

HLC Quality Initiative*

Graduation Partnership

Wichita State University's Student Success Plan

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Graduation Partnership: Wichita State University's Retention and Student Success Plan

Overview

Wichita State University's (WSU) quality initiative project is centered on its Graduation Partnership, a strategy involving faculty, staff, and students to improve overall student success. The Partnership aims to enhance the student experience in all its forms: earning good grades, staying in school, graduating in a timely fashion, and being satisfied with the WSU experience. The Graduation Partnership is an outgrowth of the University's participation in the Foundations of Excellence® (FoE) self-study process that took place during the 2008-2009 academic year.¹ Even before this time, the University came to the realization that improvement in student success was necessary to meet the needs of the Wichita community, in terms of graduating enough students to meet the workforce needs of south central Kansas. Hence, student success has emerged as the number one priority on campus as measured by the retention and graduation rates of first-time, full-time freshmen. Although this initiative will mainly focus on freshmen, efforts will also be made to improve success among our transfer students. The University's work in improving student success is furthered by the Kansas Board of Regents strategic plan for Kansas' higher education system (*Foresight 2020*)², with a goal to increase retention and graduation rates of first-time, full-time freshmen 10% by 2020. Given our current rates of retention and graduation, this goal is a stretch, but achievable in light of our current plans in this area. Plans for improving student success will impact every area of the University and addresses HLC accreditation Criterion Four (evaluation and improvement of academic programs).

Scope and Significance

Potential for Significant Impact on WSU and Evidence of Significance and Relevance

The reasons for a focus on student success are many and include changes in demographic characteristics of the students themselves, concerns about the high rate of dropout that peaks between the first and second year, and recognition that the first year presents a unique opportunity to engage students in the habits of learning.¹ In recent years, WSU's fall-to-fall retention rate for new freshmen has been approximately 70%. Our six-year graduation rate is approximately 40%. While these rates are similar to the national averages (especially when compared to other urban serving institutions), there is room for improvement.

An additional reason for attention in this area is that of economics. In the case of WSU, for every 1% improvement in retention, approximately \$415,000 is generated annually in gross revenue. Over a 10 year period, this represents over \$4 million added to the University's budget. The compounding benefit of increasing retention rates even by a handful of students per year can have a significant impact on revenue. Having higher rates of student success will benefit our reputation as well, leading more and better students to attend our university. We want to be known as a place students come to earn a degree and enter the workforce.

¹ Foundations of Excellence in the First College Year. <http://www.fyfoundations.org/>

² Kansas Board of Regents Foresight 2020. http://www.kansasregents.org/foresight_2020.

The literature is rich in regard to student success.³ Student success matters, as staying in school promotes personal goals and gives more options in life. Graduating with a college degree vastly improves one's life from employability, job satisfaction and lifetime income, to health and civic engagement. Student success matters to faculty when students acquire the skills, attitudes, and behaviors that make them successful in college.

We know that not every admitted student will succeed in college. The appropriate interventions targeted at the right populations will make a difference in the long run. The problem is multifaceted, and there are no silver bullets: a broad variety of approaches must be tried, at various levels throughout the institution and there should be a willingness to collaborate across departments, colleges and divisions. Success will involve active participation among faculty and staff. It is our belief that experimentation based on adapting national best practices to local conditions is the best hope for quick progress on this important institutional goal. We believe the Graduation Partnership is structured in such a way that modification can be made going forward based on the evaluation of outcomes.

Alignment with WSU's Mission and Vision and Linkage with WSU's Planning Process

Driven by the WSU President's commitment to accountability, in the spring of 2008 an Enrollment Management Work Group, established by the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs and Research (AAR) and the Vice President of Campus Life and Community Relations (CLUR), recommended that Wichita State University participate in the FoE Self-Study (Figure 1). This recommendation was predicated on the group's desire to develop a comprehensive plan to enhance student success at WSU.

Two key individuals, an Associate Provost for Administration and Strategic Planning (AAR) and the Dean of Enrollment Services (CLUR) were designated to oversee the FoE process, and in turn, they appointed a Steering Committee to lead the self-study. The Steering Committee was comprised of a broad cross section of university personnel that included faculty and staff from both the divisions of AAR and CLUR as well as students. All told, more than 120 people participated directly in the Foundations of Excellence-guided self-study at WSU.

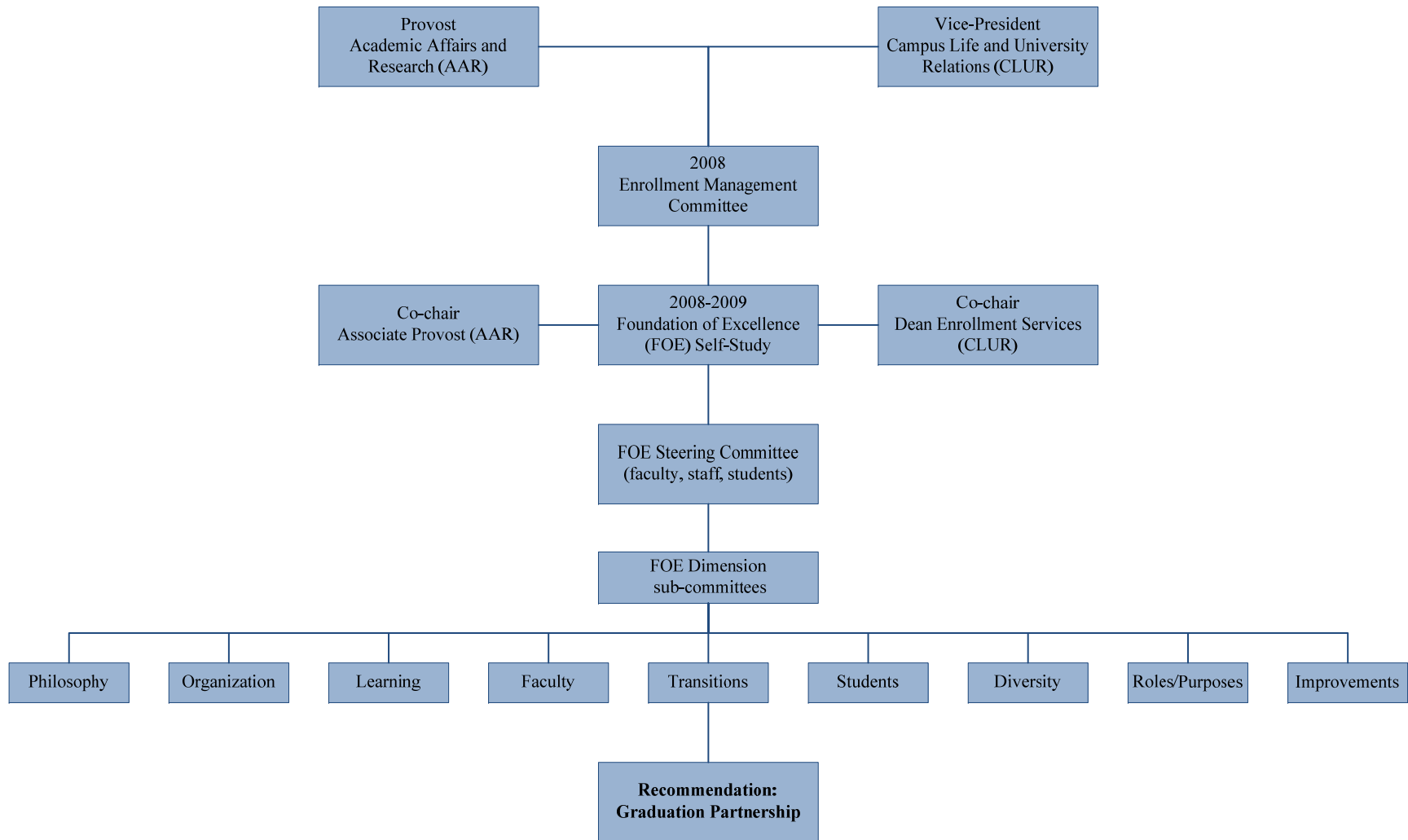
The FoE-guided self-study focused on an "aspirational model" of institutional excellence that could be used to measure levels of student achievement and initiate data-driven planning processes.⁴ The model consisted of nine standards of excellence termed "Foundational Dimensions," (i.e., philosophy, organizational, learning, faculty, transitions, students, diversity, roles and purposes, improvement), which was built on the following four assumptions:

- The academic mission of an institution is preeminent.

³ For example: Lotkowski, Veronica A., Steven B. Robbins, and Richard J. Noeth. 2004. "The Role of Academic and Non-Academic Factors in Improving College Retention: ACT Policy Report." Accessed January 27, 2012. http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/college_retention.pdf; National Resource Center on the First Year Experience and Students in Transition. "History of UNIV 101," website accessed January 27, 2012. <http://sc.edu/univ101/aboutus/history.html>; Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). How college affects students, Volume 2: A third decade of research. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

⁴ Foundations of Excellence in the First College Year. <http://www.fyfoundations.org/>

Figure 1
Organizational Chronology of Graduation Partnership Initiative



- The first year of enrollment is central to the achievement of an institution’s mission, and it lays the foundation on which undergraduate education is built.
- Systematic evidence provides validation of the dimensions.
- Collectively, the dimensions constitute an ideal for improving not only the first year of enrollment but also the entire undergraduate experience.

During WSU’s self-study process, nine subcommittees, co-chaired by representatives from both the divisions of AAR and CLUR, assessed Wichita State University’s “performance” relative to each “Foundational Dimension” and drafted a series of recommendations to improve interactions with students in their first year of enrollment at WSU. The self-study process was structured in such a way that each of the nine subcommittees drew upon a wide cross section of data to carry out its charge. This included institutional data and two surveys, one administered to all WSU faculty and staff, the other administered to the full-time, first-year student cohort. The nine subcommittees worked at assigned times throughout the 2008–09 academic year, and all dimension reports were delivered on or before May, 2009. Each subcommittee consisted of 8 to 12 members, which included faculty, staff, and students.

Early on an assumption was made that the academic mission of our institution would be considered preeminent and any retention efforts would directly connect to it:

“Wichita State University is committed to providing comprehensive educational opportunities in an urban setting. Through teaching, scholarship and public service the University seeks to equip both students and the larger community with the educational and cultural tools they need to thrive in a complex world, and to achieve both individual responsibility in their own lives and effective citizenship in the local, national and global community.”

Therefore, our student success work is an outgrowth of the University’s mission and participation in the FoE self-study process. The FoE process served as the framework for strategic planning around student success. The FoE was used as a model for engaging WSU in a voluntary, comprehensive self-study, improvement planning, and change implementation process focused specifically on the totality of the beginning college experience. This was considered a best practice.⁵

Alignment with Accreditation Criteria

Student success initiatives touch on several of the HLC accreditation criteria, such as Criterion One (Mission) and Two (Fulfillment of Mission), but directly addresses HLC accreditation Criterion Four: Academic Programs-Evaluation and Improvement. One aspect of Criterion Four requires clearly stated institutional goals for student persistence and completion of academic programs, which are also appropriate to its mission, student populations, and educational offerings. Our student success initiatives, guided by our University mission, demonstrate a commitment to educational improvement through attention to its retention and graduation rates. In the initiative, a plan is in place to collect information on student persistence

⁵ John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education. <http://www.jngi.org/>.

and graduation rates. Likewise, data on student retention and graduation rates are used to address deficiencies in retention and graduation efforts. Processes and methodologies for gathering and analyzing information on retention and graduation are reflective of best practices (i.e., business intelligence). Improvement in retention efforts will stabilize enrollments and revenues to reinvest into University priorities. Finally, all of the aforementioned efforts to improve retention and completion sets-up an overall quality improvement process for undergraduate education at WSU.

Quality Initiative: Goals

From the FoE Dimension Reports, “action items” (below) emerged as the most pressing issues necessary to enhance student success for first-year enrollees at WSU, and collectively, they served as the vehicle (used by the administration) to launch the Graduation Partnership: a plan of action to improve student retention and persistence at Wichita State University in the years to come.⁶ The Graduation Partnership also forms the basis of WSU’s HLC Quality Initiative. The Graduation Partnership is a collaborative initiative that involves faculty, staff, and students throughout the University community. It was formally launched during the 2009-2010 academic year, and is guided by the following in the FoE Report:

“Wichita State University is strongly committed to providing a quality experience for all students in their first year of enrollment. This commitment includes continual improvement of policies, programs, and services to facilitate academic success and personal growth; providing foundational educational experiences and creating a culture that supports first-year enrollees’ aspirations; and encouraging students to actively engage in campus life.”

The Graduation Partnership goals are:

- Increase retention-rate of first year, full-time freshmen by 10% (from 70%-80%) by 2020.
- Increase the six-year graduation rate of first-time, full-time freshmen by 10% (from 40%-50%) by 2020.
- Develop metrics to measure the graduation rates for transfer students and increase these rates 10% by 2020.

The Graduation Partnership action items include:

- Improve freshmen orientation program to include faculty participation (launched summer 2011).
- Initiate measures to identify academically at-risk students with pro-active advising (launched fall 2010).

⁶ Foundations of Excellence Final Report. <http://webs.wichita.edu/?u=ACADEMICAFFAIRS&p=/FoE/FoE/>.

- Deploy the GradesFirst early alert system program (launched for freshmen, athletes, Dean’s Scholar’s, honors students, and students participating in mentoring programs offered by the Office of Multicultural Affairs, fall 2011).
- Deploy a revised student success course (WSU 101) (launched fall 2011).
- Increase Supplemental Instruction (expanded spring 2011).

The next steps will be to expand freshmen orientation to a two day orientation program, which includes advising and enrollment (summer 2012), revising a transfer student orientation (spring 2013), and expanding GradesFirst to all undergraduate students (fall 2013). Refer to the figure on page 9 for the complete timeline.

Evaluation Methodology and Timeline

The University will utilize a mix of formative and summative methods in the evaluation process that will ensure continuous review, modification, and adjustment of the initiative in order to meet the ultimate goals of increasing retention and graduation rates. The structure of the evaluation will be arranged in the following manner.

Purpose

The purpose of the evaluation will be to analyze data collected for the Graduation Partnership initiatives and evaluate the results in relation to the following questions:

- How well is the program being *delivered*?
- Is the program changing *student behavior* and/or needing *modification*?
- What is the *effectiveness* of the initiative?
- What is the *impact* of the initiative?

Evaluation Strategy, Measurement, and Timeline

The initiative evaluation strategy will included both formative and summative strategies. An evaluation design has been developed to allow assessment of the extent to which the program components were meeting the action steps and goals outlined in the Graduation Partnership. The Graduation Partnership targets undergraduate students. Included in the table on the following page, for illustrative purposes, are sample metrics for assessing the success of the Graduation Partnership.

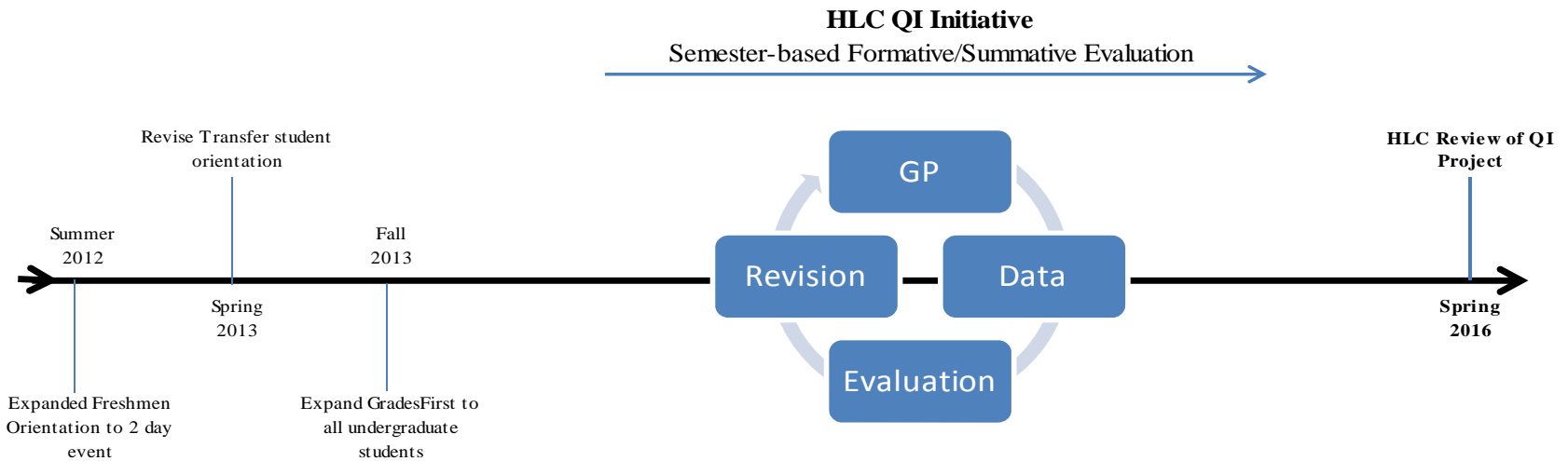
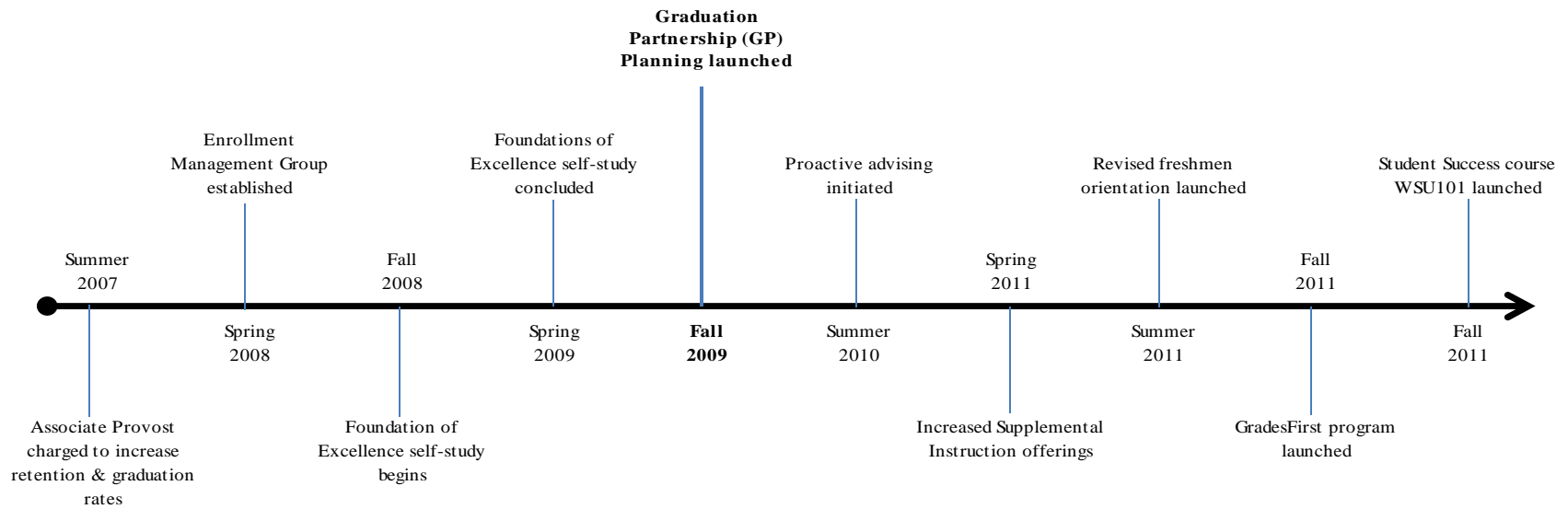
Question	Method of Evaluation	Evaluation Type	Sample Metrics	Data Source	Reviewed By	Frequency
How well is the program being <i>delivered</i> ?	Implementation	Formative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of pro-active advising tools • Enrollment patterns in remedial, basic skills, and WSU 101 • Participant patterns in GradesFirst, tutoring programs, and supplemental instruction • Attendance compliance in freshmen and transfer orientation programs • Student and faculty satisfaction with Graduation Partnership activities • Student and graduate satisfaction with general education, academic programs 	BIPM*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HLC Workgroup • Retention Council (see page 10) 	Semester term
Is the Graduation Partnership changing <i>student behavior</i> and/or needing <i>modification</i> ?	Process/Content	Formative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Predictive modeling to identify: incoming academic at-risk students and/or in academic decline (e.g., declining GPA, reduced credit hours enrollment, intermittent enrollment, financial aid changes) • Monitoring of housing contract submissions and financial aid submissions and disbursements. 	BIPM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HLC Workgroup • Retention Council 	Semester term
What is the <i>effectiveness</i> of the initiative?	Outcome	Summative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University undergraduate enrollment, credit hour reports • Retention rates (RR) • Graduation rates (GR) 	BIPM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PET**/AAPG*** • HLC Workgroup • Retention Council 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Semester term • RR – Fall • GR - AY
What is the <i>impact</i> of the initiative?	Impact	Summative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree completion • Entry into the workforce 	BIPM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PET/AAPG • HLC Workgroup • Retention Council 	Academic Year

* Business Intelligence and Predictive Modeling (e.g., institutional data, alumni and exit surveys, assessment data), **President's Executive Team, ***Academic Affairs Planning Group

Data Analysis

Data collection and evaluation of the Graduation Partnership initiatives will be an on-going process throughout the evaluation period. Graduation Partnership initiatives have a mix of periodic and real-time data access from both our student information systems (SIS) and non-SIS systems and will be accessed to perform a combination of univariate (current and historical trends), bivariate (test of difference) and multivariate (identification of significant predictors) analysis. For the program *delivery* phase, data will be used to assess compliance with student participation and use among program staff. Throughout the evaluation period all initiatives will be assessed for possible *modification* based on whether they are targeting the correct populations for interventions. Likewise, continuous data collection measuring *effectiveness* and *impact* will allow assessment of forward progress (measured as gains over time) and whether program initiatives are correctly situated to meet Graduation Partnership goals. Figure 2 provides a timeline of events from the origins of the Graduation Partnership, leading up to its launch as WSU's HLC Quality Initiative.

Figure 2
Key Dates for WSU's QI Initiative



Commitment and Capacity

Commitment and Feasibility Relative to Institutional Capacity

The existing work of faculty and staff with students is substantial. On a daily basis individual faculty and staff work with students to assure their success, often working individually with students on academics, trouble-shooting personal issues, and advising on career plans. These types of student experiences individualizes a university education for students, impacting them for a lifetime. We see these activities continuing, if not increasing as student success efforts are formalized.

WSU has employed several activities aimed at communicating a clear student success policy. The Vice President for Academic Affairs (VPAA) is the senior administrator on campus charged with student success efforts. He has charged each dean and associate vice president for academic affairs (VPAA) to include student success as their number one priority. The Faculty Senate is regularly updated through Faculty Senate Planning and Budget Committee (FSPBC) meetings with VPAA. This Committee is responsible for identifying and defining the most appropriate avenues for faculty participation in the planning and budget process. The VPAA takes feedback about implementation, strategy, and problems from the FSPBC and communicates it to the deans and others on his staff, specifically the Associate VPAA for Quality Assurance and Accountability, who is the point person in the VPAA's Office for retention efforts and oversees the Office for Faculty Development and Student Success (OFDSS).⁷ One recent initiative based on feedback has been the establishment of a retention grant program (supported by the VPAA), in which faculty have taken ownership in requesting proposals, awarding the grants, and monitoring their progress. An initial investment of \$100,000 in 2012 was carved out to encourage this work among faculty and staff. The Adviser Council, staffed by the Associate VPAA for Administration and Outreach, meets monthly with University advisers about their role in retention efforts. The University Assessment Committee meets to review University-wide assessment data, where retention and graduation rates are discussed. Finally, the Retention Council (made-up of faculty and staff from all University divisions), serves to monitor retention efforts from a University perspective. All of these individuals and groups work to understand best practices and approaches and solve problems as they arise.

Defined Plan for Integrating and Sustaining Initiative into the Ongoing Work of the Institution

What began as a campus-wide conversation with the FoE has evolved into a series of initiatives throughout the University. This work both anticipated and contributes to the Kansas Board of Regent's (KBOR) strategic plan known as *Foresight 2020*. The plan calls for all Regent Universities in the State of Kansas' higher education system to increase retention and graduation rates by 10% by 2020. The University has spent a considerable amount of time aligning student success work with the expectations of the Regents, which is reflected in two reports quantifying our progress in this area.⁸ Additionally, the University reports annually to KBOR the results of a triennially prepared Performance Agreement, which has student success initiatives included throughout the agreement.⁹ Student success is one of the University's main

⁷ WSU Office for Faculty Development and Student Success. <http://wichita.edu/ofdss>.

⁸ University Assessment Reports on Foresight 2020. <http://wichita.edu/assessment>.

⁹ WSU Performance Agreement. <http://webs.wichita.edu/?u=ACADEMICAFFAIRS&p=/PerformanceAgreement/>.

priorities and is overseen by the VPAA. Since *Foresight 2020* Goal Three aims to improve retention and graduation rates by 2020, we have agreed to use this strategic plan as a guiding document for our work, which is inclusive of the Graduation Partnership. Our overall work in this area is further guided by a Retention Council, which was established in the spring of 2012 to monitor retention and graduation data, coordinate student success work underway, vet opportunities for new initiatives, and ensure integration and sustainability of these efforts. Every area of the University is represented on the Council, which is co-chaired by the VPAA and the CLUR Vice President. Both of these senior leaders are members of the President's Executive Team, which advises the President on such matters. The President reports to the Kansas Board of Regents.

Commitment of and Alignment of Resources to Implement and Sustain Initiative

In preparation for the launch of the Graduation Partnership, the University administration strategically allocated resources stemming from the work produced in the FoE report. Several structural changes were made to assist in this endeavor, most importantly establishing the OFDSS. The OFDSS was created and expanded from a reorganization of several existing offices in 2009-2010. The current office has four full-time FTEs devoted to the main activities of the office (an Executive Director, two student success specialists, one administrative specialist, and more than 70 student workers that function as graduate teaching assistants, peer leaders, Supplemental Instruction leaders, and tutors) with an annual budget of \$467,800, with plans for an additional .50 FTE staff position during for the 2012-2013 academic year, bringing the total budget to \$506,200. This compares to a budget of \$138,334 prior to the reorganization. The OFDSS' mission is to provide support to students, especially those new to Wichita State University, by helping them adjust to life on campus, and offer tools to aid faculty in the classroom. The OFDSS collaborates with units across the university to create and coordinate campus-wide initiatives that will improve student success. In concert with the Graduation Partnership action items, student success projects in place include:

- Revised freshmen orientation (offered by Admissions and AAR), which includes more contact with faculty, more academic content, deeper social engagement, and an overall richer experience.
- GradesFirst early alert system.
- Partnership with academic advisors providing interventions for students who are at-risk in certain courses.
- Increased offerings of Supplemental Instruction.
- Revised success course called WSU 101 (Introduction to the University) with increased numbers of freshmen who take the course.
- Peer Mentoring program to accompany WSU 101.
- Weekly workshops and seminars to help instructors help students succeed.

In the fall of 2010, OFDSS successfully competed for a \$238,140 College Access Challenge Grant to promote financial literacy among college students and to help college-bound and new college students make a viable plan for paying for college. Among the many faculty development activities the OFDSS provides, it organizes and provides workshops and seminars to help instructors hone their classroom skills and promote student success.

Along with the development of the OFDSS, the University has allocated resources to develop an integrated student/course data system to inform evidence-based decision making. The Associate VPAA for Strategic Planning and Business Intelligence is charged with development and management of this data system which provides to administrators, faculty and staff current and historical (1980 to present) student /course level data to assist in the deployment of the Graduation Partnership initiative. The unified student/course data system performs daily updates from our institutional Banner based information systems comprising data from admissions, student academic history and demographics, enrollment, course level data and degree completion. In addition, the system integrates data from financial aid, housing, payroll and accounts receivables. The unified student/course data system allows for reporting and analysis of student/course data elements from a detailed student record to the aggregated systems level. Furthermore, the data system updates daily web-accessible reports to identify students at academic risk (both before and after classes start) so that advisors and faculty can take preemptive action to alter student course scheduling or to encourage enrollment in student support systems to better prepare the student for learning.

Understanding of Potential Obstacles

As WSU works through challenges related to retaining students from their first year through graduation, there is a realization that challenges are multifaceted. Adequately staffed programs, limited resources, reluctance to change practices because of historical and political realities seem to be the more common concerns among administrators, faculty, and staff. Thus, faculty and staff support of retentions efforts remains a main area of focus for continued work. Student factors, in particular, are challenging especially when they are presented with issues of poverty, inadequate academic preparation, lack of clear goals, psychological and social adjustment problems, unfamiliarity with higher education, family responsibilities, job related responsibilities, and difficulties financing college. The University's urban setting adds another layer of complexity as it primarily serves students who commute to campus.

Summary

Wichita State University's proposed HLC Quality Initiative centered on the Graduation Partnership has potential for significant impact on WSU's long-term retention and graduation rates. It is aligned with the University's mission and resource planning process, as well as HLC's accreditation criteria. The overall goals and outcomes are appropriate to the scope of the problem and the University's capacity to accomplish them. Finally, the initiative is embedded in the ongoing work of WSU to ensure sustainability, which is furthered through its alignment with the Kansas' Board of Regents strategic plan: *Foresight 2020*.