



DALTON STATE COLLEGE

RETENTION AND GRADUATION REPORT

Presented to the

Graduation Rate Task Force

University System of Georgia

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout its history, Dalton State College has regarded student success as the core of its institutional mission, a commitment expressed in its current Statement of Purpose and its recently adopted Strategic Plan for 2009-2012. As in many other institutions during the last decade, that concern has concentrated on the formulation and measurable achievement of specific learning objectives and on the improvement of retention and graduation rates. Improved retention, in fact, was the goal of a Title III grant to DSC which ran from 2003 to 2009. While it and other initiatives fostered some encouraging successes, DSC's one-year retention rates for first-time, full-time students during that time were mixed. Although they exceeded their annual targets, they tracked slightly below those for the University System (Table 1). Graduation rates for students in associate and baccalaureate programs fell below both local targets and System levels (Tables 2A and 2B). Clearly much remains to be done, and DSC welcomes this opportunity to draw on the experiences of its sister institutions in the University System and the expertise of the Board of Regents staff.

1. ROOTS OF THE PROBLEM

Many of the challenges DSC faces regarding retention and graduation rate improvement are shared with other institutions in the Access Sector. Of these, faculty and staff observations, anecdotal evidence, and surveys by the Office of Institutional Research and Planning suggest that the most notable are:

a. *Stop-in/stop-out enrollment patterns for many students*, especially among those of non-traditional age (22+) who constituted 41.2% of the student body in Fall 2009. Among the student body as a whole in Fall 2009, 40.3% carried less than a full academic load, in part

because of job or other outside responsibilities (which undoubtedly were also shouldered by some of the full-time enrollees as well). These considerations, apart from financial constraints, lack of personal motivation, or other factors, favor discontinuities in enrollment or academic progress which in turn diminish retention and graduation rates.

b. *Relatively large numbers of students requiring Learning Support courses*, forming a group frequently shown to be especially vulnerable to academic discouragement and likely to withdraw without completing their intended programs. At DSC an average of 62% of first-time students entering in the fall term from 2004 to 2008 required one or more Learning Support courses. The distressingly low three-year graduation rates between 2002 and 2006 for associate degree students in one, two, and three Learning Support areas are shown in Table 3.

c. *A lack of student "connectedness" in a primarily commuter-campus environment.* In Spring 2009, 75% of 704 randomly selected DSC students responding to a NSSE survey reported they spent no time participating in co-curricular activities, and only 48% felt well-supported by the institution regarding their social needs. While the opening of on-campus housing in Fall 2009 may afford new opportunities to improve these numbers, so far fewer than 5% of DSC students live in College-provided housing.

More peculiar to DSC are these impediments:

a. *A somewhat blurred mission, which includes baccalaureate, associate, and certificate components, and technical as well as traditional academic programs.* This reflects the two-year status the College occupied through most of its history and its standing as one of the four institutions in the System that have housed technical programs under the aegis of DTAE/TCSG.

b. *A continuing public perception of DSC as a place to begin rather than to complete programs* in the arts and sciences or professional disciplines, growing in part out of the institution's self-marketing as a starting point for transfer to a state, regional, or research university.

c. *Local employment opportunities as alternatives to higher education.* For much of the College's history, apart from occasional and (until recently) relatively mild economic downturns, a generally prosperous manufacturing economy in Northwest Georgia often seemed to promise acceptable living standards and lifestyles for which no more than a high school diploma, if that, was required. In 2007, for instance, the average weekly wage for all industries in Whitfield County was \$677, placing it 20th among Georgia's 159 counties.

2. SUCCESSES AND BARRIERS TO SUCCESS

Historically DSC's focus has been more on retention than on graduation rates, assuming that if students are retained, graduation will follow in due course, even if at a somewhat prolonged pace. Within the context of retention, DSC's primary concern has been from the freshman to the sophomore year. As the College's baccalaureate programs have matured and multiplied, however, concern for the transition from the sophomore to the junior year has increased.

To date, work aimed at improving retention rates—and by implication, those for graduation—has fallen under two major headings:

1. *The Advising-Retention-Completion (ARC) Initiative of 2004 ff.*, subsequently configured as DSC's response to the University System's Retention-Progression-Graduation

(RPG) Initiative launched in 2005. A campus-wide committee of faculty, staff, and students formulated 57 recommendations, of which 28 were accomplished by Spring 2007. Six others were deemed financially unfeasible, and those remaining were either in progress, ongoing, or had become moot for various reasons.

2. *The Title III Initiative of 2003-2008*, which was extended for one year through 2009. Under the “Strengthening Institutions Program,” a grant of \$1,825,000 was made “to improve student outcomes and increase retention through the development and implementation of innovative methods to deliver instruction and its supporting student services in a manner that responds to the educational needs of a nontraditional student body.” Specific activities funded by the grant included establishment of a centralized academic advising center; development of an array of distance-learning offerings for the B.B.A. program; development and implementation of a First Year Experience program, Learning Communities and Supplemental Instruction, and an Honors Program; and the provision of online and computer-based tutoring for Learning Support courses.

Of these two undertakings, the following appear to have been the most successful:

a. *The Academic Advising Center*. After a pilot program in Spring 2004, the Center began operation the following Fall by assuming advising responsibilities for all students enrolled in two or more Learning Support areas. All students declaring General Studies as a major were added a year later, and in Fall 2006 all new students were required to register for their first fifteen hours through the Center. In Fall 2004 the Center advised 236 students; by Fall 2009 this number had risen to 3,778. Professional advisors and specially trained faculty endeavor to spend at least an hour in each student’s initial interview and to track progress throughout the student’s

engagement with the Center. The work of the Center appears to have been a major influence on the increase in the College's retention rate for first-time, full-time students, which rose from 56.65% in 2004-2005 to 64.4% in 2008-2009, having peaked at 65.86% in 2006-2007.

b. *Identification of "killer" courses*—Learning Support or general education courses characterized by abnormally high rates of F's and withdrawals, including English 0098 and 1101; Reading 0098; Mathematics 0096, 0098, and 1111; and Biology 1107. Specialized faculty training and intra-disciplinary discussion, enhanced tutoring opportunities, and expanded faculty-to-student feedback brought significant improvement in all of these, most strikingly in English 1101 where the percentage of students earning a C or better rose from 44.5% in 2002-2003 to 75.7% in 2008-2009; Mathematics 0096, which rose from 39.1% to 59.5% in the same period; and Mathematics 1111, which went from 51.5% to 66.8%.

c. *Establishment of a First Year Experience program*. From 1986 on, DSC offered some version of an extended orientation course for incoming students, although this only became required for all new first-time, full-time students after the University System mandated FYE programs on all campuses. In its present form the program began in Fall 2007, and the fall-to-fall retention rate for first-time, full-time students who have passed through it has consistently surpassed that of non-first-time, full-time students who did not take it. For 2008-2009, 64.5% of first-time, full-time students were retained, versus only 57.4% of non-first-time, full-time students.

d. *Establishment of a College Success Summer Bridge program* to assist recent high school graduates' entry into college. Funded by a grant from The Goizueta Foundation, the four-week program provides selected high school seniors with intensive review and enrichment in

English, mathematics, and reading, taught by DSC faculty. In 2008, 95 students were enrolled; 85% completed the program, and 97% of these raised their placement scores by its end. Sixty-two percent exited one or more Learning Support areas. With the addition of on-campus housing in 2009, a residential component became possible for the program, thus replicating more closely the full College experience in order to facilitate these students' adjustment to the expectations and circumstances of College life.

Other efforts were less fruitful. Among these were:

a. *An Honors Program.* Initiated in Fall 2005, the Honors Program was suspended in Spring 2007 because of low student participation.

b. *Learning Communities.* Repeated attempts to create student cohorts enrolled in the same classes were discouraged by logistical problems arising from the nature of a commuter campus, the large number of students working full- or part-time jobs, and a shortage of faculty resources.

c. *Supplemental Instruction.* Increasing enrollments and a commensurate need for additional sections of general studies courses left few faculty available to offer supplemental instruction, which in any event never became sufficiently distinct from the College's regular tutoring program.

d. *Online Course Development.* While DSC's online offerings have grown slowly, most of these have been in specialized or upper-division courses. For lower-division and general education courses, which typically enroll larger numbers of less disciplined or motivated students, a hybrid or blended format has proven more successful as an alternative to a traditional

one. Many faculty have commented on a shortage of incentives to develop online versions of their courses, either as release time or through salary supplements. Enrollment increases have militated against the former and fiscal limitations have precluded the latter.

e. *Faculty Advising.* How to improve faculty advising and sustain it at a high quality are perennial and ongoing concerns. While training opportunities, especially for newly hired faculty, increased greatly under provisions of the Title III grant, locally designed surveys of graduating students as well as NSSE results indicate that student satisfaction with faculty advising remains relatively low, trailing nearly all other metrics of student experience at DSC. Although faculty are aware of their advising obligations, an effective means of holding them accountable for their performance as advisors has been inadequate or non-existent. Devising and implementing a remedy for this deficiency will be a major objective of a pending reassessment of the entire faculty evaluation process at DSC.

3. METRICS

The most obvious and revealing metrics for DSC's success in retaining its students and graduating them within a reasonable time are, of course, the annually compiled data for fall-to-fall retention and for graduation within three-year and six-year time frames for associate and baccalaureate degree programs respectively. These figures, in turn, should be viewed in at least two contexts: longitudinally over multi-year periods and in comparison with predetermined targets. (One problem is that many of DSC's baccalaureate programs are still too new to generate longitudinal information from statistically significant populations.) The targets currently in use at DSC were set in Spring 2008 and were established as both realistic and significant through discussion among administrative personnel after analysis of recent retention

and graduation rates for each category of degree program, along with other data disaggregated by ethnic group and gender. Pass rates for students in Learning Support are also very helpful and may be broken down by type of student, academic area, or number of Learning Support courses taken. Data derived from these sources underlay the selection of improving Learning Support outcomes as the objective of the College's Quality Enhancement Plan in preparation for its SACS reaccreditation visit in 2013.

4. THREE-YEAR PLAN

Two of the five overarching goals in DSC's Strategic Plan for 2009-2012 relate directly to the issue of retention and graduation rates. With their associated planning objectives and action plans, they will shape much of the College's work on these matters over the next three years:

IV. The College will improve student learning and academic support to ensure student success, to improve retention; and to improve graduation rates. (Linked to University System Strategic Goals 1, 2, and 6)

1. Increase academic and collegial support to students who may not be familiar with college: at-risk students, nontraditional students, displaced and working students/parents, and first-generation college students.
 - * Provide students with the opportunity to complete a self-assessment before enrolling in online/hybrid courses.
2. Improve the academic performance of high risk students through learning support.
 - * Explore ways to improve learning support success rates.
 - * Reduce learning support class sizes.
3. Expand access to quality educational opportunities through various means such as developing additional online and hybrid courses and increasing offerings at off-campus sites.
4. Schedule classes to maximize the utilization of buildings and faculty.
5. Increase need-based and academic scholarships for current and prospective DSC students.

6. Improve staff support services by providing professional development opportunities.
- V. The College will renew excellence in undergraduate education by improving teaching quality and by focusing on student achievement of essential learning outcomes for the 21st century. (Linked to University System Strategic Goals 1, 2, 3, and 6)*
1. Improve excellence in undergraduate education by improving teaching quality.
 - * Increase faculty participation in presentations, workshops, reading groups, and discussions offered by the Teaching and Learning Center and by other campus entities.
 - * Increase professional development opportunities for faculty.
 2. Focus on student achievement of essential learning outcomes for the 21st century: inquiry and analysis, critical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, quantitative and informational literacy, and problem solving.
 3. Add additional targeted four-year degree programs, including psychology, nursing, special education, and performing/fine arts.

In addition, the College will determine and apply best practices gleaned from its comparator and aspirational peers, exploit opportunities presented by the addition of on-campus housing to create a stronger student “connectedness” to DSC and their lives and responsibilities here, and pursue a variety of avenues to rebrand DSC as a destination rather than a transition in students’ post-secondary education plans. A more specific initiative involves an effort to revive the use of learning communities, but in a residential environment. Also, a three-year grant of \$500,000 has just been received from The Goizueta Foundation to underwrite scholarships for deserving Hispanic/Latino students and a program of professional development in strategic enrollment management for administrators and staff personnel.

5. MAKING GRADUATION A CAMPUS PRIORITY

Newly hired faculty and staff at Dalton State College soon become aware that it enjoys a solid reputation across Northwest Georgia and beyond as a rigorous but caring institution. Some specific strategies to capitalize on this asset may be found in Sections II and III of President

Grube's 2007 Presidential Project report on improving graduation and retention rates. The most pressing or promising of these point toward greater direct involvement of the College's Schools and Departments in the creation of an institutional culture centered on retention and graduation. This would include a more concerted effort to assure adequate availability of required or strongly desired upper-division courses (which in turn means careful attention to faculty deployment), departmental and major field orientations, course redesigns, use of undergraduate peer mentors, intrusive advising, and systematic analysis and tracking of retention and graduation data from a variety of perspectives. Some of these things are already underway in certain units of the College, especially the Schools of Business, Education, and Social Work, where they are mandated by accreditation bodies, and the procedures used there may be readily expanded to other units. Whatever steps are taken to enhance DSC's already established culture of student success and to generate improved retention and graduation rates must focus on producing quantifiable outcomes to a greater degree than has been the case heretofore. As DSC continues to respond to a relatively new President and confronts the prospect of new academic leadership by the beginning of 2011, the time for revitalizing the priorities of retaining students, creating a nurturing environment for their success, and assuring their graduation is particularly propitious.