Data That Informs Policy:
Understanding Student Progress Toward a Degree

Michelle Appel, University of Maryland

Chris Giordano, University of Maryland University College

UM Background

- Public, Doctoral, Research University
- Flagship university of the USM
- 25,000 undergraduates; 10,000 graduate students
- 60% of admits first-time freshmen
- 92% of all UG full-time
- First-year retention: 93%
- Four-year grad rate 49%; six-year 70%
- Semesters with short summer and winter sessions

Project Background

- Upward momentum in retention, graduation rates
- Increasing quality of incoming freshmen
- Increasing numbers of AP and transfer credits
- External pressure to decrease time to degree
  - Ensure capacity for growing number of HS graduates
  - Improve efficiency
  - Document accountability for use of state resources

Further complicating this…

- Dichotomy of limited admission vs. open admission majors
- Flexibility and exploration as University strengths
- De-centralized advising – no consistency across colleges in advising procedures
  - Mandatory advising each semester in a few colleges
- Shifts in focus for student success activities:
  - Recruitment → Retention → Persistence to degree

The UM Process

- President's Task Force on Undergraduate Graduation Rates
  - Chaired by UG Dean
  - Assoc. Deans, students, IR committee members
- President's Cabinet
- Senate Hearings
- Senate Approval

Our Basic Questions…

- Are students graduating with excessive numbers of credits?
- How do double degrees/majors impact this?
- Are native students different than transfers in terms of how long it takes?
- Who are the students who are taking longer to graduate?
- Are students taking enough credits per semester to graduate in time?
- How do changes in program (by choice or otherwise) impact time-to-degree?

…And the Philosophical Issues that Have to be Faced

- How long is too long?
- Do we care how long it takes, as long as they graduate?
- How do we stay true to our mission to serve all types of students, not just the traditional ones?
- How do we ensure students enough time to explore and to find their intellectual niche?
- How can we deny students the chance to keep trying, even if they aren't progressing at our pace?
- Why should we think lack of progress is the student's fault?

Shifting Focus

- Committee realized that it needed to focus on supporting student success, not only promoting efficiency
- Began looking for barriers to success
  - Campus culture, message
  - Advising and academic planning
- Began looking for quantitative data about perceived behaviors impeding success
  - Timing of major changes
  - Credit accumulation

General Analytic Framework

- Environmental scan – are other places dealing with this and what are their solutions?
- Descriptive – what's really going on?
- What are we saying vs. what are students doing?
- What if?
  - What if we do nothing?
  - How many students does it take to move the rate?
  - Who would be impacted by a new policy?

Environmental Scan

- AAUDE query plus scan of selected catalogs on websites
  - Credit minimums, credit maximums, semester limits and tuition surcharges
- Several institutions had surcharges for excessive credits at the time of the project (Berkeley, UNC, Wisconsin)
- Several institutions have limits on the number of semesters in which a student must complete the degree
  - Require permission of a Dean to continue enrollment
- At many institutions, part-time or non-traditional students in a separate portion of the university, not subject to limits

Analyses of Credit Accumulation

- Semester credits attempted
  - Over 40% of UG take 12 - 14 credits
- Annual credit accumulation
  - About half of full-time degree seeking students earn fewer than 30 credits in an AY; a sizable minority earn fewer than 24
- Half of the degree-seeking, full-time students do not meet the expectation of progress in the catalog (30 credits per academic year)

Analyses of Graduation Rates

- Predicted Graduation Rates without Policy Change
  - Simple regression – even if we do nothing we estimate 7-point growth in the 6-year grad rate because of the increased quality of the freshman class (and the increased first-year retention rate)
- With about 4,000 in each cohort, a shift of one percentage point is 40 students

Understanding the gap

- Gap in 4-year versus 6-year rates
  - Over 20 percentage points
- Gap in what students say they want and what actually happens
  - 90% of freshmen, 72% second-year, and 69% of junior-level students expect to complete Bachelor's in 4 years
- Explored profiles of students graduating at 4, 5, and 6 years

Analyses of Major Selection

- About 40% of students enter as "undecided" in the college of Letters & Sciences (LTSC)
- The colleges of Arts & Humanities, Business, and Behavioral & Social Sciences receive more than two-thirds of LTSC students
- Over 10% of graduates who began as freshmen earned multiple degrees in the same semester
  - Many of these are in two different colleges
  - About 3% of graduates who began as transfers do so

Shaping a New Policy

- As policy began taking shape, important to understand its impact
- Students adversely affected
  - How many and who?
  - Where could interventions be targeted?
  - Unintended consequences?
- Degree completion in 10 semesters/130 credits
  - Flexibility for colleges to implement their own solutions
  - All programs develop four-year templates to achieve graduation
  - "Benchmarks" for progress and early intervention
  - Mandatory advising for continuation beyond 10/130

Analyses of Affected Students

- In fall 2003, fewer than 400 students with more than 125 credits earned were registered
  - Though relatively small compared to UG population, considerable in light of cohort size
- A small number of students (less than 10%) did not successfully complete (or register for) any courses in their major for one semester of their junior year
  - Lower graduation rates from junior status
  - Those who changed majors or passed a course had much higher graduation rates from junior status than those who continued the pattern

Moving Through Shared Governance

- Initial report to Senate
  - Lengthy – cited lots of data
  - Identified patterns in data, contextual issues
  - Considerable range of recommendations
- Second incarnation of committee to work with Senate on policy recommendation
- Final Policy and FAQs
  - Short, light on data
- IR's continued presence
  - Demonstrate that data exists, even if it isn't cited

Estimating the Need for New Resources

- Policy required considerable boost to advising in some colleges
  - Benchmarking and reviews as well as academic planning
- Creating a cost estimate
  - Determined number of students to be reviewed
  - Used NACADA recommended ratio (300:1)
  - Developed number of additional advisors needed to phase in and their salary cost

Continuing Involvement

- Implementation
  - On committee to examine program plans, benchmarks
  - Eye toward assessment
- Assessment
  - Initial development and collection of data
    - Benchmarks – who meets and who doesn't
    - Waiver of 130/10 – who and why
  - Monitoring graduation rate
    - How much improvement and why?

Lessons to Learn

- Data can deepen understanding of a problem
  - For policy makers
  - For campus community
- Timely information is valuable; a lengthy report may not be
- Its better to be there at the start
  - Help understand the issues
  - Make sure assessment is included
- Find a solution that allows each unit to customize while moving the institution forward

Handout

Data that Informs Policy: Understanding Student Progress Toward a Degree

This handout includes URLs for the following:

Report of the President's Task Group on Undergraduate Graduation Rate - Student Success Rate

Student Academic Success - Degree Completion Policy

Frequently Asked Questions Concerning the Policy

For more information, contact:

Michelle Appel, mappel@umd.edu

Chris Giordano, cgiordano@umuc.edu

Report of the President's Task Group
on Undergraduate Graduation Rate - Student Success Rate

This report was prepared as the final report of the task force charged with examining how best to increase graduation rates and reduce the cost per student degree. The task force was convened in the fall of 2003 in response to growing external pressures to increase efficiency, throughput and capacity.

The report was submitted in the spring of 2004 and was the result of a frequent task force meetings in which institutional research data were supplied on an ad hoc basis in response to committee questions and requests. A member of the Office of Institutional Research and Planning (OIRP) sat on the committee.

http://www.senate.umd.edu/Meetings/CurrentSenateMeetingMaterials/
TaskGroupUndergradGraduationRateFinal%203-2-04.htm

Student Academic Success – Degree Completion Policy

Following the submission of the task force's report, the group was asked to re-convene to develop a formal policy on timely degree completion for submission to the University Senate. Joining the group were members of the Senate's Educational Affairs subcommittee.

The policy was vetted with numerous student groups and campus constituencies. During the ongoing revision and vetting process, data supplied by OIRP were used to inform revisions and to answer questions posed.

Final adoption of the policy occurred at a November 2004 University Senate meeting.

http://www.ugst.umd.edu/academicsuccess.pdf

Frequently Asked Questions
Concerning the Policy

The committee generated a list of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for use in the vetting process. These FAQs were posted on the Senate website and updated as campus hearings continued.

Initially the FAQ list included not only policy questions but also student data (including those data already reported in the Task Force's final report). Eventually most of the data were eliminated from the FAQ as the focus of conversations shifted away from the need for such a policy and toward how it would be implemented.

http://www.senate.umd.edu/Senate_Executive_Committee/
FAQsStudSucessred11-1-04.pdf