In the fall of 2003, the Vice Provost for Student Success and her staff identified 11 priorities as a focus for the work of the organization over the course of the academic year. Working groups were formed for each of those priorities and in December, 2003, individuals were designated for participation in and leadership of the groups.

The Strategic Retention Plan Priority Group received this charge in late December:

Examine current retention statistics and profiles to gain an understanding of KU’s current retention/graduation profile. In particular, gain an understanding of the Lawrence campus six-year graduation rate in comparison to the academic profile of incoming students and their first-year retention rates. Based on these data, identify the top five-to-ten strategic initiatives needed to increase student retention and graduation rates.

The group met seven times beginning January 13th, 2004. The group of twenty individuals included two students, staff representatives from thirteen Student Success units and three academic units, and one member of the faculty. Initial discussion about the Charge focused on target rates for retention (freshman to sophomore persistence) and timely graduation (six year graduation rate); the Provost’s Office has set goals of increases from 80% to 85% and 57% to 65% respectively. A review of data from the Office of Institutional Research and Planning (Appendix A) helped the group translate those percentages to real numbers of students—helping approximately 250 more students persist to their second year at KU would meet the 85% retention goal and consequently increase the number of students graduating in four, five or six years.

The group also reviewed reports done by earlier committees and taskforces who examined retention issues. (Appendix B) Following further discussion of the data and previous recommendations, the group identified five critical areas where initiatives could have a positive impact on KU’s rates of retention and graduation:

- advising/career counseling/curricular issues
- early alert/progress to degree policies/procedures
- entry level mathematics classes and support
- learning assistance and learning communities
- administrative/faculty efforts/policies and procedures.

In early March, five sub groups were formed to develop specific recommendations for each critical area. These recommendations can be seen as tactics that taken together operationalize an
overall strategy of enhancing and expanding existing “best practices”—those things that KU already does well and that data tell us help students succeed and keep them engaged and on track to graduation, e.g. proactive early advising/intervention, PRE 101, peer tutoring, career counseling, including PRE 210. These same practices can be viewed as a “safety net” designed to catch students who may, for a multitude of reasons, stumble on their way or get off track.. The data clearly indicate that helping students persist to the junior year positively affects KU’s graduation rates.

It is worth noting here that the University of Kansas has recently been recognized as one of 20 colleges and universities that exceeded predicted scores related to benchmarks of effective educational practice and graduation rates based on results of the National Survey of Student Engagement. The DEEP Report (Documenting Effective Educational Practice) detailed further qualitative exploration by a site visit team with the institution’s faculty, staff, students and administration. Over the course of two visits, the team cited and documented many specific examples of “what works” exceptionally well at KU. One of their comments especially resonates with our approach to improving retention and graduation rates. The researchers found that KU “aim(s) to raise the bar (with additional challenges) for exceptional students and to correspondingly raise struggling students to meet the bar (rather than lowering it).” (DEEP Final Report, p. 16) Our strategy is to strive to meet students’ expectations for support as they work to meet KU’s expectations of them, achieve their goals, and succeed at KU.

All recommendations were discussed, refined, and put into a time frame supporting a) those that could be achieved the soonest and with little or no requirement for additional resources; b) those which will require further elaboration and collaboration en route to implementation, plus commitment of significant resources when implemented; and c) those which will need extensive institutional collaboration and considerable allocation of resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONSIDERATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

AY 2004/05

Administrative/faculty/policy and procedure

- Send a strong, repetitive message along as many channels and in as many voices as possible (administrators, faculty and staff at every level of the institution) that the expectation at KU is that all students will graduate and that services are available, easily accessed, and proven to support the efforts of every student.
- Improve service and communication across campus. In collaboration with Human Resources, develop service training modules for campus-wide front office staff including readily accessible information about resources available to students throughout campus. In conjunction with the Help Desk initiative, appoint a liaison to that planning group to bring to the forefront concerns/issues related to retention/graduation rates as the Help Desk evolves.
- Develop an evaluation/assessment plan for all programs contributing to retention initiatives in collaboration with the Office of Institutional Research and Planning.
Advising/career counseling/curricular issues

- Notify every new student who his/her advisor is before the 20th day of the semester (this is currently in the works for Fall 2004. CLAS students will be notified after attending summer orientation).
- Pilot a program to train “adjunct” advisors for freshman in key areas (Multicultural Affairs, Disability Services, Student Housing, etc.).

Early Alert/Progress to degree policies/procedures

- Require all students placed on academic probation to meet with an academic advisor before starting the next semester and to attend specific career awareness/exploration activities (small group workshops or individual career counseling/planning sessions). Consider adopting a “contract” model in which students commit to taking certain steps to improve their academic performance with the help of a mentor.
- Enhance contact for students participating in the Office of Admissions and Scholarships’ Freshmen Scholars Development Program to insure compliance with program requirements; follow up with any student who leaves KU after first semester.

Learning Assistance/Support and Learning Communities

- Provide increased student hourly support for the KU Writing Center student consulting staff to better meet student demand for this service.
- Fully fund full time coordinator, support staff, peer educators and faculty stipends for Thematic Learning Communities, signaling campus-wide commitment to this program.
- Expand institutional support (staffing and operating) for enhanced tutoring services.
- Create a highly visible Academic Center for Excellence and Access bringing most forms of academic assistance/support under one umbrella (one stop shop), creating seamless access to these services.

Entry Level Mathematics Classes and Support

- Continue to strictly enforce math placement; develop informational piece for distribution at summer orientation enrollment about Math 002 and 101, including rationale for placements, overview of content of courses, resources available for assistance in math courses, and importance of early completion of math requirements for all degree programs.
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONSIDERATION AND IMPLEMENTATION
AY 2005/06

Advising/career counseling/curricular issues

- Hire/designate a full-time coordinator for PRE 101 and expand opportunities for teaching (and thus the number of sections/spaces available) to all staff in Student Success and all academic units, as well as team teaching opportunities for regular faculty.
- Identify funding sources to compensate all staff and faculty who teach PRE 101; develop a reward system that recognizes such teaching as a significant contribution to the institution and part of considerations for promotion and salary increases.
- Require all out-of-state conditionally admitted students and Kansas exceptions to take PRE 101.
- Pilot a 3 credit hour option for PRE 101. Use the 15 additional hours each semester for career exploration and assessment activities. Include a $25.00 lab fee to cover the costs of two career assessments.
- Expand enrollment for PRE 210 by funding six additional group leaders to lead additional discussion groups. This would allow 60 more students to enroll in each of the two PRE 210 lectures (total of 120 students per fall and spring semesters). This meets a recommendation in the Career Blueprint Committee report.

Early Alert/progress to degree policies/procedures

- Fully implement PeopleSoft Early Alert option as “new” academic warning system with an initial emphasis on freshman/sophomore level courses; seek mechanisms to tie alerts to communication with adviser for appropriate referrals/interventions.
- Develop specific strategies, programs, and possible courses to help students in academic difficulty, especially those who do not meet requirements for admission to professional schools or majors (e.g. business, journalism) persist and continue to graduation.

Administrative/faculty/policy and procedure

- Expand and strengthen fall Academic Success Week, incorporating message of expectation of success in student and faculty convocations. Create Academic Success Week specific to student needs in spring semester.
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONSIDERATION AND IMPLEMENTATION  
AY 2006/07 AND BEYOND

Advising/career counseling/curricular issues

- Expand offerings of PRE 101 (2 and 3 credit hour options) and PRE 210 (2 and 3 credit options). Develop major-related sections of PRE 101; e.g. PRE 101 for pre-business students.
- Hire ten additional advisors (over three years) for the Freshman/Sophomore Advising Center to bring advisor/student ratio down to 200 students per advisor. Provide corresponding resources supporting academic units in order that they can also achieve appropriate ratios and provide effective advising for all students.
- Consider “advising holds” on enrollment for students with sophomore and junior standing who are not making satisfactory progress toward graduation.

Administrative/faculty/policy and procedure

- Utilize PeopleSoft/SAS to create means for identifying and contacting students who repeatedly drop classes and/or drop classes late in Period 2 or beyond; develop appropriate interventions to guide students’ decision-making processes and access to appropriate resources with a goal of helping them persist rather than drop classes and delaying graduation.
- Develop a “mile-stones” system mapping satisfactory progress toward graduation. Modify “Graduate In Four” notebooks to allow for such a mapping system that includes options for changing majors/program and still keeping on track for five or six year graduation. An easily accessible, on-line system would be the ultimate goal.
- Explore consistent course numbering for all academic support courses in lieu of PRE and LAS designators in current usage; devise a UNIV 101, 210, etc. designation.
- Develop consistency in policy and procedure across the College and the schools.

Entry level mathematics classes and support

- Increase numbers of sections of entry level mathematics courses (002-116) meeting four-five days per week; reduce class size; target “serial droppers” for placement in small sections meeting daily.
- Provide funding for peer help room staff to allow expansion of math help rooms to include daily (seven day/evening) availability for all math courses through Math 116.