From The Editors:

For many years, retention studies involved little more than exit interviews, a methodology that Terenzini (1980) equated with an autopsy. Collecting data only after students leave the institution may provide clues as to why they left, but tells us precious little about what we are presently doing (or what we should be doing) to keep our students coming back to campus. In 1987, Tinto offered what has become the preeminent model of retention. At the core of his model is the notion that students who are both academically and socially connected to the institution are more likely to persist. With this expanded view of the role of nonacademic influences on retention, the focus of retention research has turned away from mere reaction toward a focus on active prevention.

It is in this spirit of prevention that the Division of Student Affairs offers the first in a continuing special series of issues of *It’s Been Said...* that will focus on retention. In this first issue of the series, we will describe the current state of retention at UNCG and at similar institutions across the country. We will also provide a snapshot of current retention-related research and interventions, focusing on the unique issues associated with large, urban campuses. In 2003, we will offer the second of this series, which will focus on the results of the Division of Student Affairs’ continuing research on the influence of nonacademic factors on student persistence. This research will combine the efforts of several departments within the Division of Student Affairs and information gleaned from other sources across the university. We hope that you find this series to be both interesting and beneficial.

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What do we mean by RETENTION?

RETENTION refers to the institution’s ability to keep students coming back to campus. Although it could describe the return of students for any subsequent semester, most institutions concentrate on yearly return rates for a particular year’s first-time, full-time freshman class. Perhaps the most commonly reported retention indicator is the first-year (freshman-to-sophomore) retention rate, which is simply the percent of the first-time freshman cohort from one year that enroll for the following fall semester. Some institutions and organizations such as the Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (CSRDE) also track retention for sophomores-juniors and juniors-seniors. Other important indicators reported by the University of North Carolina System are graduation rate and persistence rate. You will find their online reports at http://www.ga.unc.edu/student_info/retention/.

Figure 1 summarizes retention trends over the past four years from the most recent available data. On this chart we compare UNCG to its peer institutions and to other national groups.

Although UNCG’s first-year retention rate has been stable for the past few years, the rate for the 2000 freshman cohort is close to 75%; Charlotte’s was almost 78%. Data for this cohort are not yet available from CSRDE.

The UNC-General Administration (UNC-GA) also tracks retention, graduation, and persistence of students that move between institutions within the system. Persistence, as defined by the UNC-GA is simply the sum of the retention and graduation rate for any particular freshman cohort. This type of information is of particular importance for institutions that have high transfer rates. However, the UNCG and UNCC rates likely underreport the actual rate as they do not account for students that transfer outside the UNC system.

The Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (CSRDE) was established in 1994 at the University of Oklahoma to serve as a repository for student persistence data and research for institutions from across the country. CSRDE currently serves over 400 colleges and universities. In its own words, ‘In addition to coordinating the data-sharing activities... CSRDE offers a forum for discussing issues relating to student retention.’ UNCG has been a member of CSRDE since 1996. Many of UNCG’s peer institutions (see page 4) are also CSRDE members.

Why does UNCG’s retention rate appear low compared to other institutions?

UNCG is unique in many ways and comparisons can be difficult. For instance, UNCG’s peer institutions are a mix of Doctoral/Research Extensive and Doctoral/Research Intensive universities. In the UNC System, UNCG is one of only three Doctoral/Research Intensive institutions (along with UNC-Charlotte and East Carolina University). Being an urban campus, UNCG has a large commuter student population and a growing adult student population. UNCG also has a higher student transfer rate than do our large public research universities like UNC-Chapel Hill. All of these aspects makes it difficult to match UNCG to a truly comparable set of institutions.

Particularly notable when comparing UNCG and other institutions’ retention rates is UNCG’s transfer rate. System flagship institutions like UNC-Chapel Hill enjoy relatively low transfer rates as is evidenced by their second-year retention rate shown in figure 2. UNCG’s second-year retention rate is lower than UNC-Chapel Hill’s and lower than the system average, but is higher than that of UNC-Charlotte; UNCG’s most comparable sibling. More important, the data also show that the second-year rate is rising, from a steady rate of about 60% to over 62% for the 1999 freshman class.
Figure 3 shows first-year retention rates of several different groups across four different comparison populations. Note again that CSRDE data are not yet available for the 2000 freshman class.

Notable is the recent improvement in retention rates, particularly for black students. In fact, UNCG’s black student retention rate for year 2000 freshmen (82%) was higher than both the UNC System rate (81%) and the UNC Charlotte rate (also 81%). The only decrease is seen in the retention rate of males; the rate for white students has remained steady, as has the UNC System rate.

Legend:
- **UNC Greensboro**
- **UNC Charlotte**
- **All 16 UNC System Institutions**
- **All 344 CSRDE Member Institutions**
- **UNC-Chapel Hill**

*CSRDE information is not yet available for 2000*
The language of retention research

One unfortunate aspect of retention research is an often inconsistent lexicon. The following are consistent with usage in UNCG and UNC-GA reports.

**RETENTION RATE** -- Percent of a first-time, first-year freshman cohort group that returns to campus in the following year(s). For example, for the 1996 freshman cohort, the first-year retention rate is the percent of students from the year's freshman class that had re-enrolled for the fall, 1997 semester. The second-year retention rate for the same cohort was measured in fall 1998. UNC system reports for retention, graduation, and persistence (http://www.ga.unc.edu/student_info/retention/) typically include 15 freshman cohort years and 10 years of follow-up.

**GRADUATION RATE** -- Percent of a first-time, first-year freshman cohort group that graduates in a particular span of years.

**PERSISTENCE RATE** -- Sum of the retention and graduation rate for a particular freshman cohort over a particular span of years. For example, the retention rate for UNCG's 1997 first-time, first-year freshman cohort after four years was 26.4; the graduation rate for the same group after 4 years was 27.2. Therefore, the persistence rate after 4 years for this group of freshmen was 53.6.

**TRANSFER** -- The UNC system regularly tracks retention, graduation and persistence for students that transfer within the system.

Did you know that...

UNCG's peer institutions include:

- Ball State University
- Binghamton University (SUNY)
- College of William and Mary
- George Mason University
- Georgia State University
- Illinois State University
- Miami University (Ohio)
- Northern Illinois University
- SUNY-Albany
- University of Delaware
- University of Alabama
- University of Missouri--Kansas City
- University of North Texas
- University of Southern Mississippi
- University of Wisconsin--Milwaukee

* CSRDE member institution for 1999-2000

**DROP OUT** -- Literally, a student that leaves higher education, never to return. However, for research purposes, it is important to distinguish between dropouts and stopouts. **Stopouts** are students who return to higher education after at least one term’s absence.

What do researchers say about current (and future) trends in student retention?

As mentioned earlier, recent trends in retention research focus on why students choose to remain in college rather than on why they choose to leave. This change in philosophy is widely attributed to the work of Vincent Tinto and his classic work *Leaving College* published in 1987. Among the most important ideas Tinto offers are the development of a systematic, institution-wide approach to retention. This approach includes the pretext that many students leave college because of problems unrelated to their academic ability. Indeed, many of these problems, such as lack of goals, poor motivation, financial difficulties and/or external distractions may manifest themselves in poor performance that is not at all indicative of the student’s true abilities (see Tinto, V. (no date given). *Rethinking the first year of college*). Available at http://soeweb.syr.edu/departments/hed/resources/pdfforms/Learning%20better%20together.PDF.htm).

Suggestions that Tinto made in his 1987 book form the foundation of the Noel-Levitz enrollment management philosophy. Along with early identification, institutional support, faculty and staff involvement, Noel-Levitz also include an extensive program of data collection as part of their overall enrollment management scheme. For a brief overview, see Noel-Levitz V.P. Lana Low's comments at http://brevard.edu/fyc/listserv/remarks/low.htm.

Noel-Levitz posts many of their reports pertaining to retention on their website. You will find them at http://noellevitz.com.

The challenge for institutions like UNCG are formidable. Evidence suggests that commuter students (a relatively large proportion of UNCG's undergraduate population) may find it more difficult to integrate into the campus community. This sense of connectedness to the campus community is a key aspect of student retention according to Noel-Levitz. They argue that institutions that wish to increase retention must actively reach out and retrieve these students from the margins of the community. Reaching out to these higher risk students is a vital role of faculty and staff.
One way in which the institution can support the faculty and staff in their intervention efforts is to provide current data about students’ expectations and their level of satisfaction. UNCG collects a wealth of information in regard to expectations and satisfaction through its participation in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), the Spartan Experience Questionnaire, and the UNC-System-sponsored Sophomore and Senior Surveys. The Division of Student Affairs is about to launch a coordinated effort to gather student expectation and satisfaction data as it relates to student affairs.

How does the Division of Student Affairs influence retention rates?

The Division of Student Affairs plays a vital role in retention efforts at UNCG. From the student’s first contact with the Office of Orientation to his or her final contact with Career Services prior to graduation, the staff of Student Affairs serve as the student’s link to the university community. Research has hinted at the influence of nonacademic components of college life on student persistence. For instance:

- Orientation programs have been shown to contribute to increased retention and graduation rates (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).
- Research shows that positive effects from living in campus residence halls include completion of a bachelor’s degree, satisfaction with college faculty and a likelihood to reenroll in the same university (Astin, 1993).
- Studies have shown that students in residential learning communities generally perform better academically, are better adjusted socially and personally, and are more highly integrated into the university community (Tinto, no date given).
- Adult students starting their college careers may be more at risk for dropping out due to external distractions such as family and work commitments.
- Students with disabilities must contend with the same hardships as other students, in addition to the unique difficulties related to their particular disability.
- Career Services plays a vital role in helping students realize the benefits of college by helping them define and reach their occupational goals.

One of the priorities of the Division of Student Affairs is to establish a research program that will allow the various departments to exchange data in order to evaluate their programs and address critical areas of research. Questions that researchers in student affairs will be addressing in the coming years include:

- What effects do the various student affairs departmental programs have on student retention?
  - ...on academic performance?
  - ...on student satisfaction?
- Are students that participate in student affairs programs and activities more likely to remain at UNCG through graduation?
- Are they more likely to graduate?
- Do they graduate in less time?

We will address these and other questions from many different directions (new student orientation, recreation and health services, campus and community involvement, career and employment services, housing, leadership activities) as they apply to many different student groups on campus (adult students, commuters, underrepresented minorities, students with disabilities, etc.).

In the second segment of this special issue on retention, to be published in 2003, we will begin to report the results of our research on these and other important questions.

We value your ideas and input. If you have any ideas, comments, or questions, please share them with Mark Davenport at the Division of Student Affairs Research and Evaluation Office in 149 Mossman, 334-5099. Email: madavenp@uncg.edu.

References to sources used but not elsewhere documented in this newsletter


