



# Georgia Southwestern State University

## INSTITUTIONAL MISSION AND STUDENT BODY PROFILE

Georgia Southwestern State University's mission is to "cultivate excellence in learning and teaching that encourages intellectual, personal, and social growth for students, faculty, staff, and the community. Georgia Southwestern State University is a comprehensive state university within the University System of Georgia that offers a full range of bachelor degree programs, along with selected master's and specialist degree programs." Our mission is further augmented by the recently adopted Quality Enhancement Project, Windows to the World, which encourages all entering students to engage in global literacy in a robust fashion. The mission of the institution is to strengthen the immediate region, but also to prepare students to be secure as they venture into the global economy.

The primary service region of Georgia Southwestern State University (GSW) consists of Sumter County and the seven counties contiguous with it: Crisp, Dooly, Lee, Macon, Marion, Schley, Terrell, and Webster counties. The majority of these counties are among the poorest counties in the state of Georgia. The student population is very diverse, including sizable groups of students often considered to have special challenges in completing college, such as non-traditional, first-generation, and low income students. Georgia Southwestern is dedicated to continue to enroll and to graduate students from this region of the state.

GSW's total enrollment in fall 2013 was 2806. At that time, the gender distribution of the student population was 64.3% women and 35.7% men. The ethnicity of the fall 2013 student population was 62% White, 29.1% Black, 3.7% Asian and Pacific Islander, 3.3% Hispanic, 1.3% Multiracial, 0.1% Native American and 0.4% Unknown. Approximately 47% of GSW undergraduates receive Pell Grants; 57% are First-Generation college students; 24% began college for the first-time as adults (25 years old or older); and 31.4% are age 25 or older. The majority of our students (69.4%) are classified as full-time (taking 12 or more hours); 27% live on campus; 53.6% are enrolled in one or more online classes; and 24.5% are enrolled exclusively in online classes. These populations are also representative of our recent graduates. Out of the bachelor's degrees awarded in FY14, 57.5% had received the Pell grant while enrolled at GSW, 47.3% were first-generation students, and 28.8% were 29 or older at the time of graduation. First year retention rates are improving: the 2011 cohort was 62.6 percent, the 2012 cohort was at 64.9 percent, and our 2013 cohort appears to be just a bit under 70 percent.

Corresponding with our student profile, we know that ample data demonstrate that these students have difficulty successfully transitioning to higher education and that retention of first-year students is typically very low. GSW's initial priority in improving completion has been to improve fall-to-fall retention of first year students through implementation of strategies that have been shown to have high impact among low-income and first-generation college students. National data show that improved first-year success and retention lead to higher persistence and improved graduation rates. An additional component of our retention strategies has been collection of data to identify areas of risk particular to GSW and to develop specific strategies that promise to benefit all our students.

## INSTITUTIONAL COMPLETION GOALS AND STRATEGIES

In order to improve the retention of first year students,

which is an initial, primary goal, GSW has adopted several strategies shown to impact student retention: 1) Improved and more intrusive advising, 2) Improved student engagement, and 3) Emphasis on completing 15 credit hours each semester. These strategies are supported by several specific actions (some actions support more than one strategy):

1. Storm Spotters—a program of peer mentors who serve as co-instructors for UNIV 1000, Orientation to College Success. Storm Spotters connect first-year students to campus activities and academic support services to improve engagement and academic success.
2. DFW Reports and Redefinition of Good Academic Standing—each semester at mid-term and at the end of term all advisors are provided a report of all advisees with Ds, Fs or Ws in any classes. Advisors are asked to contact students and advise them on the best options given their standing and to direct them to appropriate resources. The retention specialist and first-year advocate intervene with first-year and sophomore students who may not yet have a relationship with their major advisor. To identify and intervene with at-risk students earlier, we changed Academic Good Standing from a graduated scale (1.5=0-15 cr., 1.65=16-30 cr., 1.75=31-60 cr., 2.0=61+cr.) to 2.0 for all students and implemented an advising hold for all students with GPAs below 2.0.
3. 15 to Finish—Beginning in Fall 2013, we increased the number of credit hours in the first-time freshmen learning communities from 12-14 hours to 14-16 hours and advisors are trained to encourage students to continue taking 15+ credits each semester. The credit hours in the learning communities for the Fall 2014 cohort have 15 or 16 hours.
4. Administration of the College Persistence Questionnaire (CPQ) to first year students—The CPQ measures student responses on several non-cognitive factors and has allowed us to identify several areas of

attrition risk specific to GSW, including academic engagement, social integration, and institutional commitment.

### **Storm Spotters**

During Fall 2013 Semester, GSW implemented Project Storm Spotters with funding from the USG through an Incubator grant. This project recruited and trained upper-class students as co-instructors and peer mentors for our first-year orientation course (UNIV 1000). Research has identified a successful first-year experience as a high impact practice in the retention of low income and first generation students. Project Storm Spotters was designed to expand UNIV 1000 beyond a mainly orientation course to include much more student engagement and advisement. The Storm Spotters were very successful in engaging with first-year students, and first-year students were more likely to ask questions and take the advice of their peer mentors than their instructors. Many students attended meetings of student organizations at the encouragement of the Storm Spotters. Storm Spotters were also successful at directing students to support services on campus. Although other activities had already had the effect of improving retention (2011 cohort – 62.6, 2012 cohort – 64.9%) current results predict an additional improvement in retention of 2-3% (2013 cohort – 67% predicted based on current data).

### **DWF Reports**

In 2012, we began distributing DFW reports to all advisors at midterm and at end of term. The reports list all advisees with grades of D, F, or W in any of their courses. Advisors are encouraged to contact advisees on their lists to discuss possible options for getting back on track (withdrawing from a course at mid-term, seeking tutoring support, repeating a course the next semester to improve a grade, etc.). We have also adjusted the academic calendar so that midterm grades are now due on the midterm date, thus giving students in trouble and advisors more time to develop success strategies for the rest of the semester.

UNIV 1000 instructors are asked to contact first-year students who may not be connected with their academic advisors yet. The Retention Specialist and First-Year Advocate in the Academic Resource Center helped students develop success plans. Through these efforts we have substantially increased the percentage of first-year students who complete the fall semester with at least a 2.0 GPA. In 2011, before these changes, only 63% of first-year students completed the first semester with a GPA over 2.0. The rate for the 2012 and 2013 cohorts was 74% and 75% respectively, a 12% increase over the 2011 cohort. The improvement in GPA is not only a result of withdrawing from courses where students were receiving

low grades, but also from students successfully completing more credit hours (see below and Appendix).

The increase in GPA required for Good Academic Standing has allowed us to identify students who are at risk academically much earlier and to target institutional resources on students who are most likely to benefit from intervention (those with GPAs 1.5-2.0). Students with GPAs below 2.0 have academic standing holds and are required to meet with their academic advisers to make changes to their schedules. They are also contacted by the Retention Specialist who invites them to one-on-one sessions to develop academic success plans. These interventions apply to all students and the effects are currently difficult to disaggregate for a single cohort. Starting in Fall 2014 Semester, GSW will be employing two Campus Lab products, Beacon and Collegiate Link. Beacon will employ technology to help create “Success Networks” for students as well as make it easier to track student success. Collegiate Link will use technology to help students engage more forcefully with campus life and activities. Both systems should make tracking of students and clarifying issues and weaknesses a bit easier, allowing GSW to find more effective ways to enhance student success.

### **15 to Finish**

Beginning Fall 2013, we increased the number of credit hours first-year students take with the goal of having all students enrolled in at least 15 credits each semester. This has been highly successful in increasing the number of students on track to graduate within four years. The effect has persisted with more students enrolling in 15 or more hours in the spring term. In two years we have almost doubled the percentage of first-year students enrolled full-time in credit-earning classes, who have successfully completed at least 28 credits by the end of the spring semester (17% of the Fall 2011 cohort did this, compared to 33% of the Fall 2013 cohort).

#### **College Persistence Questionnaire**

Finally, in order to better tailor our efforts to the particular needs of our students, GSW administered the College Persistence Questionnaire (CPQ) to first-year students during Fall 2013. This survey measures student responses along 10 scales corresponding to non-cognitive, but predictive factors. The results of this survey showed that although GSW’s students have a high degree of commitment toward possessing a college degree, their commitment to GSW is low, they have poor social integration, and they have poor academic integration. These are all factors that increase risk of attrition. GSW is in the process of implementing strategies specifically designed to address these issues (see Summary and Observations).

## **SUMMARY OF GOALS, HIGH-IMPACT STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES**

### **GOAL A**

#### **High-Impact Strategy Summary of Activities**

### **GOAL 1: IMPROVE FIRST YEAR STUDENT SUCCESS AND RETENTION.**

**Project Storm Spotters** – co-instructors/peer mentors assigned to each section of UNIV 1000. Storm Spotters participated in presentation of orientation material for UNIV 1000, worked on

	activities to improve student engagement (e.g. inviting students to meetings of student organizations), and participated in outreach to at-risk students.
<b>Interim Measures of Progress</b>	Surveys indicated high levels of satisfaction among participating faculty, Storm Spotters, and first-year students.
<b>Measures of Success</b>	Improved retention of first year students – Final retention data are not yet available for Fall 2013 cohort. Interim data predict a 2-3% improvement in fall-to-fall retention for this cohort.

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<b>GOAL B</b>	<b>GOAL 1: IMPROVE FIRST YEAR STUDENT SUCCESS AND RETENTION.</b>
<b>High-Impact Strategy Summary of Activities</b>	Improved and more intrusive advising. Distribution of mid-term and end-of-term DFW reports. Increased minimum GPA for Good Academic Standing to 2.0 for all students. Advisers and Retention Specialist review of reports and intervene with at-risk students.
<b>Interim Measures of Progress</b>	GPA of first-year students at end of Fall and end of Spring.
<b>Measures of Success</b>	Fall-to-fall retention rate.

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<b>GOAL C</b>	<b>GOAL 1: IMPROVE FIRST-YEAR STUDENT SUCCESS AND RETENTION.</b> <b>GOAL 2: IMPROVE 4-YEAR GRADUATION RATE.</b>
<b>High-Impact Strategy Summary of Activities</b>	15 to Finish Credits assigned to first-year students have been increased from 12-13 to at least 15 credit hours. Advisor training will emphasize the importance of taking at least 15 hours each semester (in progress).
<b>Interim Measures of Progress</b>	Increased number of credit hours completed by first-year students enrolled full-time in credit-earning classes. Only 17% of the Fall 2011 cohort completed 28 credits by the end of the Spring semester, compared to 33% of the Fall 2013 cohort.
<b>Measures of Success</b>	Improved 4-year graduation rate.
<b>Goal</b>	Goal 1: Improve first-year student success and retention. Goal 3: Improve student success, progression, and graduation rates.
<b>High-Impact Strategy Summary of Activities</b>	Implementation of Collegiate Link software to improve student engagement (a risk specific to GSW based on CPQ data). Collegiate Link software has been purchased and key administrative personnel have been trained. Training for student group advisors is planned for August 2014. Full implementation of software planned for Fall 2014.
<b>Interim Measures of Progress</b>	Increased student participation in extra-curricular activities.
<b>Measures of Success</b>	Improved retention, progression, and graduation.

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<b>GOAL D</b>	<b>GOAL 1: IMPROVE FIRST-YEAR STUDENT SUCCESS AND RETENTION.</b>
<b>High-Impact Strategy Summary of Activities</b>	Implementation of Beacon early warning software to address academic integration (a risk specific to GSW based on CPQ data). Beacon software has been purchased and key administrative personnel have been trained. Training for advisors and other personnel is planned for August 2014. Full implementation of software planned for Fall 2014.
<b>Interim Measures of Progress</b>	Improved first-year student success and retention: 2011 cohort – 62.6%; 2012 cohort – 64.9%; 2013 – 69.4%.
<b>Measures of Success</b>	Improved first-year student success and retention.

**OBSERVATIONS**

In the current climate of limited resources it is impractical to implement every strategy that might positively affect retention or graduation rates. GSW elected to focus on a few related strategies that together have high probability of addressing one particular issue – success and retention of first-year students. Together these strategies have resulted in improvements in the fall-to-fall retention rate, the GPA of first-year students, and the number of hours successfully completed by first-year students. We believe that these results

will ultimately lead to improvements in progression and graduation rates as more students are completing the first year on track and are familiar with campus resources for success. GSW is committed to continuing the strategies already implemented.

Some of the strategies already in place will be enhanced during the upcoming academic year. To improve advising and early intervention with at-risk students, GSW will implement additional adviser training, including use of

Beacon, our early alert software system. These initiatives improve our ability to intervene early with all students at-risk and should result in additional improvements to student success and retention.

As part of GSW's overall plan to improve progression and graduation, we have collected data in an attempt to identify institutional challenges to retention and progression. Results of the College Persistence Questionnaire showed that students have fairly low commitment to GSW and poor social integration as well as poor academic integration. Improvements in advising will help address issues of academic integration. To improve institutional commitment and social integration we will be implementing Collegiate Link software beginning Fall 2014. This software will improve communication with students regarding student organizations and will help track student participation in extra-curricular activities. We expect this to enhance extra-curricular participation leading to greater institutional commitment and improved social integration.

GSW is aware that challenges to progression and graduation exist beyond the first year of college. Now that a robust program to promote success and retention of first-year students is in place, we fully expect in time to shift our emphasis to progression of students through our academic programs. Discussions have already begun regarding the use of degree maps and predictive analytics to promote progression. In addition, GSW will have Degree Works fully implemented for student use starting this fall (GSW was among the last of the USG institutions to be on-boarded). In

addition, our review of the data indicates we need to address the risk factors of special populations like transfer students. In May 2014, GSW held a two-day retention retreat involving key personnel from across all sectors of the campus. Participants reviewed institutional data, identified problem areas, developed strategies, and analyzed strategies for those most likely to have an impact. Over the next two years, we expect to implement a series of strategies judged to have the most impact and to be within our means.

The goals and strategies listed in this report are not an exhaustive list of activities undertaken to improve student success. Indeed, perhaps the most important change we are making at GSW is a shift in our thinking about student success. During the past two years we have held a series of university-wide convocations to share retention data, propose institutional policies to address roadblocks to student success, and to solicit input on problem areas and strategies we might implement. The retention retreat held in May generated a greater sense of responsibility for retention across campus and has fostered some collaborative efforts that we believe will greatly improve the student experience at GSW. These have been well-attended events and have led to productive conversations outside of silos that are leading to a number of changes, big and small, but most significantly, they are leading to a change in our overall culture. Given the student population we serve, the stakes are high not just for GSW but also for our region and our state. We are looking forward to continuing our efforts to improve student success with the momentum gained over the last two years.