

**Retention Taskforce
Whitepaper
April 15, 2008**

The advisory taskforce on retention was charged with “making specific recommendations related to improving the retention of our students from the freshman to sophomore year and beyond to graduation.” Following are the group’s recommendations and related information.

What support services do we currently provide to help support student retention?

- Ms Rhonda Thomas in the Advising Center, provides advising assistance to undeclared students, incoming students, and others seeking guidance concerning courses at MUW. The Advising Center works to improve student persistence by working with faculty to identify and counsel freshmen who are at-risk for failure. Ms. Thomas also provides advisor training for faculty.
- Mrs. Carol Frazier in the Office of Academic Support Services supervises a peer tutoring program for many core courses, provides individual and group workshops for improving study skills, and tracks and counsels students on academic probation and students with failing grades at mid-term. Computer tutorials are available to students in the Academic Support Lab for strengthening basic skills. Students with disabilities are also seen for the development of accommodations plans.
- A nine-week Summer Developmental Program is offered to students who wish to attend MUW but who do not meet standard admission requirements. In addition, intermediate level courses in reading, writing, algebra, and study skills are required for first time freshmen with ACT subscores of sixteen or below to prepare them for success in college level courses.
- In the MUW Counseling Center, Ms Deanna Wilkins offers counseling services to all MUW students. Referrals to professionals in the local community are made when issues require more indepth attention.
- Ms Towanda Williams directs MUW Career Services and offers free access to an online career interest/aptitude assessment, provides workshops for resume writing and other career related skills, conducts job fairs, and proctors ACT tests.
- The MUW Health Center provides free or low cost health care for students, faculty and staff.
- Fant Memorial Library provides a wide range of services - circulating collection, reference collection, electronic resources, and information literacy services - to support students with coursework.
- In addition to instruction, MUW faculty members serve important functions that support student success – reporting absences for follow-up by the Advising Center staff, meeting individually with students who require assistance, advising for course scheduling, referring students to other support services, and sponsoring academic and social organizations.
- The Offices of Student Life and Campus Recreation offer a variety of programming options and activities that promotes active student engagement at MUW.

Which student support services should be added or enhanced to increase retention?

- Current efforts toward early identification of at-risk students in core courses should be enhanced so that structured and deliberate intervention takes place prior to GPAs reaching the probationary status. Elements of such an early alert or early warning program would include
 - An additional staff person in the Office of Academic Advising to serve as an early alert coordinator charged with collecting information and tracking early alert students
 - An additional staff person in Academic Support Services to counsel, lead workshops and provide other types of assistance necessary for early alert as well as probationary students; this individual could also serve as a faculty member to teach intermediate level classes for the increasing number of students with low ACT scores
 - A list of performance indicators or triggers indicating poor performance to be compiled by the core curriculum committee
 - A required significant grade opportunity for core courses before the last day to drop a course without a grade
 - An online reporting form with indicators described above to be used by instructors to notify the early alert coordinator about students who have at-risk behaviors/grades
 - Follow-up contact with identified students and referral to appropriate services by the early alert coordinator
 - A statement on each syllabus indicating at-risk behaviors for that course and strategies for improvement or information about University services for assistance
- For upper level courses within the majors, academic departments should be responsible for monitoring and assisting their students by creating
 - A list of indicators to facilitate the early identification of at-risk students in the major
 - Departmental guidelines for assisting the identified students
 - Syllabi statements informing students of the at-risk indicators and assistance information
 - A retention plan for the department – some departments already have retention plans; such efforts targeting majors could increase retention in other departments as well.
- Intervention should continue for students during their first probationary/suspension period to include a contract with the student indicating the actions to be taken to improve academic performance. The contract or academic improvement plan would be developed with the staff in Academic Support Services for freshmen and undeclared students and by the departments for upper level students in majors.
- At-risk and probationary students should be tracked to determine the level of success of the increased intervention
- Methods for best providing academic support for online students should be investigated - online writing labs, contracted professional online tutoring programs, etc.
- A professionally staffed writing center should be created to support the improvement of writing skills across disciplines.
- Increase access to pediatric and family health care in the MUW Health Center.
- Insure that Counseling Services has sufficient, licensed staff to meet the demands for services.

Why do students leave? When do they leave?

- The MUW 2007-2008 Fact Book provides much information related to the retention and graduation of different student groups. Of the 2001 freshman cohort, 34.43% had graduated in five years; of the fall 2002 cohort, 39.92%. For the fall 2001 transfer cohort, 54.55% had graduated in five years, and for the fall 2002 cohort, 60.44%. For the fall 2004 honors freshman cohort, 70.27% were still enrolled four semesters later; for the fall 2005 group, 90.24% were still attending. Using ACT composite scores as a measure, retention from fall 2006 to fall 2007 was lowest (50.8%) for students with scores ranging from seventeen to nineteen; while those with scores from twenty-four to twenty-seven had the highest (83.7%) fall to fall retention. Similar information is provided for other student groups based on gender, race/ethnicity or other status. We do not know, however, the reasons students do not return or exactly at what point they leave.
- The assumption is often made that poor academic performance is a major factor in students' decisions not to return to school. Probation records indicate that for fall 2004, 204 students or 9.1% of the unduplicated headcount for that semester were on probation; for fall 2005, 199 students or 8.7%; for fall 2006, 232 students or 9.6%; and for fall 2007, 227 students or 9.5%. What is not known is how many of these students are new students on probation and how many have been on probation for several semesters. It is not known on average how many semesters students remain on probation before improving their grades, being suspended or dropping out. Probationary students should be tracked to determine how many are actually lost due to poor academic performance.
- The retention rate of students enrolled in LS 101 (required for those with two or more ACT subscores of sixteen or below) begins to drop significantly after three semesters. Of the forty-five fall 2007 LS 101 students, 93% are enrolled for the spring 2008 semester. This rate is especially high due to the success of students in the required intermediate level classes. For the fall 2006 LS 101 class, 58% are still enrolled three semesters later; but only 19%, 22% and 25% of the 2005, 2004 and 2003 classes are currently attending. This is a very at-risk population that needs rigorous attention and intervention to be retained.
- Several discussions held by the task force ended in a consensus that more information is needed. We have information concerning retention rates of specific student groups; and, although hypotheses related to the relationship between factors such financial support and grades in key courses and retention have been developed, they are unproven. Therefore, the group recommends that a process for collecting this information be developed. The National Survey of Student Engagement is a tool that could be used by the University to gather much needed information regarding student engagement which supports retention.

How does Academic Advising figure into retention?

- The members of the task force recognize the important role that advising plays in guiding students to the successful completion of their program of study. Because well informed advisors working closely and regularly with advisees is essential to this process, the task force recommends the following actions.
 - Create a full curriculum of advisor professional development that would prepare advisors to assist students at all levels
 - Make advising and other student support activities a measurable part of faculty evaluations and weight these activities commensurately with their value.

- Employ professional advising staff for programs with very large numbers of advisees; this staff member could also coordinate retention efforts for the department
- Encourage strategies that would promote faculty/student interaction outside class

Is there a need for a General Baccalaureate degree and what would that look like?

The task force members agree that a General Baccalaureate is a priority consideration. It became one of its first topics of discussion and resulted in a proposed degree program that was accepted for consideration by the Academic Council.

Do we have policies and procedures that act as “stumbling blocks” to retention?

- The size and rigidity of the core curriculum are believed to be stumbling blocks to retention. The task force encourages the development of a smaller, more flexible core curriculum which will support the retention of students interested in a General Studies major as well as students with transfer credit from several institutions. Such a degree will also allow more students to complete a Baccalaureate degree in four years.
- The group understands from both national research (information Dr. Pardo collected at a recent national conference) and local research (work of Dr. Donat and Dr. Daffron last year) that there is a direct link between financial aid and the retention of students. The task force members concluded, however, that as faculty we do not know enough about the financial aid process or the faculty’s role in it to be aware of changes in either that might affect retention. A review of both the financial aid process and the faculty’s role it should be conducted with faculty groups. A review would provide a framework for determining whether any of our current financial aid practices are creating stumbling blocks and whether there are other means of awarding institutional funds that would have an even greater impact on retention. To insure an ongoing benefit of such information sharing the following recommendations are made.
 - Incorporate financial aid information as regular part of the professional development curriculum for advisors
 - Solicit faculty input and involvement in the selection process and criteria development for institutional financial aid
- Another obstacle is the lack of a consistent rotation of courses for some majors. The task force supports the development of a published course rotation for each major so that students, particularly transfer students, can plan on a timely completion of their programs.
- Adjunct faculty, who are typically not as available outside class time or as knowledgeable of University practices as full time faculty, are not usually the best choices for teaching freshmen who typically need greater assistance. To ensure that faculty are strategically positioned for improved retention, the task force recommends that
 - Department chairpersons evaluate faculty course assignments to determine whether they should be more deliberate in the selection of those who teach core courses/entry level classes
 - The value and importance of excellence in teaching entry level courses be communicated to all faculty members

Do we have deadlines (or other limitations) that exist for our convenience, but which make it more difficult for students to stay in school?

- The committee realized that there are only two points at which students qualify for scholarships, as freshmen or as sixty-hour transfer students. Is it possible to offer scholarships for sophomores who as freshmen did not qualify for a scholarship but whose academic record during their freshmen year was outstanding?
- Caps for some classes seem to be arbitrarily low. Larger class sizes would allow transfer students to get into needed courses after MUW students have registered and thereby speed their progress toward completion of their degree program. Or, an earlier registration date for transfer students would allow them an equal access to classes. Enrollment for many on-line classes should be increased to thirty-five or forty to assist non-traditional and part-time students in progressing toward degree completion.
- There are few alternatives for course scheduling. The task force recommends that the University work with the IHL to develop more flexibility in scheduling and reporting for class offerings to include shortened or condensed sessions, delayed start dates, intersessions, etc.

What other questions should we be asking and responding to?

- *How can MUW faculty become a better resource for the retention of students?*
 - Additional faculty development for those who teach 100 and 200 level classes
 - More intense, perhaps mandatory, advisor professional development
 - Information sharing to improve faculty awareness of financial aid procedures
 - The recommendations above could be accomplished through a teaching and learning center that would provide a full curriculum of faculty development. In addition to the issues listed above, other topics such the use of instructional technology, service learning and other methodologies, and the challenges of teaching students across the spectrum from millennium generation to baby boomers could be addressed.
- *What can be done to improve the retention of specific student groups each of which has particular interests and needs?*

High Achieving Students - While some of the reasons for a higher retention rate of honors college students may be the result of the characteristics of high achieving students, it is believed that the increased support and structure provided these students also contributes to their retention. The task force recommends that a pilot program which will provide similar support and structure for BSN students and which contains the following elements be offered.

 - Two designated courses in addition to UN 101 for pre-BSN students to take as a group
 - a residential program to provide a learning community for these students
 - a designated faculty coordinator for the program
 - tracking of participating students to determine if the program should be adopted in other academic areas

Recognize students with high GPA's, students being inducted into honorary societies, students demonstrating superior performance/leadership in their major or academic organization, and in internships or similar out-of-class experiences.

- University Level

Hold a President's List reception for the recipients and their family member(s). At that time, the certificates can be given to the students. The Alumnae association could be asked to participate, thereby encouraging positive role models. With student permission, an "honor roll" could be displayed in Welty. Once a year, administration and faculty can recognize in a ceremony the individuals who belong to the sophomore (Lantern), junior (Torch) and senior (Mortar Board and Phi Kappa Phi) honoraries. Students would be given individual invitations to include family member(s). The current presidents/officers of each of the organizations could "tap" their incoming members as well. Lists of members would then be published in the student newspaper as well as in the hometown newspaper for the individual student. MUW would provide certificates for our own honoraries with the nationally affiliated honoraries providing their own.

- College Level

Each semester, the student's college hosts a reception for their recipients based on majors. At that time, the certificates can be given to the students. With student permission, an "honor roll" could be displayed within the college.

- Department Level

Each month (September-April for 8 total), a department would recognize an outstanding student for each major and minor. A display of the students within the academic building and a certificate for each student would be given. At the end of the year, a reception would be held for all the recognized students, including a ceremony for the departments' honor societies.

Transfer Students - Transfer Students have interests and needs that are different from native students. The task force suggests that we improve communication with Community Colleges, especially advisors, so that both advisors and students are aware of MUW programs, program requirements, scholarship opportunities, etc. and that we increase engagement of transfer students through

- More advisor training related to transfer students
- More recognition of PTK (CC honorary) students
- Tracking transfers' use of academic support to better determine needs
- Increasing Student Services programming for non-residential students
- Chat boards/WebCT discussions for transfers/non-residential students
- A *Frequently Asked Questions* section that addresses questions often asked by transfer students to be included on each college's website

Male students, commuting students, nontraditional students, online students, international students, “average” students – for separate groups of students the task force recommends that the University

- Track the retention records, special needs and interests of these groups to determine specific needs as a basis for developing plans to meet those needs
 - Consider additional housing options for students whose needs are not met by traditional residence halls; for example, married students, students with children, non-traditional students, and international students.
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- *How can UN 101, Introduction to College Life, be better utilized to improve retention?*
A review of the entire first year experience at MUW should be conducted to determine if the UN 101 course as well as other programs related to the first year experience need to be restructured.

 - *How should retention efforts be developed and monitored for continued growth?*
The task force recommends the creation of a standing retention committee with campus wide representation to ensure that retention efforts are sustained.

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