



DALTON STATE COLLEGE

2011 RETENTION, PROGRESSION AND GRADUATION
ANNUAL REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

The benefits of educational attainment to the individual, the community, and the state are well documented and are essential to economic prosperity. The United States has historically led the world in the education of its citizenry, but now lags behind more than a dozen other developed nations. With only 27 % of its citizens holding a bachelor's degree or higher, the state of Georgia ranks near the bottom in educational attainment levels in the United States, and Whitfield County in Northwest Georgia comes in woefully behind the Georgia average with just 15.6 % of its citizens holding a college degree. Other counties within Dalton State's service area, according to the 2010 census, recorded rates ranging from 6.7 % (Murray County) to 23.3 % (Pickens), all falling below the already-low state average. As this region is also the hub of an international manufacturing industry, it is clear that the educational attainment level must be raised not just to attract future industry, but also to sustain the homegrown one.

For the economic viability of our region, Dalton State College's administration, faculty, and staff fully appreciate that retention, progression and graduation of our students must be our highest priority. No longer is it sufficient for us to merely attract students to our campus, we must be committed to moving them successfully through an academic program and across the stage with a degree in hand. From the time students are admitted, go through orientation, progress through the critical first year, and succeed beyond, we must do what it takes to ensure that our students always have the endpoint in mind: graduation.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Many of the challenges Dalton State faces regarding retention and graduation rate improvement are shared with our peer institutions in the State College sector. Of these, faculty and staff observations, anecdotal evidence, and data from the Office of Institutional Research and Planning suggest that the most notable are:

a. *Lack of perceived value for educational attainment:* At 16 %, Dalton State holds the distinction of having the largest (percentage-wise) population of Hispanic students in the University System. We also have a large number of indigenous Appalachian students who, for the most part, can be characterized as rural and lower income. As a result, Dalton State has a self-reported 59 % of students who are first generation college students, most coming from Hispanic and Appalachian families that historically have not always placed a high value on educational attainment and are not always supportive of their student children.

b. *Current economic pressures:* The Great Recession has hit Dalton/Whitfield County especially hard. With the local economy tied so closely to the struggling housing industry, unemployment in this area has run consistently over 12 % for many months. With cuts to financial aid and HOPE, many students can no longer afford to go to college, even though they know they are better candidates for better jobs with a college degree. After 13 years of steady growth in enrollment, Dalton State began the 2011 academic year with 8 % fewer students than the year before, due in large part to prolonged economic pressures. Many students who enrolled at the beginning of the economic downturn have had to stop-out because their families no longer have any financial resources for education.

c. *Stop-in/stop-out enrollment patterns for many students.* This is especially true among those of non-traditional age (22+) who constituted 44.9 % of our student body in Fall 2011. Among our student body as a whole in Fall 2011, 41 % carried less than a full academic load, in part because of job or other outside responsibilities. A Noel-Levitz survey of our non-traditional students found that approximately 38 % worked more than 30 hours a week. These considerations, apart from ongoing financial constraints, lack of personal motivation, or other factors, favor discontinuities in enrollment or academic progress which in turn diminish retention and graduation rates.

d. *Relatively large numbers of students requiring Learning Support courses:* students requiring learning support classes are frequently shown to be vulnerable to academic discouragement and at higher

risk of withdrawing without completing their intended programs. At Dalton State, an average of 49% of first-time students entering in the fall term from 2006 to 2010, required one or more Learning Support courses.

e. A lack of student “connectedness” in a primarily commuter-campus environment: In Spring 2011, 84 % of 395 randomly selected Dalton State students responding to a NSSE survey reported they spent no time participating in co-curricular activities and only 47 % felt well-supported by the institution regarding their social needs. With only 240 beds in its Wood Valley apartment complex, Dalton State has very limited on-campus housing. In its third year of operation, only 4% of Dalton State students live in College-provided housing.

f. Transitioning mission: This academic year is the first since Dalton State shed its affiliation with the Technical College System of Georgia. Some technical programs remain but are being assimilated into the College’s existing academic programs and Schools. Competition in our marketplace emerged this year when Georgia Northwestern Technical College established a campus in Whitfield County and attracted a number of existing Dalton State students as well as a number of new students who likely would otherwise have enrolled in technical programs at Dalton State. We are experiencing increasing competition from private institutions offering online programs. Additionally, the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga offers in-state, plus 20% tuition to Junior and Senior students in counties contiguous to Georgia.

g. New admission criteria: Along with peer institutions within our sector, Dalton State has initiated new admission criteria, most notably, requiring SAT scores and a minimum Freshman Index for admission. For the 2012-2013 academic year, those for whom Learning Support is indicated in all three areas of math, reading and English, will be denied admission to Dalton State. The new standards may impact our enrollment in a negative way, but in the long run, it should positively impact retention and graduation rates as admitted students will have higher probability for academic success.

PROGRESS TOWARD GOALS

1. *What have you accomplished to date, by way of progress on retention and graduation? What is working and what has failed? Accomplishments must include progress and completion metrics and data.*

Our challenge is clear: The one-year retention rate for Dalton State's first-time, full-time freshmen for the Fall 2010 cohort is 59.1 %. The institutional bachelor's degree six-year graduation rate for the Fall 2005 cohort is 16.6 %, and within the system, our baccalaureate degree-granting graduation rate is 23.64%. Both are among the lowest in the System's. Retention of sophomores from associate's degree programs to baccalaureate programs is also low. Retention and graduation problems of this magnitude have a tremendously negative implication for the long-term success of Dalton State's four-year programs. To address the problems, Dalton State has developed initiatives and strategies including:

- The decision to focus on improving academic performance of high risk students in Learning Support English for the College's Quality Enhancement Plan for SACS reaffirmation and accreditation, to begin implementation in fall 2012;
- Implementing *DegreeWorks* in Fall 2011, which allows students and their advisors to map out a successful degree plan promoting better academic progress and scheduling;
- Assistance from a nearly \$500,000 grant from The Goizueta Foundation which established the Hispanic/Latino Achievement Scholarship program. This pays for 75 % of tuition for Hispanic students enrolled full-time with a GPA between 2.0 and 2.99. By requiring these students to attend full-time, the College hopes to improve the graduation rates of Hispanic students. Thirty-two students have already availed themselves of this special opportunity;
- Development of two pre-college programs, *Summer Bridge* and *Near Peer*, to facilitate remediation of cohorts of at-risk students before their first semester on campus. *Summer Bridge* is a four-week academic enhancement program offered free each summer for selected high risk incoming Dalton State freshmen. As qualified by Compass Test scores, students attend English, math, and reading classes, with all

Summer Bridge students taking our College Success course. *Near Peer* is a voluntary, grant-funded program that provides math and English instruction to selected underrepresented high school students at a host high school. In addition, Dalton State peer mentors provide instruction in leadership development and lead our College Success course;

- Participation in the Adult Learning Consortium with 8 other USG institutions to attract, facilitate, and enhance engagement of adult learners, including soldier scholars;
- Introduction of advising workshops during orientation to educate students on how to select majors and courses toward graduation;
- Initiation of exit interviews with withdrawing students to determine reasons for stopping out/dropping out; nearly always reasons are family and/or work requirements;
- Implementation of an Early Alert System within Banner to identify students who may be experiencing academic difficulties, placing them at higher risk for dropping out, and refer them to Academic Resources staff members who encourage them to follow up with professors/advisors;
- Allowing READ 0098 students with a high pre-midterm average and with excellent attendance the opportunity to exit the course before the midterm point of the class, making them eligible to take second-half semester classes, thereby accelerating their academic progress;
- Implementing a follow-up plan in which an Academic Resources staff member communicates each semester with students on academic probation or who have withdrawn from school to determine how we might help them return;
- Posting of midterm grades to identify academically weak students and offer them remedial assistance;
- A pilot study, designating an in-house full-time advisor in the School of Business to assist freshman and sophomore business majors;
- Providing retest remediation opportunities to students who were unsuccessful on their first attempt to pass the COMPASS exit exam;

- Identifying courses with high withdrawal and/or failure rates and developing intervention strategies, including: exploration of the use of interactive software; as staffing allows, limiting class sizes in high risk courses; and engaging faculty in a course redesign initiative targeting high drop/fail/withdrawal courses;

- Instituting a comprehensive First Year Experience program that includes an online tutoring service and supplemental instruction in “killer courses” for first-time, full-time freshman, in baccalaureate degree programs.

2. *What are the most important variables that affect your 4-year or 6-year graduation rates? How did you learn that these were the central factors of concern (empirical data – quantitative and qualitative)? What have been “lessons learned?”*

Evidence suggests that the more a student is exposed to and engaged in the life of the College, the higher the likelihood of retention and graduation. This is demonstrated in Table 1. First-time, full-time students demonstrate higher rates of retention and graduation than first-time degree-seeking students who demonstrate higher rates than first-time, part-time students. Likewise, students seeking bachelor’s degrees show higher rates than those seeking associate degrees.

As Dalton State evolves into a more traditional four-year college, it stands to reason that our retention and graduation rates should continue to improve. There is evidence this is already happening: although Dalton State’s overall enrollment for Fall 2011 is down 8 % from the previous year, the number of juniors and seniors is up. And the six-year school bachelor’s graduation rate jumped from 10 % among the 2004 cohort to 16.36 % for the 2005 cohort, while the Dalton State system graduation rate jumped from 15% for the 2004 cohort to 23.64% for the 2005 cohort. It is important to note that while there were 18 graduates in the 2005 cohort group, 183 baccalaureate degrees were awarded during the 2010 academic year. The number of degrees awarded is more than 10 times those awarded in the cohort, thus demonstrating Dalton State is meeting its mission and contributing graduates to the state economy.

The results of the 2011 NSSE survey reported that Dalton State College students work off campus and provide care for dependents living with them at statistically significantly higher rates than their peers at

other USG institutions. Dalton State College students are also less prepared for class and more likely to come to class without completing readings or assignments than their USG peers.

The Noel-Levitz survey of non-traditional students, conducted as a part of our participation in the USG's Adult Learning Consortium, found that students have difficulty coordinating their work and school schedules. The two items on the survey where Dalton State differed most significantly from a comparable national sample of four-year adult learners were: "My program allows me to pace my studies to fit my life and work schedules," and "Sufficient course offerings within my program of study are available each term."

To address these issues, we are providing faculty development opportunities to encourage more online and hybrid courses, along with strategies to ensure high quality of these courses. Faculty are also working with other schools in the Adult Learning Consortium to develop collaborative online programs that will increase students' time flexibility.

During 2011, Dalton State has become a host site for eCore, increased the number of hybrid classes from 87 to 116 (a 33% increase) and increased online classes more than 200%, from 31 to 94, not including eCore classes.

3. *Modifications to the Three-Year Plan (if any).*

We do not anticipate modifying the three-year plan presented in 2010, but plan to continue implementing action steps, including:

- Increasing academic and collegial support to students who may not be familiar with college; having faculty (math/science initially) go to local high schools and do guest presentations in the classrooms; continuing the Near Peer program; having high school teachers teach dual enrollment college classes in the local high schools;
- Selecting to focus on improving academic performance of high risk students in Learning Support English for the College's Quality Enhancement Plan for SACS reaffirmation and accreditation;

- Expanding access to quality educational opportunities such as expanded online and hybrid classes and increased offerings at off-campus sites, such as our Gilmer Center in Ellijay and Dalton State East campus on the grounds of the Whitfield County College and Career Academy;
- Improving excellence in undergraduate education by improving teaching quality through a wide variety of professional development activities both on and off campus. For example, 65 faculty members are participating in a campus-wide course redesign initiative to develop innovative teaching methodologies initially targeted at courses with high drop/withdrawal/failure rates;
- Focusing on student achievement of essential learning outcomes of the 21st century (including inquiry and analysis, critical and creative thinking, written and oral communications, quantitative and informational literacy, and problem solving);
- Adding targeted four-year degree programs, including nursing, respiratory therapy, liberal studies, psychology, middle grades education, and communications.

In addition, the College will determine and apply best practices gleaned from its comparator and aspirational peers and exploit opportunities presented by the addition of on-campus housing and intercollegiate athletics to create a stronger student connectedness to Dalton State and their lives and responsibilities here. We will also continue efforts to rebrand Dalton State as a destination rather than a transitional institution in students' post-secondary education plans.

Retention and graduation targets appear in Table 2.

4. *Please outline your plans for the remaining two years, including any revisions, based on first year progress and impediments.*

- We will continue to monitor high drop/fail/withdrawal courses and explore different teaching methodologies to determine what is most effective for student success;

- The deans of each of our seven Schools (Liberal Arts, Natural Sciences and Mathematics, Business, Education, Nursing, Social Work, and Technology) will set goals for Retention, Progression, and Graduation for Spring 2012;

- The assistant vice president for enrollment services is working with partners across campus to develop a strategic enrollment management plan for the College. This will be a first for the institution, and the plan will help us better manage enrollments and make more accurate forecasts. Thus far, the assistant vice president has met with each of the deans to determine their school's needs, and along with some key staff and faculty, enrolled in an online strategic enrollment management course developed by AACRAO;

- As soon as is economically feasible, the college will expand FYE to all first-time students. Currently, FYE classes are limited to first-time, full-time students enrolled in four year baccalaureate degree programs;

- We look forward to a BOR needs assessment for new student housing to be completed soon so we can launch a public-private venture for construction. We believe that students residing on campus are more fully engaged in campus life which we believe will translate into higher levels of student retention and progression;

- We will launch Learning Communities within our student housing during fall of 2012. Our previous attempts at establishing Learning Communities with commuter students met with very limited success. We also plan to implement Learning Communities in regular academic programs, pairing an FYE course with a substantive content discipline-based course;

- We are reviewing scheduling practices to try to better accommodate student needs;

- We will continue to increase hybrid and online course offerings.

5. *Graduation as a Campus Priority.*

Progress towards graduation is communicated in subtle and not-so-subtle ways across the Dalton State campus. Photographs of happy graduates in caps and gowns adorn the walls of our buildings. The President

regularly communicates to students that every class period and every test completed brings them one step closer to their degree. Every faculty member is made aware that he or she contributes in a meaningful way to each student's progress and graduation. The President consistently speaks about improving RPG rates at faculty meetings and has met with individual schools to discuss developing methods of improving RPG rates.

Newly hired faculty and staff soon become aware that Dalton State enjoys a solid reputation across the region and beyond as a rigorous but caring institution. Even so, there must be greater direct involvement of the College's Schools and Departments in the creation of an institutional culture centered on retention and graduation. This will require a more concerted effort to assure adequate availability of required or strongly desired upper-division courses, departmental and major field orientations, course redesigns, expanded 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 initiatives are already underway in certain units of the College, most notably within the Schools of Business, Education, and Social Work, where they are mandated by accreditation bodies, and the best practices used there should be readily expanded to other units.

The viability and health of our institution depends upon our ability to retain good students and to nurture them to graduation. Indeed, the very economic prosperity and quality of life in our region does so as well.

Table 1:

DALTON STATE COLLEGE					
Retention and Graduation					
One Year Retention					
	Number			Rate	
	Total Cohort	Dalton State	USG	Dalton State	USG
First Time, Full-Time, Degree-Seeking Freshmen	1156	683	708	59.08	61.25
First Time Degree-Seeking Freshmen	1421	794	819	55.88	57.64
First Time, Part-time, Degree-Seeking Freshmen	265	111	111	41.89	41.89
Six-Year Bachelor's Graduation Rates					
	Number			Rate	
	Total Cohort	Dalton State	USG	Dalton State	USG
First Time, Full Time, Degree-Seeking Freshmen, 05 Cohort	110	18	26	16.36	23.64
First Time, Degree-Seeking Freshmen, 05 Cohort	137	20	28	14.60	20.44
Three-Year Associate Graduation Rates					
	Number			Rate	
	Total Cohort	Dalton State	USG	Dalton State	USG
First Time, Full Time, Degree-Seeking Freshmen, 08 Cohort	635	51	52	8.03	8.19
First Time Degree-Seeking Freshmen, 08 Cohort	764	54	55	7.07	7.20

Table 2:

DALTON STATE COLLEGE						
USG Retention and Graduation Rate Targets (Revised December 2011)						
First-Time, Full-Time Degree-Seeking Freshmen						
Retention Rate Targets						
Cohort and Rate	Fall Cohort					
	*2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Institution-Specific	59.1	60.6	62.1	63.6	65.1	66.6
System-Wide	61.3	63.0	64.7	66.4	68.1	69.8
*Actual retention rate.						
Six-Year Bachelor's Graduation Rate Targets						
Cohort and Rate	Fall Cohort					
	*2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Institution-Specific	16.4	17.5	18.5	19.5	20.5	21.5
System-Wide	23.6	24.6	25.6	26.6	27.6	28.6
*Actual graduation rate.						
Three-Year Associate Graduation Rate Targets						
Cohort and Rate	Fall Cohort					
	*2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Institution-Specific Graduation Rates	8.0	9.0	10.0	11.0	12.0	13.0
System-Wide	8.2	10.0	11.0	12.0	13.0	14.0