



# 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 SACSCOC approved Quality Enhancement Plan, Windows to the World, which encourages all entering students to engage in global literacy in a robust fashion (first full assessment of this program due March, 2020, with data collected through the 2018-19 academic year). The mission of the institution is to strengthen the immediate region, but also to prepare students to be confident and knowledgeable 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 undergraduate enrollment in fall 2014 was 2666 (2013: 2806—Note—significant changes from last year [positive or negative] are noted in parenthetical elements). At that time, the gender distribution of the student population was 63.2% women and 36.8% men. The ethnicity of the fall 2014 student population was 63.7% White; 27% Black (2013: 29.1%); 3.2% Asian and Pacific Islander; 4% Hispanic (2013: 3.3%); 1.5% Multiracial; 0.2% Native American; and 0.5% Unknown. Approximately 62% of GSW undergraduates receive Pell Grants; 53% are First-Generation college students (no parent/guardian with bachelor degree or higher); 22% began college for the first-time as adults (25 years old or older); and 30% are age 25 or older. The majority of our undergraduates (69.3%) are classified as full-time (taking 12 or more hours); 30.6% live on campus (2013: 27%); 55.7% are enrolled in one or more online classes (2013: 53.6%); and 24.1% are enrolled exclusively in online classes. These populations are also representative of our recent graduates. Out of the undergraduates who were awarded bachelor’s degrees in FY15, 62.7% had received the Pell grant while enrolled at GSW (FY 2014: 57.5%); 51.8% were first-generation students (FY 2014:47.3%); and 30% 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 the 2013 cohort was at 69.8 percent. The retention rate for the 2014 cohort, as determined on 1 July 2015, stands at 75.9 percent.<sup>1</sup>

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, HIGH-IMPACT STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES

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, aided by technology [Matrix A]; 2) improved student engagement through peer advising [Matrix B]; 3) redefining of good standing and more information provided to advisors and faculty [Matrix C]; 4) strong emphasis on completing 15 credit hours each semester in order to graduate on-time [Matrix D]; and 5) improved and more sustained extra-curricular student engagement, aided by technology [Matrix E]. These strategies are supported by several specific actions (some actions support more than one strategy). As we indicate in Observations, we intend to hold to these practices until we have amassed enough meaningful data to know that our improvements are not anomalies, and until these practices are fully engrained in GSW’s culture. In all cases, all activity and strategies support Goal 1: Increase the number of undergraduate degrees awarded by USG institutions.

### MATRIX A

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**High-impact strategy** Using Campus Labs technology in order to implement Beacon. Beacon is a type of early warning

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<sup>1</sup> In the Appendix, for Goal 1: Progress Metrics 1.1 in Table 6; Progress Metrics 1.4 and 1.5 in Table 10; Access Metrics 1.1 in Tables 1 and 2; Outcome Metrics 1.1 in Table 9; Outcome Metrics 1.3 in Tables 4 and 5; Outcome Metrics 1.5 in Table 3; Outcome Metrics 1.7 in Table 5

<b>Related Goal Summary of Activities</b>	software to address academic integration (a risk specific to GSW based on data from the College Persistence Questionnaire, administered in 2013). This ties into Strategy 4.4 (establish criteria for identifying students who may need special interventions in the semester [e.g.: lack of attendance, poor performance on early assignments]) and into Strategy 4.5 (ensure that students who meet off-track criteria receive timely and targeted advising intervention). We are also employing Strategy 4.3 (use Degree Works to track student progress).
<b>Baseline status</b>	Goal 4: Provide intentional advising to keep students on track to graduate Administration of the Student Success Inventory to first year students –The SSI 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. 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
<b>Interim Measures of Progress (Process Metrics)</b>	We have completed year one of the use of Beacon. Average retention rates have been approximately 67 percent before the advent of Beacon. Process Metric 4.3: Does the institution have clear criteria for identifying students who are “off-track” in their programs? Answer: To a certain extent. Metric 4.3.1: If yes, what are the criteria for being off-track? Answer: Found in most program handbooks and also indicated within Degree Works. Process Metric 4.4: Does the institution have clear criteria for identifying students who are off-track in courses? Answer: Yes. Metric 4.4.1: If yes, what are the criteria for being off-track in a course? Answer: Attendance, mid-term grades, individual test scores.
<b>Measures of Success</b>	Outcome Metric 4.1 (Table 9 in the Appendix): Improved first-year student success and retention. Also note Progress Metric 1.1 (Table 6 in the Appendix): we currently stand at 75.9 percent for a one year retention rate, up from 69.8 percent last year. We would hope to see sustained retention rates of close to 80 percent by 2020.
<b>Lessons Learned</b>	Faculty and staff can raise alerts on students who are not doing well in classes, or other concerns. All those in the student’s network can see the alert and are asked to intervene. We’ve seen some benefits from this but need to encourage more use of the system by advisors to respond to alerts raised about students.

**MATRIX B**

<b>High-impact strategy</b>	Creation and Implementation of Project Storm Spotters. The Storm Spotters Team (SST) consists of peer mentors who serve as co-instructors for UNIV 1000, Orientation to College Success. SST’s connect first-year students to campus activities and to academic support services in order to improve engagement and academic success.
<b>Related Goal Summary of Activities</b>	Goal 4, Provide intrusive advising to keep students on track to graduate The Storm Spotters Team participates in the presentation of orientation material for UNIV 1000, they work on activities to improve student engagement (e.g. inviting students to meetings of student organizations), and participate in outreach to at-risk students. Starting in the Fall of 2013, 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). Project Storm Spotters was designed to expand UNIV 1000 beyond a mainly orientation course to include much more student engagement and advisement. SST’s were very successful in engaging with first-year students, which is important, as we know that first-year students are more likely to ask questions and take the advice of their peer mentors than from their instructors. SST’s encouraged increased participation in student organizations and were successful at directing students to support services on campus.
<b>Baseline status</b>	Since implementation in Fall 2013, the contact rate between SST’s and entering first-year students has been 100 percent. There has been intermittent contact between SST’s and students after their first semester. In terms of affecting retention rates, 64.9 percent was the retention rate before implementing SST’s. The retention rate of the first cohort to use SST’s is 69.8 percent.
<b>Interim Measures of Progress</b>	Surveys indicated high levels of satisfaction among participating faculty, Storm Spotters, and first-year students. There are probably some paradoxical effects of the SST’s. The withdrawal rate for certain core classes that we know to be difficult hurdles has been elevated, due in part to increased counseling by the SST’s to students about the importance of maintaining a good GPA. Thus, as indicated in Table 6, our term-to-term retention rate actually declined slightly last year.
<b>Measures of Success</b>	Increased persistence in courses and successful completion of course work, as well as increased participation in student activities and utilization of student support services of various kinds. Improved retention of first year students as shown in Table 6 of the Appendix. By 2020, we would hope to have retention rates that are fairly steady from year to year. We would also expect revenue from retained students would support enhanced Storm Spotter

**Lessons Learned** activity, so that financially, by 2020, this activity is completely self-supporting. The biggest immediate challenge has been how to pay for the program once the grant funding ran out. We pay SST's a very minimal stipend. Because we have made it a very selective, by invitation only position, pay has not been a delimiting issue. There will always be ongoing training because upper-class students are only here 2-3 years, so we will always be hiring new ones. That is why we have included the SST in orientation training this summer.

**MATRIX C**

<b>High-impact strategy</b>	<p>Redefinition of Academic Good Standing and issuing of DWF Reports twice a semester. To identify and intervene with at-risk students earlier, we changed Academic Good Standing from a graduated scale to a 2.0 for all students and implemented an advising hold for all students with GPAs below 2.0. And, at mid-term and at the end of each semester, DWF reports are issued, with advisors being 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.</p>
<b>Related Goal Summary of Activities</b>	<p>Goal 4: Provide intrusive advising to keep students on track to graduate</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.).</p> <p>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 help 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 75.5% respectively, a 12% increase over the 2011 cohort. For 2014, the rate was 75.3 percent (Table 7). The improvement in GPA is not only a result of withdrawing from courses where students were receiving low grades, but also from connecting to resources early, allowing them to recover and pass classes in which they were not doing well (Table 9).</p>
<b>Baseline status</b>	<p>We discovered that with our previous sliding scale, we were blind to students who were in trouble academically, but who were not being flagged because they were technically in good standing (even at a 1.5 GPA). Moving good standing to a 2.00 allowed us to identify academic risk in the first semester of trouble rather than two to three semesters later. The DWF reports help us to pinpoint courses that need additional resources, such as Supplemental Instruction or dedicated tutoring, as well as alert us to students who are in academic difficulty as early as mid-term.</p>
<b>Interim Measures of Progress</b>	<p>These are relatively recent processes grafted on to the institution, and they appear to be having a positive effect.</p>
<b>Measures of Success</b>	<p>Outcome Metric 4.1 (Table 9 in the Appendix). By 2020, we hope to be able to use various analytic support mechanisms to ensure sustained success of our students.</p>
<b>Lessons Learned</b>	<p>Timing of distribution of the DWF report is crucial, as is having enough time between semesters to adequately work with students. In some cases, lack of core classes can create a difficulty in students progressing.</p>

**MATRIX D**

<b>High-impact strategy</b>	<p>Adoption and implementation of 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 have been trained to encourage students to continue taking 15+ credits each semester.</p>
<b>Related Goal</b>	<p>Goal 2: Increase the number of degrees that are earned “on time”</p>

<b>Summary of Activities</b>	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).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).
<b>Baseline status</b>	The general history of advising at GSW was to have students sign up for twelve hours a semester, in order for them to be successful in those fewer hours.
<b>Interim Measures of Progress</b>	Increased number of credit hours attempted and completed by first-year students enrolled full-time in credit-earning classes. In 2014, 61.7 percent of the FTFT cohort attempted 15 or more credit hours (compared to 2013, when 49.6 percent attempted). In 2014, 36.3 percent of the FTFT cohort actually earned 15 or more credit hours (compared to 2013, when 22.8 percent earned hours). At the same time, 75.3 percent of these students in 2014 maintained a GPA of 2.00 or higher.
<b>Measures of Success</b>	Improved 4-year graduation rate. Outcome Metrics 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5 (Table 9 and 12 in the Appendix); Needed: Outcome Metrics 2.2. By 2020 we expect to have 22 percent of our students graduating within four years.
<b>Lessons Learned</b>	Better advisor training, and better preparation of students as they come through our summer orientation and registration programs have led to more students attempting fifteen hours a semester or more. The percentage of students taking fifteen or more hours, and the number of students coming into college already with college credit, continues to increase. A lesson learned is that students can do as well in 15 hours as 12 hours. In fact, with the right support, they can actually do better while taking more hours.

**MATRIX E**

<b>High-impact strategy</b>	Using Campus Labs technology in order to implement Collegiate Link. Collegiate Link is a type of social media software that fosters multiple and deeper integration into campus social networks sponsored and supported by Student Affairs. Our branded version is called Canes Connect, and is used to strengthen social integration primarily outside of the classroom.
<b>Related Goal</b>	Goal 2: Increase the number of degrees that are earned “on time”
<b>Summary of Activities</b>	All research shows that the more socially integrated students are in the culture of the academy, the more likely it is that they will succeed. Toward that end, we see the importance of extra-curricular activities as they are crucial in helping students feel they are part of the academic community. Any extra-curricular activity--from health, wellness, and intramural sports, to serving in the Student Government Association, to attending academic lectures—adds to the sense of cohesiveness and motivation that are necessary for all student success. The many activities sponsored within the Residence Halls, the debates and panels sponsored by Panorama, Third-World Studies, and Windows to the World, are crucial parts to engaging students and keeping them on track to graduate.
<b>Baseline status</b>	This system was implemented for the first time in the 2014-15 academic year.
<b>Interim Measures of Progress</b>	Table 15 shows specifically how data are collected in Canes Connect. The efficacy of the system is still in the developmental stages.
<b>Measures of Success</b>	Measures of success include data from Table 13 which are measures of student engagement, and data from Tables 16 and 17 that indicate health and wellness activities. Table 14, which is a compilation of results from Noel-Levitz surveys of parents during our summer orientation series, indicates areas of strength and weaknesses that need further addressing.
<b>Lessons Learned</b>	Canes Connect is a useful tool, but it is not yet fully integrated into GSW’s culture. Our Windows to the World program is relatively recent, with only one year of data that will remain incomplete until we have had a cohort go through a full four years of the program. With this said, we have very strong student programming in the extra-curricular dimension, and with the augmentation of Canes Connect, we should be able to safely say that these programs are having a positive effect on our retention and graduation rates.

**OBSERVATIONS**

The strategies listed in this report are not an exhaustive list of activities undertaken to improve student success,

but they are ones in which we have invested much time and effort, and we hope to continue to focus on these particular strategies for at least several more years in order to have established clear patterns in the data that lead to a confirmation of practice. GSW is about to embark on a new strategic plan for the institution that will guide it over the next five to seven years, and we fully expect that the strategies in this report will not only be endorsed, but will serve as a foundation for further development in terms of how we encourage and sustain students beyond the first year. Indeed, toward that end, in May 2014 we held our first ever Retention Retreat. Partially growing out of the findings of that two-day process, we created an Enrollment Management Council, which will help oversee retention efforts and continue to aid in the effort to break down silos across campus and strengthen our ability to retain and graduate the students who come to our institution. In addition to these efforts, we have contracted with the Educational Advisory Board to aid us with data analysis and consultation over the next three years in an effort to become fully knowledgeable about best practice and to be better able to implement strategies in the most efficient manner possible. Specially, we hope that EAB will help us strengthen our advising process throughout a student's career at GSW. As an institution, it is unlikely that we can move toward the professional advising model for all students, so helping our current faculty and staff become more efficient at what they do is part of how we intend to succeed. Degree Works should help with efficiency, but as this program was implemented only last year, we think it will be some time before it is fully integrated into our culture and can demonstrate that it is making a difference. A growing focus on transfer students and on on-line students is also part of our planning for the future.

Indeed, perhaps the most important change we are making at GSW is a shift in our thinking about student success. During the past three 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. These have been well-attended events and have fostered 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. In the end, we look at our one year retention rate, which currently stands at 75.9 percent, the highest it has been (with the exception of an anomalous year due to a financial aid issue) in the past fifteen years, and we think we are on the right track to doing some things well here at Georgia Southwestern State University.