

CASE STUDY

Broad-Based and Targeted Florida State University's Efforts to Retain Every Student

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Introduction

Over the past twenty years, Florida State University (FSU) has recorded one of the largest increases in six-year graduation rates in the nation—increasing from 63.2 percent for the 1988 entering cohort to 79.1 percent for the 2008 entering cohort. This improvement in outcomes has occurred with only a modest increase in students’ entering credentials—for example, the average SAT score of entering students has slightly increased during the time period. Instead of selecting its way to better outcomes, FSU has focused relentlessly on retaining and supporting every student it enrolls.

FSU’s strategy has two components. First, it has sought to make broad changes in systems and processes to eliminate barriers that make all students less likely to stay at FSU or succeed there. Key among these changes are FSU’s pioneering implementation of detailed program mapping reinforced by proactive advising. Second, the university has systematically segmented its student body to identify and address through intensive, targeted programs the particular challenges facing relatively small groups of students.

Both strategies rely on the rigorous use of student data to identify areas in need of improvement. FSU routinely parses data on retention, graduation, credit accumulation, access to courses, and other student outcomes to identify disparities in different departments, at different points in a student’s academic career, or among different student subgroups. It also uses these data to devise solutions—like program maps that increase the likelihood of graduation—and to monitor the efficacy of those solutions. Also critical are organizational structures—such as regular, cross-functional meetings focused on retention—to surface and investigate barriers to retention, streamline decision-making, and coordinate implementation and review of responses.

Although FSU’s efforts are intended to and have succeeded in helping many more at-risk students succeed, the university’s retention goal is broader: it aims to ensure that all students who enroll—from across the income spectrum, and with all different levels of preparation—want to and can remain at the institution and earn their degree there. Thus, unlike some of the other institutions we have profiled, FSU’s student success strategy includes targeted programs not only for low-income and first-generation students, but for students who in the past might have transferred to a more-selective private institution.

In many ways, FSU’s transformation into a systematic solver of retention problems can be traced to a single source—former provost Larry Abele, who served in the role for sixteen years and oversaw FSU’s big gains in retention and graduation rates. Abele’s single-minded focus on retention, insistence on seeing hard evidence, and willingness to use his authority to streamline and improve services for students has had a lasting

impact on the university. His efforts led to specific programmatic changes as well as the development of capacities—such as sophisticated data analysis—and structures—such as regular, cross-functional retention meetings—that have facilitated ongoing refinement and development of interventions. Abele has retired from the provost’s office, but FSU continues to use broad and targeted efforts, based on close parsing of student data, to boost retention and graduation.

Origins and Operations

FSU’s success in improving retention and completion rates can be attributed to an institutional shift in approach and culture. The chief catalyst for this change was the appointment of Lawrence Abele as Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs in 1994.

A marine biologist by training, Abele describes himself as a “data nut.” In his early days as provost, Abele began to scrutinize FSU’s data on retention and graduation, and discovered some unnerving patterns of which he had been unaware as a faculty member and department chair. First, graduation and retention rates were far lower than Abele expected: just 63.2 percent of students who entered college for the first time in 1988 had graduated by 1994, and the fall-to-fall retention rate for the 1993 entering cohort was 85.1 percent.¹ Second, different populations of students remained enrolled at different rates, and retention over students’ academic careers was different for each subgroup.²

Guided by the data, Abele began to inquire into the sources of these two problems. One pattern that emerged was that poor communication and a lack of collaboration among departments and offices within student affairs, academic affairs, housing, and financial services created many avoidable barriers to student retention. For instance, prerequisites for courses were scheduled during the same semester as the next course in the sequence, causing students to graduate later and with excess credits. When Abele confronted

¹ “Retention & Graduation Rates for FTICs,” *1997-98 FSU Fact Book*, <http://www.ir.fsu.edu/Factbooks/1997-98/FTIC.htm>. The retention and graduation rates presented in FSU’s Fact Books are comparable to those provided by FSU to the federal government’s Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Because the Fact Books include data from earlier years, when IPEDS data are not available, we have relied on the Fact Books for most statistics. Unless specified otherwise, cohorts consist of full-time, first-time-in-college bachelor’s or equivalent degree-seeking students. Students who are deceased or permanently disabled, or who left to serve in the military, with a foreign aid service of the federal government, or on an official church mission are excluded.

² For example, the attrition rate for white, female students is much lower than the attrition rate for black male students. However, the rate for white females is highest from the first to second year while the rate for black males is consistent across years one through six. Joseph Yeado, Kati Haycock, Rob Johnstone, and Priyadarshini Chaplot, “Learning from High-Performing and Fast-Gaining Institutions,” *The Education Trust*, <http://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/PracticeGuide1.pdf>.

department chairs about this common problem, they complained that the registrar had not given them the classroom schedule early enough to avoid it. When Abele asked the registrar why the schedule was produced so late, the answer was that no one had asked for it earlier.

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Another finding from Abele's inquiry was that FSU tended to have the worst retention rates among students at the high and low ends of the preparation spectrum. Students who were the first in their families to attend college, or who came from less academically challenging high schools—often low-income and minority students—left FSU at all stages of their academic careers for a variety of academic, financial, and social reasons. Students with the highest incoming academic credentials also left at higher rates, often to transfer to a more selective institution.

This combination of challenges led Abele and his team to develop a two-pronged strategy to improve retention. On one hand, the team would seek to dismantle bureaucratic barriers and create university-wide services and structures to support retention and success for the student body, as a whole. On the other hand, the team would work to improve and develop programs targeted to the subgroups least likely to remain at FSU. Both strategies would be undergirded by systematic, data-informed inquiry and assessment and by a proactive, rather than reactive, approach. Furthermore, anticipating that increases in retention would increase tuition revenue, Abele was able to convince FSU's president to fund the work by reinvesting that additional revenue in the student success efforts.

University-Wide Initiatives

Cross-Functional Structures for Surfacing and Addressing Barriers

Beginning in 1998, Abele and his team organized a weekly meeting of representatives from offices across the institution. The motivation was simple: by creating a space to surface challenges, share information, and hold everyone accountable, coordination would increase and the barriers to retention and success that resulted from lack of coordination would fall.

Eighteen years later, the meetings are still held, now on a biweekly basis. Every other Friday, more than 20 representatives from a host of student services, including representatives from the Registrar’s Office, the Financial Aid Office, among others, meet to discuss an array of pressing issues across the institution. We were able to observe one of these meetings during our visit to FSU. The first hour, led by John Barnhill, the Assistant Vice President for Enrollment Management, is devoted to recruitment. When we visited in December, much of the conversation revolved around the significant increase of applications for the Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement (CARE), a program committed to serving students who come from “traditionally underrepresented and disadvantaged populations,”³ which we describe in more detail below. The second hour, led by the Dean of Undergraduate Studies, Karen Laughlin, is centered on retention.

Table 1.

University-Wide Initiatives	Year Initiated	Summary
Cross-Functional Structures for Surfacing and Addressing Barriers	1998	Examples include a bi-weekly two-hour meeting of representatives from more than 20 university functions, focused on issues of recruitment and retention; the Demand Analysis Numbers Group, which coordinates course offerings and classroom space; and the Council of Informed Advisors, which meets regularly to coordinate advising practices.
Advising First	1998	A department that hires, trains, and manages professional academic advisors who work across the university, as well as college life coaches. Advising First is nationally recognized for its implementation of a proactive advising model.
Mapping	2005	An eight-term schedule of courses for each major that is strongly correlated with students graduating on-time. Students are provided with their maps at orientation, and their advisors use maps to guide course selection. If a student misses a milestone on her map, it can result in consequences including registration holds and a requirement to change major.

These biweekly meetings seem to encourage a sense of shared responsibility among the participants. For example, the majority of the retention hour was devoted to enrolled students who had yet to register for spring semester courses. After the Director of Retention reported the current number of unregistered students, a number of participants acknowledged that it had declined since the previous meeting, while still

³ "About CARE," *Center for Academic Retention & Enhancement*, <http://care.fsu.edu/About-CARE>.

expressing concern about the number remaining. Then, representatives from housing, CARE, and advising informed the group of the steps their offices were taking to remind and encourage those students to register.

Other structures that promote information-sharing include the Demand Analysis Numbers Group (DANG), which analyzes the demand for key undergraduate courses, including general education and mapping milestone courses, and shares its reports with department leaders, the Registrar, and participants at the biweekly meetings; the Council of Informed Advisors, which has an active list serve and holds a meeting each semester that focuses on advising best practices; and the development, with EAB, of a new platform for faculty and staff to review predictive analytics results and enhance advisor outreach and information sharing.

Advising First

As Abele and his team began to inquire into the university systems that hindered retention, a number of indicators pointed to advising as a key problem. Surveys designed to capture students' expectations and satisfaction with various aspects of the FSU experience found one of the largest gaps between students' high expectations for the quality of academic advising and their low satisfaction with it. Around the same time, FSU hired the Noel Levitz consultancy to assess its undergraduate experience and make recommendations. One of the firm's key recommendations was to improve the quality of advising by shifting to professional advisors.

At the time, most departments made advising the responsibility of faculty and graduate students, who received little training and had few incentives to do it well. In response to the survey results and Noel Levitz's advice, Abele set aside budget lines for departments to hire professional advisors. Though well-intended, and consistent with FSU's emphasis on faculty and departmental leadership, distributing responsibility for advising in this way posed some challenges. Department leaders generally did not know what qualities to look for in a professional advisor, could not provide adequate (or consistent) training, and tended to give additional administrative tasks to advisors, limiting their time spent working with students.

In 1998, over the objection of some department chairs, Abele and his team reorganized advising into a model they called satellite advising. In that model, advisors were hired, trained, and managed by the Division of Undergraduate Studies and allocated to departments based on enrollment. Initially, six professional advisors were hired and distributed to the departments with the largest enrollment. Student reviews of these advisors were highly positive, support grew among department leaders, and FSU hired more and more satellite advisors.

Initially, advisors followed the dominant model at the time, which was a reactive, walk-in approach—advisors would provide guidance or otherwise intervene when students sought them out, or occasionally when faculty reported a problem. But in the early 2000s, FSU’s advising leaders began to reorganize around a proactive, caseload model of advising, which was then emerging as the standard of practice among professional advisors, nationally. Under the proactive model, each advisor is responsible for a group of students. The advisor is expected to check in with those students regularly, to monitor their course choices and academic progress, and to intervene in response to problematic developments. In addition to restructuring advisors’ work around their caseloads, the Division of Undergraduate Studies developed a robust training curriculum on proactive advising for new and continuing advisors.

Today, a team of professional advisors and several other services are housed in Advising First,⁴ a department within the Division of Undergraduate Studies that consists of more than 60 advisors and coaches. In addition to advisors placed in academic departments, Advising First includes the Center for Exploratory Students, which serves the approximately 25 percent of first-year students who have yet to decide on a major and therefore do not have access to departmental advisors; the Center for Academic Planning, which serves sophomores who have yet to choose a major; and the Center for College Life Coaching.

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The advent of proactive advising at FSU has led to a far more structured experience for students in their first two years, particularly ones who have yet to decide on a major, known at FSU as exploratory students. All freshmen are expected to participate in several one-on-one meetings with their advisor. An extended advising session, known as a “Nole Call,” takes place within the first six weeks of the fall semester and gives advisors and students a chance to have an in-depth conversation after the first rush of orientation advising and the initial drop-add period. In an effort to engage exploratory students and

⁴ Advising First has garnered national recognition: in 2011, the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) awarded Advising First’s Center for Exploratory Students the Outstanding Institutional Advising Program Award. Jill Elish, “FSU Advising Center Wins Top National Award,” *Florida State News and Events*, <https://www.fsu.edu/news/2011/06/16/advising.center/>.

help direct them toward a major, these students are provided active guidance and required to complete additional tasks throughout their first year. Before they meet with their advisor, exploratory students must complete the “Choosing a Major or Occupation Guide” and online assessments, including a Myers-Briggs test.⁵ In order to register for courses for the summer and fall of sophomore year, they are required in the spring semester to complete three out of ten tasks described in a “Nole Pass” handbook. Some examples of these tasks are: attend a career panel; attend a workshop on majors; and shadow a professional in an occupation of interest.

The Center for College Life Coaching, initiated in 2009, takes a caseload approach with those most at risk of attrition: target populations include Pell-eligible freshmen; freshmen living off campus; freshmen from out of state; freshmen admitted for spring semester; and sophomores enrolled in CARE. The center has fourteen full-time coaches that meet one-on-one every two weeks with about 1,500 students. Coaches collaborate and work closely with advisors, but focus more on personal development, financial management, and campus involvement than on academics.

Mapping

The regularization of proactive advising ensured that students received frequent attention from professional FSU advisors. The advent of mapping amplified the impact of those advisors by providing them with common expectations and better information, and reinforcing their guidance with consequences.

FSU modeled its mapping initiative on that of the other state flagship university, the University of Florida, which initiated mapping a few years earlier. In 2002, staff in the Undergraduate Studies office began to analyze course enrollment and outcomes data to identify course paths in each major, and milestones along those paths, that were highly correlated with on-time graduation. These analyses were presented to college and department leaders, who were asked to refine them. While a number of deans, department chairs, and faculty were initially resistant to the idea of mapping, Abele and his team persisted in explaining the usefulness of the data and emphasized that it would not be used punitively. Eventually, the resistance died down.

In 2005, FSU students began to receive at orientation a term-by-term guide that includes the name and number of each course recommended for their major and a list of milestones for each term. (Exploratory students’ first year courses are heavy on general education requirements and milestones meant to facilitate major selection.) If a student

⁵ “Year at a Glance,” *Advising First*, <http://advisingfirst.fsu.edu/Exploratory/Center-for-Exploratory-Students/Year-at-a-Glance>.

misses a first milestone, the consequence is a registration hold, which is not lifted until the student meets with an advisor. Under these circumstances, the student and advisor often develop but do not implement a “parallel plan”: an alternate major (with its own map) to which a student could transfer and remain on track to graduate. Students aiming to be admitted to highly competitive majors or ones with limited seats develop a parallel plan as well. The consequence for missing a second milestone results in a hold that cannot be lifted unless the student discusses changing his or her major with the advisor. Students can make a case for remaining in that major. Summer courses, for example, provide many students with an opportunity to make up for a missed milestone.

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In addition to its impact on the advising process, mapping has made FSU’s course planning more efficient. DANG is able to combine map information with registration information to better anticipate course demand and help departments ensure that sections, staffing, and classroom space are allocated appropriately.

Targeted Initiatives

CARE

For decades, FSU has offered dedicated programs to support low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented minority students. For example, Horizons Unlimited, which was created in 1968, admitted low-income students that did not meet FSU’s standard admission criteria and provided them with additional tutoring and support. The Summer Enrichment Program, created in 1978, was initially devoted to black males, and offered a curriculum of academic and developmental courses that evolved over time. While these and other programs were appreciated by their participants, by the mid-1990s there was a general recognition that they were insufficient to the task of promoting high levels of retention among the target populations. To increase the intensity, funding, and coordination of the programs, in 2000, Horizons Unlimited, the Summer Enrichment Program, and several other programs were merged into the Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement (CARE).

CARE selects students from among FSU applicants that elect to be considered, essentially running a parallel admission process. Applicants who are first-generation and Pell-eligible, and who meet academic requirements—typically a 3.0 GPA, a 1330 (out of 2400) on the SAT, or a 19 on the ACT—are eligible to participate, and the CARE staff make decisions based on those factors as well as an essay.⁶ In the past, CARE applicants had to complete a separate application on the same timeline as their FSU application. Beginning with the 2016-2017 cohort, applicants to FSU may elect to apply to CARE as part of their standard FSU application. Applications have more than doubled as a result, from approximately 1,500 to 3,200. In its first year, CARE served approximately 50 students. Since then, it has steadily grown: it enrolled 350 students in 2008-2009, 400 in 2015-2016, and is preparing for 425 in summer 2016.

CARE provides an array of academic and social supports. CARE students spend seven weeks of the summer before their first year in a fully funded Summer Bridge program, living on campus and taking seven credits. CARE Ambassadors, most of whom are former summer program participants, help students with their transition to college. Although the standards for the summer courses are the same as those offered during the academic year, faculty and staff make a concerted effort to create a sense of community and ensure the students feel welcomed.

⁶ "Qualifications for SBP," *Center for Academic Retention & Enhancement*, <http://care.fsu.edu/College-Programs/Summer-Bridge-Program/Qualifications-for-SBP>.

Table 2.

Targeted Initiatives	Year Initiated	Summary
CARE	2000	A department that provides mentoring, academic support, and opportunities for engagement to first-generation and Pell-eligible students. Students are admitted to CARE and FSU through a supplemental admissions process, and all CARE students participate in a seven-week summer program before their freshman year.
University Honors Program	1932	A feature of FSU's predecessor institution, the Florida State College for Women, Honors developed into a program of small classes and enrichment activities for students who excelled academically in high school or in their first semester at FSU.
Center for Undergraduate Research and Academic Engagement	2007	A center that creates opportunities for undergraduates to participate in faculty research, foreign study, and significant service projects.
Office of National Fellowships	2005	An office that assists students in the application process for nationally recognized and competitive scholarships, grants, or fellowships.
Living-Learning Communities	1997	Academically themed residence halls that offer their resident students small course sections, mentoring, speakers series, and other enrichment activities.
Academic Center for Excellence	2007	A center that offers peer tutoring, academic workshops, an academic skills course for students on probation, and study space.
Student-Athlete Academic Services	2007	A program to provide intensive academic support and mentoring for FSU's 550 Division I student-athletes.

Throughout the academic year, students are advised by dedicated CARE academic advisors. The CARE advisors receive the same training in proactive advising as Advising First advisors, and work with students' other advisors to coordinate guidance. To support the advising, CARE staff reach out to every professor of each CARE student in the middle of each semester to collect information about the students' attendance and progress in the course. During their sophomore year, CARE students are assigned a college life coach with whom they meet biweekly. CARE students also have access to workshops on how to study, financial literacy education, general assemblies on campus resources, and a lab within the CARE building that provides on-demand tutoring.

Students raised without parental support, or who were ever homeless or in foster care, are placed in Unconquered Scholars, a program within CARE that provides additional layers of support. For example, in addition to the usual CARE services, Unconquered Scholars have access to counseling, financial advising, and university housing during breaks.

Despite coming from disadvantaged and underrepresented communities, a significant number of CARE students flourish at FSU and perform at the highest academic level.

Despite coming from disadvantaged and underrepresented communities, a significant number of CARE students flourish at FSU and perform at the highest academic level. In fact, many are recognized and celebrated by university-wide leadership and scholastic Honor Societies, including the W.E.B. Du Bois Honor Society and the Oscar Arias Sanchez Hispanic Honor Society. In 2006, a former CARE student was FSU's second student to be selected as a Rhodes Scholar.⁷

Honors, Scholars, and Fellows

The initial focus of FSU's targeted retention efforts was students who frequently struggle in higher education—those from low-income backgrounds or who are the first in their families to attend college. But, around 2005, in its ongoing efforts to segment the student population to identify and address retention problems, FSU determined that about a third of the students that left FSU each year had a GPA of 3.3 or higher. To better engage and retain more high-achieving students, FSU established or intensified a number of programs, including the University Honors Program, the Center for Undergraduate Research and Academic Engagement (CRE), and the Office of National Fellowships. These programs have grown significantly over the years and, as of 2014, are centrally located in the non-residential Honors, Scholars, and Fellows House. While each of these programs provides unique opportunities, they all include peer mentoring and outreach, which increases campus awareness and engages upperclassmen.

The University Honors Program is available to students who excelled academically in high school or during their first year of college, and offers them additional opportunities for challenging work. Honors students have access to separate, smaller classes and

⁷ "About CARE Students," *Center for Academic Retention & Enhancement*, <http://care.fsu.edu/About-CARE-Students>.

seminars, early registration, and research opportunities. There are about 2,400 students enrolled in the University Honors Program, the vast majority of whom are accepted through the general admission process before the fall semester of freshman year. About 150 students per year join the Honors Program through lateral admission in the spring of their first year. Special effort is made to ensure that eligible CARE students take advantage of the lateral admission opportunity. Upperclassmen have the opportunity to earn honors in their major by completing an honors thesis.

Launched in 2007, the Center for Undergraduate Research and Academic Engagement (CRE) manages the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program (UROP) and the Global Scholars program. UROP provides students the opportunity to serve as research assistants for faculty conducting research. While there are no minimum academic requirements to apply, students must be either incoming freshmen or second-year students and are evaluated based on GPA, test scores, extracurricular activities, and a short essay, among other things.⁸ Special sections of UROP are reserved for students who are veterans and who transferred to FSU. In addition to the research, participants take a one-credit colloquium course in the fall and present their research at a symposium in the spring. In the 2015-2016 academic year, 260 students participated, including 12 from CARE and 60 other first-generation students. Through the Global Scholars program, students spend at least two months in a developing country and serve as interns and researchers for community organizations. About 50 students per summer participate, and 10 of these are typically CARE students.

The Office of National Fellowships, which was established in 2005, assists students who apply for nationally competitive fellowship, including awards such as the Truman Scholarship, Rhodes Scholarship, and the Fulbright Full Grant. The office conducts special outreach to CARE and other groups to ensure that a diverse set of students participates. Last year, the office supported 169 students on 215 applications.

Living-Learning Communities

In an effort to engage and challenge students in their first year of college, FSU established Living-Learning Communities (LLCs) in 1997. Each community focuses on a specific academic major or theme, and all participating students live together in a residence hall. Currently, there are about 500 students living in seven LLCs, and themes include exploration and discovery; women in science, math and engineering; and music. Students in most LLCs complete an intensive one-credit colloquium course and take at least one course in the major at their residence hall, with fewer students than traditional

⁸ "UROP FAQ," *Center for Undergraduate Research and Academic Engagement*, <http://cre.fsu.edu/Students/UROP-FAQ>.

courses. Each community offers other theme-specific activities, including guest lectures, field trips, and career services. Distinct from similar themed housing at other universities, FSU faculty propose, design, and run these communities.

Academic Center for Excellence

As FSU developed support programs throughout the 2000s that covered an increasing share of low-retention students, one of the few groups that still struggled with retention was students on academic probation, whose GPA was below 2.0. In 2007, FSU began requiring those students to take a one-credit course focused on developing study skills and learning strategies. After reviewing the performance of students in that initial course and studying the programs of peer institutions, FSU decided to supplement the course with additional supports. In the summer of 2008, the Academic Center for Excellence (ACE) was established to offer the academic success course along with workshops and consultations on academic success for all students.

In 2010, ACE began to facilitate peer tutoring, taking advantage of a new pool of state funding for undergraduate instruction. Beginning with 15 tutors in the library, FSU's peer tutoring program now has forty-five undergraduate peer tutors trained to cover approximately 200 courses, and is housed in a suite of dedicated rooms called the ACE Learning Studio. In addition to on-demand tutoring, ACE has experimented with Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS)—in which peer tutors sit in on a course and hold regular study sessions—in several sections of college algebra and financial accounting.

Student-Athlete Academic Services

It is hard to talk about FSU without acknowledging the big footprint of its successful Division I athletics program. FSU has about 550 varsity athletes in twenty sports; by virtue of their academic profiles, NCAA requirements, and the time they spend on the practice field, many of them require academic support. Although FSU has provided robust academic services to its student-athletes for decades, the university's Student-Athlete Academic Services took its present form in 2007. In some ways, FSU's Student-Athlete Academic Services were a model for the support programs for other students. Indeed, several members of the FSU faculty pointed to student-athlete support as proof that intensive student services can improve the likelihood of success. FSU athletes are assigned professional advisors who take a proactive approach; learning specialists, who help the student-athletes understand the holistic process of learning; mentors, who focus on social and personal development; and tutors, who work with student-athletes on particular academic subjects.

Evidence of Impact

Over the past twenty years, FSU has experienced dramatic improvements in graduation and retention rates. The six-year graduation rate has increased from 63.2 percent for students who entered in Fall 1988⁹ to 79.1 percent for students who entered in Fall 2008.¹⁰ The fall-to-fall retention rate has increased from 85.1 percent for students who entered in Fall 1993¹¹ to 91.6 percent for students who entered in Fall 2012.¹²

Impressively, the improvement in graduation rates has proceeded at the same pace for African American students, who represent 6.8 percent of the Fall 2014 entering cohort, and Hispanics, who represent 18.5 percent, as for all other students.¹³ The six-year graduation rate for African Americans rose from 60.3 percent for those who entered FSU in 1995¹⁴ to 78.1 percent for those who entered in 2008.¹⁵ The graduation rate for Hispanics rose from 61.3 percent for those who entered in 1995¹⁶ to 79.3 percent for those who entered in 2008.¹⁷

The credentials of undergraduates at FSU have increased only slightly over the last seventeen years, which suggests that greater selectivity is not the main reason for the improvement in retention and graduation rates. A year after SAT scores were re-centered by the College Board, the Fall 1997 cohort entered FSU with an average SAT score of

⁹ "Retention & Graduation Rates for FTICs," *1997-98 FSU Fact Book*, <http://www.ir.fsu.edu/Factbooks/1997-98/FTIC.htm>. The cohort consists of first-time-in-college students.

¹⁰ "Retention & Graduation Rates for Full-Time FTICs," *2014-15 FSU Fact Book*, http://www.ir.fsu.edu/Factbooks/2014-15/Retention_&_Graduation_rates_FTIC.pdf.

¹¹ "Retention and Graduation Rates for FTICs," *1997-98 FSU Fact Book*, <http://www.ir.fsu.edu/Factbooks/1997-98/FTIC.htm>.

¹² "Retention & Graduation Rates for Full-Time FTICs," *2014-15 FSU Fact Book*, http://www.ir.fsu.edu/Factbooks/2014-15/Retention_&_Graduation_rates_FTIC.pdf.

¹³ "Undergrad FTIC Fall 2014 Race vs. Full Time Part Time," *Detailed Enrollment Reports Beginning Summer 1999*, <http://ir.fsu.edu/student/headcount.htm>.

¹⁴ "FSU Graduation Rates 2001," *National Center for Education Statistics – IPEDS Data Center*, <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/>.

¹⁵ "FSU Graduation Rates 2014," *National Center for Education Statistics – IPEDS Data Center*, <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/>.

¹⁶ "FSU Graduation Rates 2001," *National Center for Education Statistics – IPEDS Data Center*, <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/>.

¹⁷ "FSU Graduation Rates 2014," *National Center for Education Statistics – IPEDS Data Center*, <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/>.

1,127.5,¹⁸ only approximately 80 points less than the 1,211.8 average SAT score of the Fall 2014 cohort.¹⁹

Although it is difficult to tease out the effect of any particular initiative, statistics bear out the theory of action for some of them. For example, two goals of mapping are to help students graduate faster and with fewer excess credit hours. The four-year graduation rate of students in the 2000 entering cohort (which did not experience mapping) was 44.2 percent,²⁰ and 7,382 students that year had excess credit hours, defined at the time as having accumulated over 120 credit hours and being more than one term from graduation.²¹ After the advent of mapping in 2005, the four-year graduation rate rose to 61.5 percent for the 2009 entering cohort,²² and only 1,540 students had excess credits.²³

One major focus for Advising First has been counseling exploratory students, the number of which has nearly doubled, from 583 in the 2007-08 to 1,115 in 2013-14. During this period, the retention rate of exploratory students increased from 85.25 percent to 89.9 percent.²⁴ As a result, the retention gap between exploratory students and all students has decreased from 4.65 percentage points to 2.10 percentage points.

There is also evidence that programs targeting particular student subgroups have had an impact. The low-income and first-generation students who participate in CARE have fall-to-fall retention (90.6 percent for the 2012 cohort) and six-year graduation (80.6 percent for the 2008 cohort) rates²⁵ that are consistent with university-wide rates. The primary goal of ACE's college skills course is to return the students required to take it to good academic standing. An indication of such a move is students returning for their second year. Looking at the 2006 cohort, which is the last cohort before the course was implemented, 54 percent of students who were below 2.0 in their first term returned for

¹⁸ "FTIC Admission Statistics, 1996-2003," *2003-04 FSU Fact Book*, http://www.ir.fsu.edu/Factbooks/2003-04/Admission_Statistics.pdf. The cohort consists of first-time-in-college students who enrolled in the university.

¹⁹ "FTIC Admission Statistics, 2005-2014," *2014-15 FSU Fact Book*, http://www.ir.fsu.edu/Factbooks/2014-15/Admission_Statistics.pdf. The cohort consists of first-time-college students who enrolled in the university.

²⁰ "Retention & Graduation Rates for Full-Time FTICs," *2010-11 FSU Fact Book*, http://www.ir.fsu.edu/Factbooks/2010-11/Retention_and_Graduation_rates_FTIC.pdf. Allowable exclusions were not subtracted from the denominator.

²¹ Lawrence Abele, "Working the Issues of Retention and Graduation," Proceedings of BOOST Conference 2015, University of South Dakota, Vermillion, South Dakota.

²² "Retention & Graduation Rates for Full-Time FTICs," *2014-15 FSU Fact Book*, http://www.ir.fsu.edu/Factbooks/2014-15/Retention_&_Graduation_rates_FTIC.pdf. Allowable exclusions were not subtracted from the denominator.

²³ Lawrence Abele, "Working the Issues of Retention and Graduation," Proceedings of BOOST Conference 2015, University of South Dakota, Vermillion, South Dakota.

²⁴ "Exploratory Major Report: 2007-2013," *Advising First*.

²⁵ FSU Office of Institutional Research, "CARE Retention and Graduation Rates" (report provided to authors on request).

their second year. Among the 2013 cohort, 73 percent of course completers returned for their second year.²⁶ Finally, FSU's Graduate Success Rate (GSR), an NCAA statistic focused on graduation, has steadily increased over the last ten years, from 78 percent for the 1998 cohort to 85 percent for the 2008 cohort, close to the NCAA Division I average of 86 percent.²⁷

Success Factors

A High-Ranking Campus Champion

FSU's dramatic shift in institutional practices began in 1994 when Lawrence Abele became Provost. The consensus among those we interviewed was that Abele not only catalyzed these changes, but also was the chief strategist and used his authority to see them through. Over a nearly twenty-year tenure as provost, Abele was able to use his high position and his budgetary authority to institutionalize the use of data to understand the student experience, prioritize retention and graduation, and change established practices that stood in the way of student success. He was able to impress these changes into the fabric of the institution, in a way that has outlasted his time in the role. One of the reasons FSU has been able to sustain these changes is that Abele empowered others within the university with similar priorities and approach. Another reason is that he created structures—such as the regular, cross-functional admission and retention meeting or Advising First—to pursue these ends that are now part of the established practice of the university and sustained by their own organizational inertia.

Systematic Parsing and Willingness to Act on Student Data

One of the key features of Abele's approach, and one of his lasting impacts on university management, is the emphasis on analyzing patterns of behavior in student data, and acting on the insights gained from that analysis. The use of data at FSU is highly systematic. FSU administrators disaggregate signal outcomes—retention patterns over a college career or excess credits at graduation, for example—along multiple dimensions to flag areas of concern. They combine further parsing of the data with administrator to administrator discussion to try to get to the root cause of the discrepancy. They then establish a process for resolving the root cause—often with analysis that points toward a particular solution—and continue to monitor the disaggregated outcomes to see if the solution is effective. They have undertaken this process dozens of times focused on different processes or student groups. Although we heard about some discomfort with

²⁶ Sara Hamon, "SLS1122: An Academic Success Course for Freshmen on Probation," *Academic Center for Excellence*.

²⁷ "GSR Search," NCAA, <https://web1.ncaa.org/GSRSearch/exec/homePage>.

this data-heavy process in Abele’s early years, at this point, the application of data to student success challenges is expected and appreciated by the administrators and faculty we interviewed.

Cross-Functional Structure for Surfacing and Addressing Barriers

For many years, administrators responsible for the student experience at FSU worked in isolation, which caused unnecessary bureaucratic barriers. With the goal of fostering better collaboration and communication, Abele began holding weekly meetings of administrators from all relevant departments to discuss admission and retention. These meetings (now held every other week) enable administrators that would typically work in silos to surface problems and address them, collectively. The process has resulted in better identification and diagnosis of problems through pooled information. It has also facilitated more creative and comprehensive solutions that can be implemented faster because key stakeholders are in the room.

A Focus on Retention for All Students

FSU has undertaken a methodical, step-by-step approach to improving student retention—for all students. While some of its retention programs are designed specifically for students from low-income families or who are the first in their generation to attend college, those students are not the sole focus of the overall effort. Rather, FSU applies its methodology of identifying barriers to retention to its entire student body. Some FSU students whose backgrounds suggested they were highly likely to succeed in college were not staying and succeeding at FSU, and so retention programs were developed for them. At most institutions, “student success programs” include initiatives like FSU’s CARE. At FSU, programs like the University Honors Program, the Office of National Fellowships, Student-Athlete Support Services, and the Living-Learning Communities fall within the category, as well.

FSU has undertaken a methodical, step-by-step approach to improving student retention—for all students.

An obvious risk of this strategy is that resources will be spread so thin trying to help all students that the students most in need suffer. We have not seen evidence of this risk bearing out at FSU; low-income and first-generation students remain a priority for attention and support resources. One likely reason for this is that the application of support resources remains evidence-driven. FSU’s data on retention has led it to focus

on some groups that are not ordinarily considered retention risks, but it has also concentrated resources where they are needed most.

Remaining Challenges

FSU has been systematically identifying and addressing barriers to graduation and retention for over twenty years. Most of the low-hanging fruit is gone. The good news is that the remaining barriers are more apparent. The bad news is they are often more difficult to remove. It can be a challenge to maintain momentum in these circumstances, but FSU is relying on its well-integrated analysis and collaboration processes to continue pushing the boundaries of retention.

Success has introduced some resource challenges, as well. In the past, the additional tuition revenue generated from higher retention rates was reinvested in retention efforts. But as retention levels reached new highs and began to plateau, revenue growth slowed and the reinvestment process was discontinued.

Nevertheless, the CARE program has expanded rapidly, and with its application process now integrated into the general FSU application process, its growth is accelerating further. The number of applications to CARE more than doubled between 2014 and 2015, and the program is planning to serve a cohort this summer that is even larger than last summer's. The program is on the verge of outgrowing its current staff and facilities—despite recently hiring and moving to a new space. Leaders are confident in CARE's ability to serve this new, larger cohort, but worry that further rapid growth will make it difficult to maintain the quality of a program.

Advising First is another example of a program that is pushing at resource limits. While the National Academic Advising Association recommends a 300:1 student to advisor ratio, the average at FSU is about 500:1 and in some colleges, it is as high as 700:1. FSU has begun to work with EAB to adopt its predictive analytics-based advising platform, which the university hopes will make its proactive advising process more efficient. FSU has also faced a relatively high turnover rate among advisors; such turnover is particularly challenging to deal with in light of FSU's intensive training process for advisors. The university is creating a new, tiered position structure for advisors to clarify a career pathway in the department.

Sustaining these programs will require continued prioritization from university leadership. Since 2010, FSU has had three presidents and three provosts, which has made such prioritization less than certain. Notwithstanding, FSU's current president, John Thrasher, and current provost, Sally McRorie, have each expressed support for the retention effort, and have dedicated resources to expanding programs like CARE.

Conclusion

Spurred by a visionary provost in the early 1990s, FSU has maintained a focus on retention and graduation for over twenty years. During that time, it has developed a systematic process for using student data to identify and address barriers to retention, for the student body as a whole and for particular, struggling subgroups. This process has led to numerous initiatives, some aimed broadly at the rules, processes, and experience affecting all students, and some targeted to students that need extra support and engagement. The result has been a nearly unprecedented improvement in student graduation outcomes, and an infrastructure that will allow FSU to continue to adapt and improve in the future.

Appendix

We conducted the following interviews with FSU staff, faculty, and students on December 3 and 4, 2015:

- Lawrence Abele, Former Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs
- Jeff Badger, Interim Co-Director, University Honor Program
- Greg Beaumont, Associate Dean, Senior Associate Athletic Director; Director of Student-Athlete Academic Services (SAAS)
- Susan Blessing, Faculty Director, WIMSE – Living Learning Community
- Chris Boyd, Director of Advisor Training
- Ashe Brewer, CARE, Assistant Director, Tutorial and Computer Lab
- Michael Buchler, Faculty Director, Music – Living Learning Community
- John Carter, Associate Director of Advising First
- Theodore Chiricos, CARE Faculty, Criminology
- Billy Close, CARE Faculty, Criminology
- Jennifer Daniels, CARE, Office Manager/ HR Representative
- Charlie Davis, III, CARE, Program Director, Upward Bound
- Craig Filar, Assistant Dean, Undergraduate Studies and Director of Office of National Fellowships
- Jill Flees, Associate Director of Advising First
- Jessica Francis, Assistant Director of Educational Services for Student-Athlete Academic Services
- Rose-May Frazier, Director of Advising First
- Marc Gertz, CARE Faculty, Criminology
- Katie Grissom, Program Manager, Advising First Center for Academic Planning
- Germarlon Hall, CARE, Academic Advisor
- Sara Hamon, Associate Dean of Undergraduate Studies, Director of Academic Center for Excellence (ACE)
- Peter Hanowell, Coordinator of Tutorial Services (ACE)

- Mike Hart, Assistant Director, Academic and Student Services
- Holly Hunt, Teaching Faculty II, Academic Center for Excellence
- Lisa Jackson, CARE, Coordinator, Unconquered Scholars
- Bruce Janasiewicz, Associate Dean of Undergraduate Studies
- Justina Jones, CARE, Coordinator, Summer Bridge Program
- Maxine Jones, CARE Faculty, History
- Kacy King, Director of Student-Athlete Academic Services
- Karen Laughlin, Dean, Division of Undergraduate Studies
- Samuel Lloyd, Assistant Program Manager, Advising First Center for College Life Coaching
- Sally McRorie, Provost
- Osei Nyahuma, CARE, Financial Aid Specialist
- Bill Parker, Faculty Director, Bryan Hall – Living Learning Community
- Nikki Raimondi, Assistant Dean of Undergraduate Studies
- LaShae Roberts, Advising First Center for College Life Coaching
- RaJhai Spencer, CARE, Assistant Program Coordinator, Student Transition and Engagement
- Tadarrayl Starke, CARE, Director
- Fabian Tata, CARE, Tutoring and Computer Lab Director
- Alice Wright, Director of Retention
- CARE students