leaves be conducted. It was also recommended that a means of measuring enrolled student's attitudes about Gustavus be developed, along with examining the degree to which students' initial expectations had been met or exceeded, to provide a basis for campus retention conversations.
Intervention – Faculty advisors had the responsibility of contacting advisees who did not register for an upcoming semester. The Task Force recommended that a means for tracking unregistered students be developed along with a systematic follow-up and intervention program.

No records were found of any results from these recommendations.

January 1996 – “Retention Analysis: Classes Entering 1988-1995” by Drs. R. Martin and T. Robinson. This study was requested by President Axel Steuer and Vice President Owen Sammelson to assist the work of the Retention Committee in an attempt to improve retention. The goals of the study were to “establish a database of information about students entering Gustavus between 1988-1995 including academic, demographic and financial information; to perform statistical analysis to determine factors associated with retention and to construct a model to identify students most likely to leave Gustavus at

different points in their careers.” Starting in 1988, data collected about retention of first-year students was tracked using a system developed by the Computer Center. Prior to that time retention information was much more anecdotal and based on information collected from a limited number of students. The Strategic Plan of 1994 mandated that a “goal of a four-year (retention) rate of 85% be reached within ten years”. The four-year graduation rate for the Class of 1990 was 73.7%. In a memorandum from Owen Sammelson to then Dean Elizabeth Baer dated January 24, 1995, Mr. Sammelson informed Dean Baer that Sarah Daniels, Computer Center, and Dr. Richard Martin had developed a database of information on the entering class of 1993. Extensive analysis was done on student demographic, academic and financial aid information. The study resulted in a series of conclusions and recommendations. A student’s first semester was shown to be a very critical time in determining a student’s chances of persisting. While financial aid wasn’t as influential to retention as might be expected, it was an important influence in the first semester. The Guaranteed Cost Plan was an important influence as students looked at Gustavus even though fewer enrolling students were electing to participate in the program. At a selective institution such as Gustavus, the stronger the student’s academic credentials the better the chances of the student’s success. It was proposed that the analysis could be best used in the recruitment and selection of students.

No further records were found in connection with the study and its results.

Sometime after the spring of 2001, Vice President Owen Sammelson convened a group of faculty and administrators to look at students who were enrolled for the spring semester, but had not registered for the following fall semester. The group was instructed to determine why students were not electing to return to Gustavus for the next fall. The five-year retention rate for the entering Class of 2001 was 80.5%. Anecdotal information was collected about students from staff members in the Academic Advising Center, the Registrar’s Office, Student Accounts and the Financial Aid Office. No conclusions were drawn. Informal unscientific tracking has continued for most semesters as a means for predicting enrollment for each subsequent semester.

Current Situation

Retention is not problematic at Gustavus. The five-year graduation rate for the classes finishing in 2001 and following ranges from 80.5% to 82.3%. We compare very favorably with our HEDS/comparison schools (*see appendix A and B*). David Menk, Director for Institutional Research, stated that a change of 3% enrollment over time is noteworthy for retention. However, it is generally more cost effective to retain a student if possible than to recruit a new student to replace one who has left. Any increase in the retention of students serves the College well. Hence, all campus personnel have a responsibility for retention.

Since the College does not have an overall retention problem, the questions the current retention group considered are “What do we do to look forward?” “What patterns or trends could evolve that should be paid attention to?” “Are there segments of the Gustavus student population that bear watching carefully?”

Currently, the College tracks a number of data points to identify reasons students leave Gustavus. David Menk collects and collates data (including demographic, academic, activities/level of involvement, on/off-campus employment, future plans and reasons for leaving) from students who leave seeking information to help raise the four-year graduation rate. Members of the Financial Assistance Office track financial data for every student who withdraws, including financial need, aid awards, loan indebtedness and reasons beyond need that might cause a student to leave. Information is collected from exit survey forms and from the written comments by Dean of Student’s staff members during exit interviews with departing students. Anecdotal information is collected and distributed to appropriate offices. While all of these efforts are valuable, there is no specific process in place for intervention before a student chooses to withdraw.

Best Practices for Retention

Most information on best practices in retention focuses on institutions with very low retention rates or on public two-year schools. The American College Testing Program, Inc. (ACT) has done a number of studies over the last three decades including a very

informative study, “What Works in Student Retention-Four-Year Private College” in 2004. This study is important reading for any group studying retention issues (*Appendix C*). Four-year private college respondents to ACT’s survey identified six practices as having the greatest impact on retention as:

- first-year seminar/university 101 for credit
- advising interventions with selected student populations
- internships
- integration of academic advising with first-year transition programs
- pre-enrollment orientation
- early warning system

Another helpful study, “Best Practices for Student Retention,” focuses on community colleges, but has very appropriate recommendations to other size institutions.

At present, Gustavus has a number of “best practices” in place. Summer registration and new student orientation for first-year students re-enforces students’ commitment to attending Gustavus while introducing them to the level of work that will be expected of them. We have a first-year seminar program with a strong advising component. The Academic Alert program is a way for faculty members to notify the Advising Center of students who may be struggling early in a term. The mid-term grading process also helps identify students who may be struggling academically. Academic Advising staff members identify these students and follow-up with them offering assistance and guidance. Virgil Jones, Director of Diversity Development and Multicultural Programs, Jeff Anderson, International Student Services Coordinator and Mark Anderson, Vice President for Enrollment Management have been very successful working with targeted segments of the Gustavus population to increase retention. The Gustavus Residential Life system also tracks students who may be struggling. The internship program is very robust and popular with students as they explore career options.

Recommendations

While retention is the responsibility of everyone, putting into place the following recommendations should help increase retention. The Enrollment Management Council (EMC) should oversee the recommendations and delegate responsibility where appropriate.

1. A retention committee should be formed as a sub-group of the new EMC to monitor trends and sound the alarm when necessary. Depending on the final make-up of the EMC, the retention committee should include the director of the Academic Advising Center, a member from the Admission Office, the Registrar, a faculty member, a member from the Office of Financial Assistance, a member from the Dean of Student's Office, and the Director of Diversity Development and Multicultural Programs. The committee should be directed to look for trends within specific segments of the population – first generation, geographic-distance from home, financial need levels, students with documented disabilities, students with little or no co-curricular interests and ethnicity - and also to look more closely at the reasons students leave to determine which factors can be changed and which cannot. This process must be clearly explained to faculty and relevant administrators so that individuals know where to direct students who are considering leaving the College.
2. A process should be developed for identifying and assisting students who are considering leaving for reasons other than graduation, academic dismissal or medical leaves. Frequently, by the time students are identified, the decision has been made and it is too late to alter or influence the decision.
3. A process should be created to identify and track students who are “at risk”. David Menk’s predictive information could be used to identify who these students are, they could be monitored and information could be provided to advisors for tracking and watching out for potential problems. This would mean returning more of the responsibility of retention to academic advisors.

The working group has reviewed the data collected by David Menk on students who have left Gustavus over the last five years. He has identified six factors that predict

the likelihood a student will withdraw from college. The factors are the student's academic profile, academic skills, financial issues, commitment to their education, conscientiousness or lack of motivation and social integration at the institution. Reasons for leaving included factors we have little control over such as location, size of the college and of St. Peter, change of interests and goals and personal issues. Changes in finances, programs offered, workload demands, housing issues and factors we have some control over. Of continuing concern is the number of students applying to and not being admitted to the cap-selective programs in Education, Nursing and Athletic Training. "Fit" is an item that appeared frequently on exit surveys. Students didn't feel they fit in at the college for personal, financial, ideological, or religious reasons. This is an area that should be researched more fully. Are students not fitting in, because of an inaccurate impression they received when they went through the admission process or are they not fully doing their research before enrolling and making a decision based on incomplete information?

4. Identify who is responsible for the student withdrawal process and when and with whom should information be shared to work with students considering leaving. A review should be conducted of the exit survey to make certain the most useful data is being collected.
5. Monitor the increasing number of students leaving for medical reasons. Since January of 2001, 87 students have been granted a leave of absence for medical reasons. Fourteen have returned and graduated. Ten more are currently enrolled. As of November 17, 2008, twelve students have been granted a medical leave of absence for fall of 2008.
6. Monitor the findings of the First-Year Survey, the Senior Survey, and over time, the Wabash Study for common themes that may influence retention.
7. Members of the Admission Office staff should be made aware of which students have left Gustavus and the reasons why. Their message to prospective students must be on-target and they must be able to address issues of attrition accurately.

As we have worked on this report, the economy has taken a dramatic downturn. In the next months, retention will have to be monitored carefully. The reasons students give for

leaving will have to be reviewed to make sure we are aware of the relevant factors for these decisions.

Appendix A

Gustavus – Historical Retention

STUDENT RETENTION (PERCENTAGE) YEAR OF FIRST-YEAR ENTRY

	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Returning: Second Year	91.6%	90.6%	91.9%	86.8%	87.2%	89.4%	90.5%	87.8%	89.3%	89.8%
Returning: Third Year	83.3%	84.7%	84.9%	82.8%	80.6%	85.0%	84.0%	82.6%	84.0%	
Returning: Fourth Year	81.5%	82.4%	82.9%	81.0%	79.3%	82.6%	81.2%	78.7%		
Graduation: Four Years	77.8%	79.7%	78.8%	79.0%	77.3%	80.1%	81.1%			
Graduation: Five Years	81.2%	82.3%	80.8%	81.3%	80.5%	81.9%				

Source: Gustavus Adolphus College Fact Book

Appendix B

Retention Select Schools

	Status of Fall 2006 Entering Cohort in the Fall <u>2007</u>	Status of Fall 2005 Entering Cohort in the Fall <u>2007</u>	Status of Fall 2004 Entering Cohort in the Fall <u>2007</u>	Graduated in 4 years
Allegheny College	87.3%	77.9%	73.2%	70.1%
Alma College	82.7%	70.4%	66.5%	60.9%
Beloit College	85.9%	76.8%	80.7%	69.3%
Carleton College	96.1%	93.4%	91.2%	89.8%
College of St. Benedict	89.8%	83.4%	79.7%	73.3%
College of Wooster	86.2%	69.0%	75.1%	70.3%
Cornell College	84.3%	67.2%	69.6%	68.1%
Denison University	92.3%	65.3%	81.4%	77.1%
DePauw University	91.6%	89.0%	84.3%	82.5%
Gettysburg College	91.0%	87.0%	82.9%	76.3%
Grinnell College	92.0%	62.2%	78.4%	81.0%
Gustavus Adolphus College	89.8%	84.0%	78.7%	81.1%
Hope College	87.7%	81.9%	80.0%	63.0%
Illinois Wesleyan University	90.3%	76.1%	84.1%	77.5%
Kalamazoo College	89.6%	25.2%	76.4%	70.8%
Kenyon College	92.0%	92.1%	96.0%	85.2%
Lawrence University	86.5%	68.9%	67.6%	58.0%
Luther College	82.7%	78.4%	76.0%	60.9%
Macalester College	93.1%	70.9%	81.3%	84.1%
Muhlenberg College	92.5%	73.2%	83.9%	81.4%
Oberlin College	92.0%	77.7%	81.7%	68.5%
Occidental College	90.1%	71.8%	79.8%	82.3%
St. Olaf College	92.7%	74.0%	81.3%	82.9%
Susquehanna University	85.7%	74.9%	80.5%	80.0%
Wabash College	87.1%	83.9%	69.2%	66.7%
Wittenberg University	82.6%	70.1%	68.1%	56.3%
AVERAGE	89.0%	74.8%	78.8%	73.7%

Source: Gustavus Adolphus College Fact Book

Appendix C

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Four-Year Private Colleges from *What Works in Student Retention? Four-Year Private Colleges*, © 2004 by ACT, Inc.

In spite of the attention paid to college student retention:

- Only 64.1% of campuses have identified an individual responsible for coordinating retention strategies.
- Only 59.4% of campuses have established an improvement goal for retention of students from the first to second year.
- Only 38.7% of campuses have established a goal for improved degree completion.

Respondents at four-year private colleges are as likely to attribute attrition to student characteristics than they are to attribute attrition to institutional characteristics.

- Of 24 institutional characteristics contributing to attrition, respondents identified only three factors that made a moderate or higher contribution: amount of student financial aid available, student-institution fit and social environment.
- Of 20 student characteristics contributing to attrition respondents identified 6 factors that made a moderate or higher contribution. Those student characteristics were inadequate financial resources, lack of motivation to succeed, inadequate preparation for college level work, poor study skills, inadequate personal coping skills, and lack of educational goals and aspirations.

Retention practices responsible for the greatest contribution to retention in four-year private college fall into three main categories:

- *First-year programs*: including freshman seminars/university 101 either for credit or not for credit, learning communities, extended orientation programs and integration of academic advising with first-year programs
- *Academic advising*: including advising interventions with selected student populations, increased advising staff and integration of advising with first-year transition programs
- *Learning support*: including a comprehensive learning assistance center/lab, reading center/lab, tutoring program, and summer bridge program

Several retention practices at high-performing (retention and degree completion) four-year private college differentiate those college from low-performing colleges. See page 16 of complete report for definitions of high-performing and low-performing colleges. Those practices are:

- integration of academic advising with first-year transition programs,
- increased advising staff,
- academic advising center,
- learning communities,
- faculty mentoring,
- non-credit extended freshman orientation,
- summer bridge program,
- program for honors students,
- peer mentoring, and

- writing center/lab.

When asked to identify three campus retention practices that had the greatest impact on student retention, four-year private college respondents identified

- freshman seminar/university 101 for credit (16.5%),
- advising interventions with selected student populations (16.2%),
- internships (13.5%),
- integration of academic advising with first-year transition programs (12.7%),
- pre-enrollment orientation (10.5%),
- early warning system (10.5%), and

The remaining practices were cited by less than 10% of the colleges.

Recommendations:

- Designate a visible individual to coordinate a campus-wide planning team.
- Conduct a systematic analysis of the characteristics of your students.
- Focus on the nexus of student characteristics and institutional characteristics.
- Carefully review the high impact strategies identified in through the survey.
- Do not make first to second year retention the sole focus of planning team efforts.
- Establish realistic short-term and long-term retention, progression, and completion goals
- Orchestrate the change process.
- Implement, measure, improve!

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