Appendix G

Student Success at Cal State Northridge: A Decade of Research-Based Action

Sustained efforts to improve student success at Cal State Northridge and expedite graduation go back almost a decade, when then-Provost Louanne Kennedy became concerned about the low graduation rates of CSUN students and their slow degree progress. After assembling a range of data to document the problem, she appointed a Graduation Rates Task Force early in 2001. As is outlined in the main body of the CPR report (see section 4.3), this Task Force undertook a lengthy investigation of barriers to graduation at CSUN and best practices elsewhere. Using these data, the Task Force formulated a series of recommendations that, after wide consultation, became the basis for a number of changes designed to remove unnecessary barriers to graduation. One of the most sweeping changes that grew out of the Task Force’s work was the redesign of the General Education program (see section 4.4 of the CPR), with a new program going into operation in Fall 2006.

More recent efforts to foster student persistence-to-degree have built on these early initiatives. In Fall 2006, the Office of Institutional Research (IR) used the data compiled for the CSU’s biennial accountability review, in which all campuses participate, to compare CSUN’s continuation and graduation rates to those prevailing at the system level and at other similar campuses. The analysis revealed that CSUN’s transfer students are retained at high levels and have relatively high graduation rates. The University’s First Time Freshmen lagged other CSU campuses, however, in their one-year continuation rates and, to a lesser degree, in their graduation rates. The data examined also revealed that the disproportionately high number of freshmen needing remediation at entry in mathematics and English hindered their initial retention at CSUN. These findings contributed to an ongoing multi-year effort to improve the delivery of
remedial coursework and to the development of programs that allow incoming freshmen to begin to address their remedial needs in the summer prior to formal matriculation.

Concurrently with the accountability research, IR undertook a detailed investigation of the initial success of several first-year experience programs. It found that the freshmen involved in a number of these programs were more likely to return to CSUN for a second year of college work than students not participating in them. This investigation – a report on it is posted in the Special Reports section of the IR website -- also examined the relative benefit that major racial and ethnic groups derived from the first year experience programs. It revealed that African American students are least likely to benefit from them. Earlier, more restricted examination of the link between proficiency at entry and persistence had already revealed that underserved minority students, including African Americans, were least likely to enter the University proficient in mathematics and English. Thus, it was clear that they would benefit disproportionately from new efforts to assist freshmen in completing their remedial coursework in a timely manner.

Following up on this initial research, staff in IR undertook a detailed examination of the freshmen entering CSUN from the top feeder high schools (N=34). With the aid of multivariate regression techniques, this examination revealed that incoming freshmen from schools that provide adequate preparation in mathematics and English are more likely to persist at CSUN than those from schools providing less adequate preparation. Although the former generally have relatively small minority populations, the findings pointed to particular area high schools with large minority populations that might benefit from CSUN’s help in strengthening the academic preparation they provide, thereby also increasing the success of the freshmen they send to CSUN each year. The data on individual schools included in the resulting feeder high school
report (posted on the IR website) have contributed to new outreach efforts by the Eisner College of Education to such schools.

Three reports prepared by IR staff in the last year are included in the supporting documents for the CPR report:

- **A Comparison of CSU and Cal State Northridge Performance on Selected Accountability Indicators**
- **Retention of Undergraduates Entering Cal State Northridge During the 1998-2008 period**
- **Retention at Cal State Northridge and in the CSU System: A Comparative Perspective on the Persistence of Selected Undergraduate Groups**

All deal with the continuation and graduation rates of incoming freshmen and transfer students. The first updates the 2006 accountability report with additional data provided by the CSU Chancellor’s Office in mid-2008. Since these most recent accountability data do not extend beyond the Fall 2006 entry cohorts, the second report, which is brief, puts the more recent continuation and graduation rate data for Cal State Northridge into longitudinal perspective. Finally, the third report represents the first phase of a two-part investigation into the continuation and graduation rates of subgroups differing by gender and racial and ethnic background.

The larger investigation, which is ongoing, relies on newly available data on subgroup persistence compiled by the CSU Chancellor’s Office for all campuses. The first phase of the investigation compared the CSUN rates to those for the system as a whole, while the second phase involves comparison of the CSUN data with those for other similar CSU campuses. The report on it should be available by the end of November and will be posted on the IR Special Reports webpage.

By and large, this last investigation confirms what the earlier ones had already revealed. In comparison to other CSU campuses, CSUN’s transfer students are retained in disproportionately large numbers and graduate in a timely manner. The persistence of our First Time Freshmen, in
contrast, lags that of freshmen on other campuses, largely because they are disproportionately likely to need remediation at entry. Insofar as minority and underserved freshmen are less likely to persist than their white counterparts, it is because they are less likely to be proficient in mathematics, in particular, at entry. The only exception to this general pattern, which the new investigation uncovered for the first time, is that freshmen who are men arrive significantly better prepared than the women in their entry cohorts, but are no more likely to persist into the second year and less likely to graduate. The underlying reasons for this anomaly will receive further study in the near future.

Taken together, the three reports document CSUN’s ongoing commitment to gathering the evidence needed to track student persistence and to using it to foster student learning.