

Colleges Sharpen Focus on Freshmen

Contacting, Counseling Students Boosts Retention Rates

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Tuesday, April 5, 2005; Page A12

About 20 years ago, the leaders of Alcorn State University, a rural Mississippi college 10 miles from the nearest stoplight, took a look at their student retention rates. They didn't like what they saw. Only half the freshman class showed up for sophomore year, and the percentage of students sticking around to pick up degrees was even lower.

For public colleges that, like Alcorn State, draw large numbers of low-income students whose parents did not attend college, the low graduation rates were all too common. But the school's administrators found no comfort in that and launched a series of changes drawing the attention of experts looking for ways to improve what they consider a feeble national college graduation rate barely above 50 percent.

Alcorn State created the College for Excellence, a program that arranged counseling for new students who were missing classes, organized tutorials for new students whose grades were low and has since done everything its administrators can think of to put academic achievement at the top of their agenda. "We focus on the success of freshmen," said Edward L. Vaughn, dean of the College for Excellence. "The early success of freshmen is a key component of future success as a student. That early success builds both skills and confidence."

According to reports by the Washington-based nonprofit organization the Education Trust, which focuses on low-income and minority student achievement, at least 75 percent of Alcorn State freshmen return as sophomores, and the portion of students who receive bachelor's degrees within six years has increased from 33.4 percent in 1997 to 47.9 percent in 2003.

Kevin Carey, Education Trust policy research director, acknowledged that

educators often excuse the lower graduation rates of less selective institutions as unavoidable because of demographics. But while creating the Web site CollegeResults.org -- it compares the graduation rates of schools with similar student bodies -- Carey said he found that "some institutions consistently outperform their peers."

Sheldon Steinbach, general counsel of the Washington-based American Council on Education, which coordinates higher education institutions, cautioned that generalizing about graduation rates can be misleading. "Individual student circumstances vary so dramatically that the figures may be less meaningful than they appear on the surface," he said.

Still, researchers say about half of U.S. students starting college acquire a degree within six years; for students who start in four-year schools, the graduation rate goes up to about 60 percent. And at many colleges, the graduation rate for blacks is 20 percentage points lower than it is for whites.

Many experts, such as Steinbach, say the best way to improve college graduation rates is to strengthen education from kindergarten through 12th grade. Many colleges and universities, however, also have raised graduation rates by changing their procedures.

Florida State, for instance, is one of the few big universities whose black students' six-year graduation rate, 61.3 percent, is almost as high as the rate for its white students, 63.9 percent. One important reason, an Education Trust report said, is the university's full-time student advisers, who do not sit in their offices waiting for problems to walk in but follow a policy of contacting every student at least three times a semester by e-mail, phone or in person.

When University of Notre Dame science professors noticed that a significant number of students, particularly minorities, were failing or dropping out of its freshman chemistry course, the report said, they set up alternative classes for low-performing students that covered the same material and included mandatory study group sessions. That raised the freshman success rate by 50 percent.

University of Northern Iowa administrators heard the common complaint of students in big schools that they could not graduate in time because required courses in their majors were full. They analyzed the course requirements in each of their degree programs and added extra sections or took other measures to relieve the logjams. The school's graduation rate

increased from 60.4 percent in 1997 to 65.1 percent in 2003.

The University of Maryland has a graduation rate of 70.7 percent. But under CollegeResults.org's 2003 comparisons, U-Md. is 14th in its peer group of 16, below No. 1 University of California at Berkeley with 85.4 percent and No. 2 University of Michigan with 85.1 percent. George Washington University, 75.1 percent, is 12th out of 16 in a list topped by Notre Dame, with 94.6 percent, and University of Virginia, 92 percent.

George Cathcart, a spokesman for Maryland, said the university is working hard to improve its graduation rate, which he said has reached 72.9 percent and is still growing. He said since 1998, the rate for black students at U-Md. has gone from 49.4 percent to 56.8 percent and for Hispanics from 50 percent to 67.5 percent. Tracy Schario, spokeswoman for George Washington, said the university's graduation rate has reached 78.7 percent, and the peer list used by the Education Trust does not fairly reflect the school's characteristics.

James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Va., had one of the best comparative standings in the region, with a six-year graduation rate of 79.9 percent. That is No. 1 on a list of 16 schools, beating No. 2 UC Santa Barbara, 73.5 percent, and No. 3 University of New Hampshire, 72.6 percent.

At Alcorn State, Vaughn said, the effort to carefully follow the progress of new students will receive a boost this summer when the school begins to electronically monitor attendance records. He said the university also has discovered that students who are undecided about a major are the most likely to leave school without graduating, so advisers and programs have been added to help them choose. "The university is constantly looking for ways to improve and sustain our success," he said.