COMMITTEE ON RETENTION
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Background: The retention of students is fundamental to the core business of any institution, yet until the most recent decade, many colleges across the country paid little attention or paid mere lip service to the importance of strategic management of student persistence and graduation. However, the time is now long overdue for the incorporation of retention planning into the University's enrollment management efforts. The competition of replacing departing students with new students is extremely fierce, and it is a lot less expensive to retain a student than it is to recruit one.

"Retention" is an outcome. It is the convergence of many variables including students' incoming characteristics, their experiences, both formal and informal, and their satisfaction and success.   Thus student retention should be everyone's business.

However, an entity focused on retention -- data analysis, information sharing, program development, and strategic interventions -- is both necessary and desirable to ensure the University at Albany community's knowledge base and to guide strategic thinking about ways to improve. Many universities have either an Office of Retention or a Retention Committee that is generally charged with the review and analysis of retention data; the creation of retention programs and initiatives; and development or revision of policies and procedures to improve and enhance the retention of students. Areas that should be explored, but not limited to include the establishments of a First Year Experience Program, or New Student Orientation Program; and the review and analysis of time to degree and course availability.

Thus, the Provost is establishing the University Retention Committee, to be chaired by Sheila Mahan, Assistant Vice President for Academic Affairs. While the focus of this effort will initially be on the academic programs and experiences, representatives from across campus will be invited to participate. Membership will include representatives from:

- Undergraduate Admissions (Robert Andrea)
- Undergraduate Studies   (Sue Faerman)
- Academic Support Services/EOP (Carson Carr)
- Advisement Services Center (Sue Phillips)
- College of Arts and Sciences Dean's Office (Gregory Stevens)
- Academic Affairs Planning and Assessment (Bruce Szelest)
- Associate Vice President for Student Affairs (Christine Bouchard)
- Two teaching faculty from the University Senate (to be identified via Senate Chair)
- Two or three students (to be identified via Undergraduate Studies and Student Association)

Committee Charge: The committee is charged with the on-going examination and evaluation of retention data, with its analysis shared with Executive Committee and Faculty Governance. It also has the responsibility to identify barriers to student persistence and graduation; identify best practices; develop university-wide retention strategies; review existing policies and procedures that serve as impediments to strong retention; and make recommendations for new policies, programs or initiatives, or revisions to existing policies to governance and administrative channels as appropriate.

Agenda for the 2005-2006 academic year

1) **Develop University Retention Report and Plan:** On the question of retention, the University is data rich and information poor. Many studies have been done, much data collected, but we have not assembled it into informative, actionable reports. We must ensure that efforts are informed by what we know from data as well as what we feel is right. And we must ensure that we assess our efforts as we move forward. As part of its ongoing effort, the Retention Committee will:

   a. Examine University retention data, national benchmark data, student satisfaction reports (national and University)
   b. Provide preliminary report by December 1, 2005, and ongoing reports thereafter
   c. Engage campus in education/discussion to develop appropriate goals for improvement to retention and strategies to achieve goals as part of formal "retention plan" for 2006-07. (Spring 2006)

2) **Explore and enhance the "First-year Experience":** The retention of students from freshman to sophomore year is widely regarded as the key institutional opportunity to affect its rate of persistence to graduation. While there are certainly other opportunities during the lifecycle of a student, improving the retention rate from freshman to sophomore year provides significant institutional benefit. That is why 80 percent of colleges and universities around the country, including the University at Albany, have a "first-year experience" program – a set of academic and cocurricular activities that are purposefully organized to create an "intentional" first year experience. However, the University at Albany's program, "Project Renaissance," is limited to 380 students, and while there are other pockets of activity focused on the freshman-year experience, they are not widespread, coordinated or integrated.

   In other words, most UAlbany first-year students do not benefit from an "intentional" first-year experience. The University must find ways to expand the intellectual and academic benefits that it has seen in Project Renaissance – which has a first to second-year retention rate 6-8 percentage points higher than students not in these groups. Furthermore Project Renaissance students' graduation rate of 69.4% is just behind Presidential Scholars (69.7%) and far ahead of students in none of these groups (56.3%).

   The task requires an understanding of the "current state" of the freshman year and the articulation of a "desired state" – that is set of goals for first-year students. Then we must identify and implement a set of experiences (academic/intellectual, residential/social) intentionally designed to achieve these goals. (In this regard, there is no need to invent programs, as many exist throughout the country; the task will be to tailor well-established initiatives to UAlbany's particular needs and culture.) Whether by expanding Project Renaissance, or developing other first-year programs, the University must address what is an increasing gap between its first-year experience and those of competitor institutions. (Additional members of the faculty from key departments will be enlisted in this effort.) This perspective can also inform ongoing compact planning initiatives arising from academic units.

3) **Improve course management/access**: Without question one of the major sources of student dissatisfaction at UAlbany is course availability and our procedures to access courses. This is the University's "core business" and the reason that students attend college, yet the process has actually gotten worse in recent years as a result of a number of changes (General Education requirements, budget reductions, etc). Capitalizing on the new technology tools available to the University (PeopleSoft, DARS, and Resource25), the Committee will seek a better understanding of the situation and more proactive management to ensure that:

   a. Supply of courses equals academic requirements

b. Academic requirements are deliverable
c. Student demand is managed through advisement and other efforts to structure the academic experience for them to maximize availability
d. Student course preferences, course-taking patterns, and other student-driven variables are better understood as factors in this tight 'economy'
e. Other institutional practices that affect registration access, such as classroom management, are coordinated to achieve maximum access

This is the proverbial "low-hanging fruit" to improve student satisfaction, which is not to suggest that revisions will be easy (given entrenched patterns by faculty, departments, administrative units, governance and students). But <u>any</u> improvements will affect virtually all students to some degree.

4) **Continue improvements to academic advisement:** Academic advisement appears at the top of every national survey of what's most important to students. In 2004 an Advisement Task Force began a review of University-wide advisement, including its various forms of delivery throughout the campus, as well as the issues, challenges and needs of students and advisors around this core academic support activity. The Advisement Policy current under review by the University Senate includes joint formation of a working group to implement many recommendations that emerged from the initial report (more resources and training for advisors, better resources for students, continued review of advising policies and practices, etc.) and to consider advisement-related matters on an ongoing basis.

Given the centrality of advisement to student satisfaction and academic progress (and the overlap between the leadership of the task force and the Retention Committee), it is proposed that this activity be folded under the umbrella of the Retention Committee.

5) **Use technology to improve student-centered services and reduce runaround:** Many institutions have begun using "portals" like MyUAlbany to proactively provide services to students. While MyUAlbany is not a true portal (which allows users to modify what they see and what information they receive), we can certainly capitalize on it to provide students with key information and procedural guidance, and reduce runaround and red tape. For example, this week we will work on bringing declare/change major and minor links to the portal which will eliminate the need for students to obtain two signatures and return a form to the Advisement Services Center. Instead, they will simply submit an online form and will receive email confirmation when the change is made.

The Retention Committee will be encourage to assist in identifying opportunities to eliminate red tape and runaround and to advise on proposals for the portal.

6) **Customer Service Training and Mentoring of front-line staff:** The University at Albany currently provides no orientation or reinforcement of a campus culture that we value students. Many individual offices do so, but too often our students interacting with the academic administrative units and business administrative units are not treated as "customers." Too often they are sent away or read the rules. At the same time, staff in these front line units have not received training to deal with the public, are not empowered to step outside the regulations, and have not received an institutional message about the value we place on service to students.   As a result, no one feels good about these interactions – students feel the University is bureaucratic and uncaring, and staff feel students are rude and not worthy of assistance.

We need to break this cycle. Working with colleagues in the Office of Human Resources Management, we will attempt to develop programs to support a campus culture of student service with particular attention to providing front line staff with the interpersonal tools as well as information to support services.