

Thrive@Carolina:

A Campus-Wide Effort to Strengthen Student Success

Background

In July 2013, the 21st Century Vision Committee on Access and Completion recommended that UNC-Chapel Hill launch “a focused, University-wide effort to foster a culture of success and completion for all students.” The committee also recommended that the University

... establish—and within ten years achieve—the goal of leading all AAU public universities in four- and six-year graduation rates for undergraduate students by enhancing coordinated support services and by eliminating disparities in retention and graduation rates for students of all races, ethnicities, incomes, abilities, and educational backgrounds.

In January 2014, in an announcement that coincided with the White House Summit on College Access and Success, Chancellor Folt committed the University to such a campus-wide effort and pledged \$4 million over four years towards this purpose.

In March 2014, Provost Dean convened a working group of retention leaders from various University departments and charged them with quickly developing rough options for implementing the commitment of Chancellor Folt and the recommendations of the 21st Century Vision Committee.

In the following pages, we describe several such options. But before we do so, we begin with several elements that we consider essential.

Essential Elements

1. This effort must be a true priority of the University, and it must be recognized as such by schools and departments and by faculty, staff, and students. To be viewed as a priority by the campus, the effort will require public leadership from the Chancellor and Provost and perhaps from the Board of Trustees.
2. This effort must truly be campus-wide. Many of our greatest current needs—for example, the need for better quantitative skill-building for students enrolled in science courses—cross the boundaries between academic units. These needs cannot be met by any one school or department, however heroic its efforts might be. Rather, resources will need to be marshalled and deployed across these boundaries.
3. This effort must have clear goals, and it must measure progress towards those goals. We endorse the goal of having the highest graduation rates among AAU public universities, as well as the goal of achieving equivalent success across groups. To meet these goals, we must clearly define student success at Carolina; identify measures, perhaps in conjunction with the Carolina Metrics Project, that reliably indicate this success; and increase our capacity to gather and analyze interim data in ways that will help us stay on track in meeting our goals.
4. This effort must be coordinated. The University has made great strides in student achievement over the last ten years, despite the lack of a clear strategic or organizational structure for retention efforts across campus. We believe we will realize additional gains only if our efforts are better aligned and only if we are encouraged and held accountable by a united leadership that is committed to the success of the initiative.

5. This effort must engage faculty. Faculty are essential in assisting students in their effort to thrive and flourish academically, intellectually, and personally during their University experience. Research shows that faculty-student interaction improves retention and increases achievement, especially when this interaction is academic and intellectual rather than merely social. Consequently, our effort must encourage faculty members to understand that every interaction with a student can contribute substantially to the student's success, and that faculty members can encourage such interaction by being excellent and approachable teachers. By the same token, students must be encouraged to perceive faculty as approachable and critical to their education.

6. This effort must reinforce front-line student services. Student-service offices across campus have suffered disproportionately during the last five years of budget cuts. In our view, any approach to retention we now take will not fully succeed unless it moves quickly to strengthen existing programs that have proven their effectiveness in fostering the success of our students. We offer below two options for allocating resources for this purpose. What is not optional, in our view, is the principle that schools or departments receiving such resources must agree not to reduce their own support for the programs in question. In other words, the additional funding must not be used to displace current funding or effort.

7. This effort must build on the strengths of our students. Historically, retention work has tried to remediate the problems of students rather than to build upon their strengths—in effect, to cure sickness rather than promote wellness. We recommend a different approach: one that appreciates what is right with students, identifies individual strengths, and encourages optimal learning. Such an approach, if implemented broadly and consistently over time, will result in a change in our culture—one that encourages students to thrive, not just survive. The name we propose for this initiative—Thrive@Carolina—is intended both to signal and to encourage this change in culture. To thrive is to flourish and grow academically and intellectually and to participate in high-impact opportunities associated with the university. A student who flourishes is likely to have positive college experiences, stay enrolled, and graduate.

Recommendations

1. We recommend that the Provost retain full authority for allocating the resources committed publicly by the Chancellor. Doing so will communicate clearly that the Provost is leading Thrive@Carolina and is committed to its success.

2. We recommend that these resources be allocated roughly among three priorities:

- 45 percent to reinforce front-line student services;
- 45 percent to foster innovation and collaboration across boundaries in teaching, learning, and/or student services; and
- 10 percent to lead, coordinate, and communicate the broad initiative.

3. We recommend that specific proposals be assessed in light of the following questions:

- Will the allocation improve student success as measured by graduation rates?
- Will it foster inclusive excellence and achievement equity?
- Will it recognize and build upon the strengths of students?
- Will it encourage collaboration across school or departmental boundaries?
- Will it contribute to the change in campus culture suggested by the name Thrive@Carolina?

4. In regard to reinforcing the front lines, the attached appendix lists many options for restoring student services that have been depleted by budget cuts. Although it has been difficult to choose among these worthy programs, we have listed on the first worksheet the options that we think would make the greatest difference. The second worksheet lists other ideas that came from the brainstorming exercise. If any of these options are selected, plans will need to be developed and metrics and measures established before moving forward with implementation.

As an alternative to funding these recommended priorities, the Provost could issue a request to schools, divisions, and departments for brief proposals for additional funding for existing student-support programs, with the funding to be distributed over four years beginning in 2014-2015. An RFP would offer several advantages: it would call attention to Thrive@Carolina, allow existing programs to compete fairly for additional funding, and encourage commitment from the units that receive the resources. On the other hand, any RFP process would require more time and effort than would a simple allocation of resources, and it would run the risk of alienating those whose proposals were not funded.

5. Where innovation and collaboration are concerned, the appendix also lists several new programs that we have again listed according to their projected impact. Although we encourage the Provost to support one or more of these collaborative efforts immediately, we also strongly encourage an RFP process for innovation and collaboration.

6. In regard to leading, coordinating, and communicating, we believe, as we note above, that the Chancellor and Provost must serve as the principal public leaders of Thrive@Carolina.

We recommend that the Provost recruit and charge a committee of leading faculty members from the various schools of the University—professors with strong credentials both as teachers and researchers who would be willing to offer their frank advice to the Provost and champion the cause of student success among their colleagues. The Provost could solicit nominations for this purpose from deans and from the Faculty Executive Committee.

As for the day-to-day leadership of the initiative, in the near term we think that this should be invested in staff members already reporting to the Provost. The aims of this near-term leadership should be to:

- confirm the goals of the initiative;
- convene the faculty committee charged by the Provost;
- administer resources allocated to strengthen existing programs;
- design and implement the RFP process for innovation and collaboration;
- build early support for Thrive@Carolina among deans and other senior leaders;
- plan and executive campus-wide communications that publicize the initiative to faculty, staff, and students; and
- develop a strategic plan, including a long-term leadership structure, for ongoing student-success efforts.

We hope that our working group can also provide an ongoing leadership role in the initiative that we have helped to launch. We all believe that our students are capable of thriving on our campus, and we are deeply committed to helping them do so. We would welcome the chance to refine further the ideas that we have briefly elaborated here, and to help the Chancellor and Provost as they lead the University to fulfill its mission as a great public research university.