# AASCU Graduation Rate Outcomes Study
# Campus Self Study
# University of South Carolina Aiken
Conducted January to February, 2005

**Prepared By:**

Randy Duckett, Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Services
Braden J. Hosch, Ph.D., Director of Institutional Effectiveness

## University of South Carolina Aiken
Dr. Thomas L. Hallman
*Chancellor*

## University Mission
Founded in 1961, the University of South Carolina Aiken (USCA) is a comprehensive liberal arts institution committed to active learning through excellence in teaching, faculty and student scholarship, research, creative activities and service.  In this stimulating academic community, USCA challenges students to acquire and develop the skills, knowledge, and values necessary for success in a dynamic global environment.

The university offers degrees in the arts and sciences and in the professional disciplines of business, education, and nursing.  All courses of study are grounded in a liberal arts and sciences core curriculum.  USCA also encourages interdisciplinary studies and collaborative endeavors.

Emphasizing small classes and individual attention, USCA provides students with opportunities to maximize individual achievement in both academic and co-curricular settings. The institution challenges students to think critically and creatively, to communicate effectively, to learn independently, and to acquire depth of knowledge in chosen fields. The university values honesty, integrity, initiative, hard work, accomplishments, responsible citizenship, respect for diversity, and cross-cultural understanding.

USC Aiken attracts students of varying ages and diverse cultural backgrounds who have demonstrated the potential to succeed in a challenging academic environment.  In addition to serving the Savannah River area, USCA actively seeks student enrollment from all parts of South Carolina as well as from other states and countries.

As a senior public institution of the University of South Carolina, USCA combines the advantages of a smaller institution with the resources of a major university system.  Located in beautiful, historic Aiken, South Carolina, USCA is an institution of moderate size (2,500-5,000 students) that offers baccalaureate degrees in a number of disciplines, completion baccalaureate degrees at University of South Carolina regional campuses, and master's degrees in selected programs.

The USCA World Wide Web Home Page is: http://www.usca.edu
The USCA Office of Institutional Effectiveness World Wide Web Home Page is: http://ie.usca.edu

February 2005

## Suggested Citation
Duckett, R and Hosch, B. (2005). *AASCU Graduation Rate Outcomes Study - Campus Self Study: University of South Carolina Aiken.* Aiken, SC: Enrollment Planning Team, University of South Carolina Aiken. Retrieved [date], from http://ie.usca.edu/research/institutional/aascuGROselfstudy2005.pdf.

## Contact Information
Office of Institutional Effectiveness
108 Penland Administration Building
The University of South Carolina Aiken
471 University Parkway
Aiken, SC 29801

# *Executive Summary*

As a part of the 2005 American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) Graduation Rate Outcomes Study, this self study provides an examination of specific campus features and programs that contribute to the improvement of retention and graduation rates of full-time undergraduate students at the University of South Carolina Aiken (USCA). Six-year graduation rates over the past five years have been in the upper-30% to lower-40% range, while one-year retention rates have been in the mid- to upper-60% range. Most efforts designed to improve graduation rates at USCA have focused on increasing the retention of first-year students, since the bulk of student departures occur between the freshman and sophomore years.

This report provides an overview of the history, purpose, pervasiveness, organization, integration, impact, assessment, and continued plans of seven campus features designed to improve retention and graduation rates. These features are: *Strategic Planning*; a coordinating *Enrollment Planning Team*; ongoing modification and review of *Admission Policies*; entering student *Orientation*; sustained *Academic Advising*, with a focus on first year advising; and a *First Year Experience Program*.

Significant findings suggest that successful efforts to improve graduation and retention rates on campus are directly influenced by the following:

> ➢ **Intentionality**. The university has intentionally set learning and student success as an institutional priority and identifies retention and graduation rates as outcomes of these goals.

> ➢ **Resources and Organization**. The university has allocated resources to accomplish goals related to retention and has either reorganized or created administrative structures to implement programs.

> ➢ **Student Integration**. Most efforts to improve graduation and retention rates described in this report aim to effectively integrate students into the university community or improve their acculturation to an academic environment.

> ➢ **Cross-Functionality**. Most efforts to improve graduation and retention rates draw upon resources and personnel that include members from all areas of the institution.

While the past five to seven years provide evidence of organizational growth and alignment to improve retention and graduation rates, significant challenges remain. These challenges include: the *integration and coordination* of these initiatives, effectively *including more individuals* in retention efforts, and the *assessment* of effectiveness.

# *Contents*

# Context and Nature of the Self Study

## Organizational Context

**Institutional Profile**

| University of South Carolina Aiken | | | | Dr. Thomas L. Hallman, Chancellor | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| USCA is a member of the University of South Carolina System. It is located in a suburban setting. It is not designated as a minority serving institution, although about a quarter of enrolled students are African American. | | | | | |
| Barron's Admissions Category | Carnegie Classification | Undergraduates (Fall 2002) | All students (Fall 02) | Appropriations Tuition, & Fees (FY02) | Total Budget (FY 02) |
| Less Competitive | Baccalaureate General | 3,279 | 3,416 | $20,758,971 | $31,889,118 |

**Mission**

Founded in 1961, the University of South Carolina Aiken (USCA) is a comprehensive liberal arts institution committed to active learning through excellence in teaching, faculty and student scholarship, research, creative activities and service. In this stimulating academic community, USCA challenges students to acquire and develop the skills, knowledge, and values necessary for success in a dynamic global environment.

The university offers degrees in the arts and sciences and in the professional disciplines of business, education, and nursing. All courses of study are grounded in a liberal arts and sciences core curriculum. USCA also encourages interdisciplinary studies and collaborative endeavors.

Emphasizing small classes and individual attention, USCA provides students with opportunities to maximize individual achievement in both academic and co-curricular settings. The institution challenges students to think critically and creatively, to communicate effectively, to learn independently, and to acquire depth of knowledge in chosen fields. The university values honesty, integrity, initiative, hard work, accomplishments, responsible citizenship, respect for diversity, and cross-cultural understanding.

USC Aiken attracts students of varying ages and diverse cultural backgrounds who have demonstrated the potential to succeed in a challenging academic environment. In addition to serving the Savannah River area, USCA actively seeks student enrollment from all parts of South Carolina as well as from other states and countries.

As a senior public institution of the University of South Carolina, USCA combines the advantages of a smaller institution with the resources of a major university system. Located in beautiful, historic Aiken, South Carolina, USCA is an institution of moderate size (2,500-5,000 students) that offers baccalaureate degrees in a number of disciplines, completion baccalaureate degrees at University of South Carolina regional campuses, and master's degrees in selected programs.

**History**

Under authority granted by the South Carolina General Assembly, the Aiken County Commission for Higher Education entered into an agreement with the University of South Carolina in 1961 to establish a two-year, off-campus center of the University in Aiken County. The campus opened its doors in a local mansion in September 1961 with 139 students, three full-time faculty members, and a secretary. Initially, the Center offered only freshman- and sophomore-level courses.

In 1968 after enrollment crested 1,000 students, the Center underwent an institutional self-study and was accredited by the SACS to award associate degrees as a branch of the University of South Carolina and as a junior college. The first associate degrees were awarded in June 1968.

The campus moved to its present 144-acre site in 1972. All educational and student life programs were initially housed in one large, multi-purpose administration/classroom building. The Gregg-Graniteville Library was completed in 1975. In 1976, the Student Activities Center was completed to house a gymnasium, bookstore, and food service facilities. In September 1976, the Board of Trustees granted academic autonomy to the Aiken campus. The institution was fully accredited as a senior college by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and granted its first baccalaureate degrees in 1977. In 1977, a classroom-office building, later named the Humanities and Social Sciences Building was completed. An operations/maintenance building for auxiliary services was completed in 1978.

The 1980's marked a change in leadership as Mr. Bill Casper announced his retirement as Chancellor of the institution after 20 years of service. Dr. Robert E. Alexander was named Chancellor of the University of South Carolina Aiken in 1983. Building projects through the 1980s and 90s included an addition to the library, student housing, a fine arts center, three academic buildings (Science, Nursing, Business & Education), an education center for lifespan educational partnerships, a day care center.

Master's programs in education were first offered in 1994; a master's program in clinical psychology began in 1998; and a master's program in educational technology started in 2002. Partnerships through the University of South Carolina's Extended Graduate Campus allow for several hundred additional students to pursue other graduate programs.

In 2000, Dr. Alexander announced his retirement after 17 years of service. Dr. Thomas L. Hallman was named Chancellor of the University of South Carolina Aiken in 2001. In the past five years, the campus has added another building for student housing and dedicated the Roberto Hernandez Baseball Field and Stadium. The campus plans to break ground in 2005 on a Convocation Center.

## *Interactions with Constituencies*

| Individual | Position | Office/Unit | Division |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cook, Patti | Strategic Planning Cmte., Chair; Assoc Prof. Nursing | Strategic Planning Cmte./ Nursing | Chancellor / Academic Affairs |
| Davis, Marshall | Director | Advisement Services | Enrollment Services |
| Duckett, Randy | Vice Chancellor | Enrollment Services | Enrollment Services |
| Foote, Stephanie | Director | First Year Experience and Academic Support Services | Academic Affairs |
| Grice, Vivian | Registrar | Records | Enrollment Services |
| Groves, Trudy | EPT Prof. School Admission, Chair; Assoc Prof Nursing | Enrollment Planning Team / Nursing | Enrollment Services / Nursing |
| Hall, Tim | Associate Director | Athletics Department | Student Services |
| Hallman, Tom | Chancellor | Chancellor | Chancellor |
| Hendrix, Andrew | Director | Admissions Office | Enrollment Services |
| Holt, Jarod | Student Leader | Student Leader | Student Leader |
| Hosch, Braden | Director | Institutional Effectiveness | Academic Affairs |
| Keeling, Sarah | Academic Advisor (First-Year Advising) | Advisement Office | Enrollment Services |
| Keltch, Nick | Student Leader | Student Leader | Student Leader |
| Lyle, Lisa | Director | Housing and Residence Life | Student Services |
| Martin, Deidre | Vice Chancellor; EPT Communication Chair | External Affairs | External Affairs / Enrollment Services |
| Ozment, Suzanne | Executive Vice Chancellor | Academic Affairs | Academic Affairs |
| Samaha, Ahmed | Director | Student Activities | Student Affairs |
| Shumpert, Glenn | Director | Financial Aid | Enrollment Services |
| Terry, Katya | Director; EPT Survey & Strategic Planning Chair | International Programs | Academic Affairs / Enrollment Services |
| Volforte, Jennie | Associate Director | Housing and Residence Life | Student Services |
| Williams, Stacie | Director | Multicultural Affairs | Student Services |

## *Documents, Materials, and Web Pages Reviewed*

| Document | Source or Location |
|---|---|
| *Academic Tracking Report 1: First-Year Student Retention Fall 2002 to Spring 2003* | http://ie.usca.edu/research/ATReports/AT_Report1.pdf |
| *Academic Tracking Report 2: Academic Success of Transfer Students from Aiken Technical College Fall 2003* | http://ie.usca.edu/research/ATReports/AT_Report2.pdf |
| *Academic Tracking Report 3: First-Year Student Retention Fall 2002 to Fall 2003* | http://ie.usca.edu/research/ATReports/AT_Report3.pdf |
| *Academic Tracking Report 4: Fall 2004 Undergraduate Academic Performance by Place of Residence* | http://ie.usca.edu/research/ATReports/AT_Report4.pdf |
| Advising Web Pages | http://www.usca.edu/advisement/ |
| *Charting a Course for Excellence: Institutional Effectiveness Report 2004* | http://ie.usca.edu/assessment/IEReports/IEReport2004.pdf |
| Consultant's Recommendations – Dr. Nancy King (Kennesaw State University) March, 2004 | Consultant Report in Academic Affairs Office |
| Enrollment Planning Team minutes | Internal committee documents |
| Enrollment Planning Team Web Site | http://www.usca.edu/ESIP/ept/ |
| Enrollment Services minutes | Internal division documents |
| Evolution of the Undergraduate Admission Policies for Freshmen | Admissions Office Report to EPT |
| Fact Book (Fall 2002) | http://ie.usca.edu/facts |
| First Year Advising Program Web Page | http://www.usca.edu/advisement/FirstYear.htm |
| High School Class Rank as a Predictor of Academic Success | Report to the Freshman Admissions Action Team of the Enrollment Planning Team (IE Office) |
| IPEDS Peer Analysis System | http://nces.ed.gov/ipedspas/ |
| IPEDS Peer Executive Tool | http://nces.ed.gov/ipedspas/Expt/ |
| NSSE Results for USCA (2004) | http://ie.usca.edu/research/surveys/nsse/2004/index.htm |
| Orientation Committee minutes | Internal committee documents |
| Retention and Graduation Rates | http://ie.usca.edu/facts/ret_info/index.htm |
| *State Higher Education Finance FY 2003* | http://www.sheeo.org/finance/shef.pdf |
| Strategic Plan | http://www.usca.edu/strategicplan |
| USCA Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Survey Results and Analysis (2003) | http://ie.usca.edu/research/surveys/CIRP/cirp2003.pdf |

# Strategic Planning

## *Overview*

### History

Following the inauguration of Chancellor Hallman in September 2001, USCA set out to develop a strategic plan to clarify the USCA's programs, practices, and values that would project the university's visions for the future. A Strategic Planning Steering Committee (SPSC) composed of faculty, staff, and students participated in a workshop conducted by a strategic planning consultant through the spring of 2002. Following the workshop, the SPSC immediately began the strategic planning process, and having engaged in extensive discussion and analysis, the SPSC presented a draft report to Chancellor Hallman that included USCA's institutional values, mission, and vision statements; eleven broad strategic goals; and objectives for achieving those goals.

During Fall 2002, Chancellor Hallman solicited feedback in writing and meetings with USC Aiken faculty, staff, students, and from Aiken community members regarding the report and draft strategic plan. The SPSC met then with Chancellor Hallman to review all comments received on the planning report and to make revisions as deemed necessary. Once revisions were complete, the Chancellor and SPSC initiated the action planning phase of the project.

In January 2003, twelve action teams began the task of devising specific strategies to meet strategic goals and objectives. In April 2003, team leaders presented these strategies to the Chancellor and SPSC, who discussed and revised the strategies during April and May. In August of 2003, the Chancellor and senior administrators prioritized and assigned responsibility for carrying out those strategies that remained. The prioritization was reviewed by the SPSC in early fall 2003, and implementation continued. The process and results of strategic planning at USC Aiken are described in greater detail below.

In subsequent academic years, the University Strategic Planning Committee has reviewed progress on each item of the plan and reported on the extent to which strategies have been implemented and objectives have been accomplished. The Committee is also charged with communicating this progress back to the faculty, students, staff, and community at large.

### Purpose

Many of the elements that contribute to improving graduation and retention rates that are catalogued elsewhere in this self study follow directly from objectives and strategies in the Strategic Plan. In many ways, the planning process and the monitoring of its success provide the guiding and unifying principles behind many of these initiatives, and the impact of this institutional planning and implementation process are a contributing factor to the leadership, organization, and efficacy of specific components. Goal 6 of the plan is directly focused on improving retention rates: "Goal Six: Develop and implement a strategic enrollment plan to attract and retain an increasingly diverse and qualified student body." A variety of related strategies follow this goal.

**Pervasiveness**

Meetings are held one a month in the Fall and then every two weeks in the Spring. Committee work typically consists of review of a written and oral presentation by a senior administrator about an area of responsibility in the Strategic Plan and progress made. In Fall 2004, the Committee spent time reviewing some findings from Patrick Terenzini, *How College Affects Students*, vol. 2 (2005) as well as results from the Spring 2004 administration of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE).

**Organization**

Committee membership consists of the Chancellor, the nine members of the Chancellor's senior staff (Monday Group), eleven faculty members across the three schools and two colleges, four staff members, and two current students.

**Integration**

The role of the Strategic Planning Committee in many ways is to integrate various efforts across campus and link initiatives and programs back to deliberately crafted strategies. In this respect, the very function of the Committee is integration. The Strategic Plan itself has provided a useful focus for a variety of features mentioned in this self study that are designed to improve retention and graduation rates.

**Impact**

The Strategic Plan has already had an effect in aligning efforts to coordinate and consolidate efforts to improve graduation rates. It has provided the impetus and justification behind many of the initiatives reported in this self-study. The excerpt below from the Plan is illustrative of the detailed direction that has guided some of the recent retention efforts on campus:

- Objective 2.a. Develop a comprehensive and centrally coordinated First Year program aimed at creating a nurturing and stimulating introduction to the university.
  - *Completed* ○ Strategy 2.a.1: (Student Life/Athletic Programs Action Team Report) Appoint or hire a full-time (or at least part-time) First Year Program Director and provide appropriate budget for staffing, developing, assessing and coordinating all components of the program.
  - *In Progress* ○ Strategy 2.a.2. (Academic Programs Action Team Report) Review and implement as appropriate the missions and goals of the First Year Program established by the First Year Committee in 2000.
  - *In Progress* ○ Strategy 2.a.3: (Student Life/Athletic Programs Action Team Report) Strengthen and expand the ASUP program.
  - *In Progress* ○ Strategy 2.a.3.a. Make ASUP 101 mandatory for all freshmen.
  - ○ Strategy 2.a.3.b. Improve teacher training by encouraging attendance at off-campus workshops (for example, University 101) and developing required workshops on campus.
  - *In Progress* ○ Strategy 2.a.3.c. Standardize ASUP 101 curriculum
  - *In Progress* ○ Strategy 2.a.3.d. (Academic Programs Action Team Report) Expand ASUP 101 courses to a full semester to cover topics that will help students in their transition to college and their overall development
  - ○ Strategy 2.a.3.e. Use peer mentors as assistants in ASUP courses.
  - ○ Strategy 2.a.3.f. Correlate and extend orientation into ASUP courses.

## Assessment

While progress and accomplishments for individual strategies and overarching objectives are monitored and assessed by the Strategic Planning Committee, a mechanism that can easily summarize or illustrate progress is not readily available. Reports of progress on objectives and strategies are published on the USCA web site.

## Continued Development

Beyond the unique obstacles that may arise in implementation of specific strategies, continuing challenges for the Strategic Planning process lie in the area of communication. In addition to maintaining a web site about progress on the strategic plan, the Committee has planned three brown bag lunches about specific areas. Material has also been gathered for a newsletter to faculty and staff for publication later in Spring 2005.

# Enrollment Planning Team (EPT)

## *Overview*

### History
A reorganization of the University took place in 1995 which resulted in the creation of the Division of Enrollment Services and Institutional Planning. A year prior to that, in 1994, an Enrollment Planning Group was established to address enrollment issues with campus wide participation. The Group was chaired by the soon-to-be senior administrator of the newly created division of Enrollment Services. This team's membership included 13 individuals: 7 from within the division, 3 faculty, 2 additional senior staff members, and 1 student. By the Year 2000, the leadership in the group had changed—the group had grown to a team of 16, and received "enrollment" related reports from administrative offices. In an effort to distribute the work load and have the group take more ownership in the process, the group was divided into 2 teams, one to report on recruitment initiatives and the other to report on retention issues. The Enrollment Group became a report gathering and information sharing body, rather than an Action Group. Due to a leadership change within the division, the Group did not meet after the Spring of 2000.

In the process of developing a Strategic Plan for the campus (2002), the University community developed and endorsed statements of values and vision which have been critical in shaping the conversations regarding enrollment issues of the campus. One of the major goals of the Strategic Plan focused on Enrollment Planning and called for the re-establishment of an Enrollment Planning Team (EPT). This group became organized and met for the first time in the Fall of 2003. The remainder of that year was used as an educational period for the group, and a time to identify issues which needed to be addressed. Input was solicited, was taken from the strategic plan, and involved all populations and levels of the campus.

### Purpose
EPT is the single most important component of our campus wide retention efforts because it is a cross-divisional group of administrators and faculty assembled to implement and coordinate retention efforts identified in the Strategic Plan. The individuals involved in the process and other interested individuals across the campus are aware of the issues identified by the EPT, and use the EPT as a vehicle to be more effective within their plans and activities.

### Integration
In the Spring of 2004, seven campus concerns were identified as priority issues for the EPT, and resulted in the formation of seven Action Teams. These Action Teams include not only 22 EPT members, but 16 additional members of the campus (faculty and staff) who have volunteered to serve and have an interest in these areas. The teams identified are: Communication, Freshmen Admission Requirements, At-Risk Students, Survey/Strategic Plan Implementation, Minority Student Success, Financial Aid/Scholarship, and Academic Program/Major Admissions. Each team has been given specific charges and asked to make progress reports at monthly meetings.

**Organization**

EPT includes faculty, staff, and students; it includes individuals on campus who have some of the most directly identifiable impacts on retention and graduation rates. Several individuals on the faculty and staff who are not members of the full EPT participate in focused activities in Action Teams.

*Enrollment Planning Team Members:*

- Gwen Ashley, Director, Finance Office
- Dr. Ed Callen, Professor of Psychology and Graduate Advisory Committee
- Marshall Davis, Director, Academic Advisement
- Randy Duckett, Associate Chancellor for Enrollment Services, Chair
- Corey Feraldi, Director, Career Services
- Stephanie Foote, Director, Academic Support & First Year Experience
- Vivian Grice, Registrar
- Dr. Trudy Groves, Professor, School of Nursing
- Andrew Hendrix, Director, Office of Admissions
- Dr. Braden Hosch, Director, Office of Institutional Effectiveness, Vice Chair
- Nick Kelch, Undergraduate Student
- Judy Ledford, Director, Alumni Relations
- Lisa Lyle, Director, Housing & Residential Life
- Dr. Val Lumans, Professor and Chair, History, Political Science & Philosophy
- Dr. Tom Mack, Professor and Chair, English
- Dr. Deidre Martin, Associate Chancellor for University Advancement
- Ahmed Samaha, Director, Office of Student Activities/Orientation
- Glenn Shumpert, Director, Office of Student Financial Aid
- Katya Terry, Director, Office of International Programs
- Randy Warrick, Director, Athletics
- Stacie Williams, Director, Office of Multicultural Affairs
- Dr. Ann Willbrand, Associate Professor, Chemistry & Physics

The Vice Chancellor of Enrollment Services serves as the chair of the group, and the Director of Institutional Effectiveness as the Vice Chair. The Chair and Vice Chair meet weekly to help manage activities and formulate action plans.

The following Action Teams were formed in 2004. The issues assigned to each team are listed.

*Communication Team*
- Will continuously provide student enrollment information to the campus (weekly, monthly emails, etc.)
- Will communicate to the campus regarding monthly EPT meetings
- Will schedule a campus-wide enrollment update meeting each semester
- Will make recommendations as to how we can better communicate positive retention information to our current students

*Freshmen Admission Requirement Team*
- Will review academic performance of currently enrolled students and determine if admission standards are appropriate (make recommendations to EPT and SS&P)

- Will review the current freshman predicted GPA formula and communicate findings and recommendations to EPT
- Will make recommendations to EPT regarding a possible "provisional admissions" program for freshmen
- Will make recommendations as to what additional data or information is needed

*At Risk/Probationary/Suspension Team*
- Will work independently and with other campus groups in identifying "At Risk" students
- Will make recommendations regarding intervention programs/guidelines for each group of students identified as "At Risk." (Early warning: Intrusive Advisors; Mandatory ASUP; Restricted # of hours and courses, etc)

*Survey and Strategic Plan Implementation Team*
- Will review the USCA Strategic Plan for Enrollment issues and present them to EPT for consideration and prioritization
- Will determine which internal USCA surveys should be reviewed for enrollment implications (CIRP, Satisfaction Surveys, Outcome Surveys)
- Will present these surveys to the EPT for discussion

*Minority Students Success Team*
- Will establish, maintain and annually present a profile of minority students at USCA (to include retention and graduation rates)
- Will make recommendations to EPT regarding programs or policies which will enhance the recruitment and retention of minority students
- Will document and present information sessions regarding minority students recruitment and retention initiatives
- Will make recommendations as to what additional data or information is needed (key data indicators)

*Financial Aid/Scholarship Strategy Team*
- Will inform EPT of the "current" Financial Aid/Scholarship process, and provide annual updates
- Will review current scholarship process and make recommendations for an updated and comprehensive scholarship strategy for the campus

*Program/Major Admission Team*
- Will determine all academic programs which have admission requirements beyond those of the University
- Will determine the implications of these requirements
    - Is it realistic for a student admitted with a freshman PGPA of 2.0 to obtain the GPA required to these program (Should they be discouraged?)
    - When and how do we communicate these differences to students
    - When and how do we tract and implement an Early Warning process for these students
    - Who advises and who should advise these students
    - Are low predicting students occupying class space of more qualified students
    - Should we limit the # of students (Nursing)

## Impact
While the past three semesters have focused primarily on organizational issues and internal and external assessment of practices and needs, some impact has already been felt. For example, members of EPT contributed substantially to the development of new admission requirements of a minimum combined SAT score of 800 for students entering in 2005.

## Assessment

Formal assessment processes are not yet in place for EPT. The assessment plan, however, calls for the development of an online set of key indicators for overall success. As a whole this group of indicators is called ENROLLSTAT (for "Enrollment Statistics"). Each Action Team has been charged with developing a template of data to be collected regularly and monitored by the campus. In addition, EPT as a whole maintains a set of campus-wide indicators, the most important of which are one-year retention rates and six-year graduation rates (see below). These figures are scrutinized every year and compared to an identified peer group participating in the Consortium for the Study of Retention Data Exchange. Retention and graduation rates are also monitored by race and by gender (available on the Office of Institutional Effectiveness web site).

*Example High Level Items from ENROLLSTAT*

**Six-Year Graduation Rate**

| Cohort Year | N | Degree from USCA | Degree from USC System | CSRDE Peers |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| 1993 | 300 | 38.3% | 44.6% | |
| 1994 | 321 | 34.3% | 42.1% | |
| 1995 | 347 | 38.9% | 43.8% | 39.2% |
| 1996 | 384 | 34.1% | 39.3% | 39.5% |
| 1997 | 305 | 43.3% | 51.5% | 41.4% |
| 1998 | 403 | 40.4% | 49.1% | |
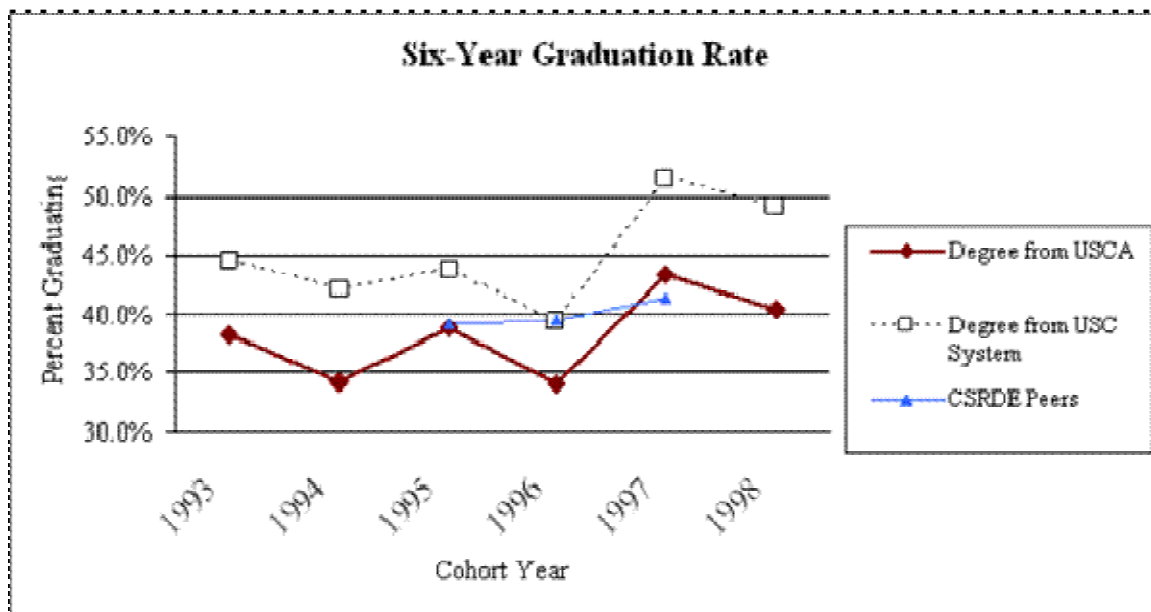
**One-Year Retention Rate**

| Cohort Year | N | Remaining at USCA | Remaining in USC System | Working Peer Group (CSRDE) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1993 | 300 | 67.3% | 70.3% | |
| 1994 | 321 | 63.2% | 68.5% | |
| 1995 | 347 | 72.3% | 74.4% | 70.0% |
| 1996 | 384 | 64.6% | 67.7% | 69.1% |
| 1997 | 305 | 71.8% | 77.4% | 70.9% |
| 1998 | 403 | 72.0% | 75.3% | 72.2% |
| 1999 | 393 | 69.2% | 73.5% | 72.5% |
| 2000 | 473 | 68.3% | 72.3% | 72.3% |
| 2001 | 417 | 70.3% | 75.5% | 73.9% |
| 2002 | 471 | 68.2% | 72.2% | 74.2% |
| 2003 | 537 | 64.4% | 70.2% | |



Retention of First-Year Students to the Second Year
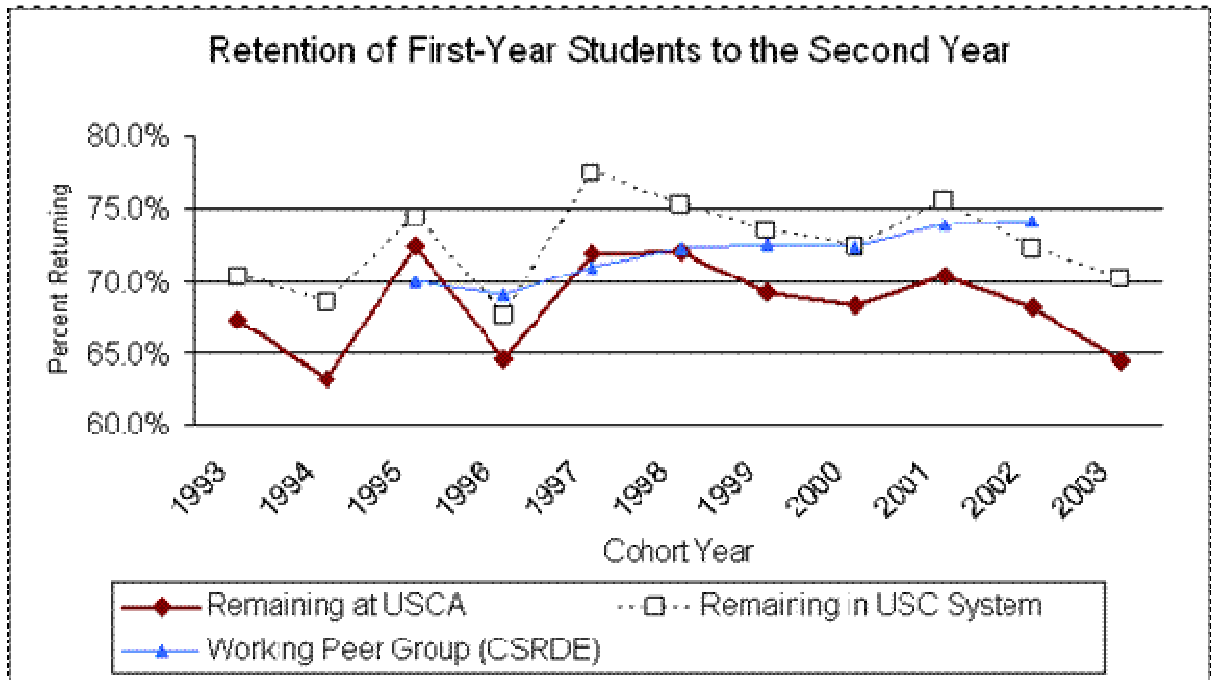
## *Continued Development*

Action teams are in various stages of planning or implementation of other initiatives for Fall 2005, including additional academic support, revision of probation/suspension policies, a re-envisioning of provisional admission status, campus presentations about minority success, a series of newspaper articles for communication, and the development of additional assessment methods.

# Admissions Policies and Requirements

## *Overview*

### History

| Date | Admissions Requirement or Event |
|---|---|
| 1961-1975 | Open admissions |
| 1975-1987 | Minimum SAT scores: 350 verbal, 350 math (regular admission); 300 verbal, 300 math (provisional admission) |
| | No HS requirements |
| 1988-1995 | Minimum SAT scores: 350 verbal, 350 math |
| | HS requirements: completion of 16 college preparatory courses; provisional admission lacking 1-4 courses |
| 1995-1996 | Adoption of a predicted (PGPA) formula based on HS GPA in core classes (weighted 2/3) and SAT scores (weighted 1/3); no minimum SAT again until 2005. |
| | Minimum PGPA: 1.8 (regular), 1.40-1.79 (provisional) |
| | HS requirements: completion of 16 college preparatory courses; provisional admission lacking 1-2 courses |
| 1996-1998 | Minimum PGPA: 2.0 (regular), 1.40-1.99 (provisional) |
| | HS requirements: completion of 16 college preparatory courses; provisional admission lacking 1 course |
| 1997-1998 | State legislature mandates 4-year institutions to remove remedial courses from curriculum; reduces size of FT FY cohort by about 25% as students needing remediation take 3-6 credits at Aiken Technical College (retention and graduation rates improve for this cohort). |
| 1998-1999 | Minimum PGPA: 2.0 (regular), 1.80-1.99 (provisional) |
| | HS requirements: completion of 16 college preparatory courses; provisional admission lacking 1 course (except English) |
| 1999-2001 | Minimum PGPA: 2.0 (regular), no admission below 2.0 GPA |
| | HS requirements: completion of 16 college preparatory courses; provisional admission lacking 1 course (except English or math) |
| 2001-2003 | Minimum PGPA: 2.0 (regular), no admission below 2.0 GPA |
| | HS requirements: completion of 21 college preparatory courses; provisional admission lacking up to 2 courses (except English or math) |
| 2003-2004 | Minimum PGPA: 2.0 (regular), no admission below 2.0 GPA |
| | HS requirements: completion of 21 college preparatory courses; provisional admission lacking 1 course (except English or math) |
| 2005- | Minimum combined SAT score: 800 |
| | Minimum PGPA: 2.0 (regular), no admission below 2.0 GPA |
| | HS requirements: completion of 21 college preparatory courses; provisional admission lacking 1 course (except English or math) |

### Purpose

Admissions policies at USCA are designed to attract and admit students to the university who will be successful students and to provide access to higher education to qualified students from the local area. There is broad recognition that student characteristics upon entry contribute significantly to retention and graduation rates.

**Pervasiveness**

All students are affected by the admissions process, since it is the gateway into the university. However, only students entering directly from high school are subject to the admissions requirements listed above, and there is recognition that transfer students entering the institution may require additional support services that could be identified by means of academic inputs.

The Scholastic Standing and Petitions Committee (SS&P), a standing faculty committee, reviews exceptions to admissions policies on an individual basis and also reviews appeals to probation and suspension. Formal recommendations for changes to the admissions policies and requirements typically originate in this committee and are forwarded to the full Faculty Assembly for approval.

One of the seven action teams in the Enrollment Planning Team (EPT) is responsible for the consideration of freshman admissions (see Enrollment Planning Team above).

**Organization**

As one of the key areas of the Enrollment Services Division, the Admissions Office recruits and admits students to the university following the policies determined by the faculty and administration. The Director of Admissions reports to the Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Services. The following permanent positions are housed in the office:

> Two Assistant Directors of Admissions
> Two Admissions Counselors
> Two Admissions Specialists
> One Coordinator for Graduate Studies and Residency Officer
> One Transfer Credit Analyst
> Several Student Workers

**Integration**

The analysis, review, and revision of admissions policies is a cross-institutional activity involving the Office of Institutional Effectiveness, Enrollment Services, Academic Affairs, the Admissions Office, the Scholastic Standing and Petitions faculty committee, and the Enrollment Planning Team's Freshman Admissions Action Team. Senior administrators also participate in this process. Changes to admissions policy are approved by the full Faculty Assembly.

**Impact**

The impact of admissions policies has been wide ranging in terms of selecting students who have a good chance of success at the university. For instance, the most recent change of instituting a minimum combined SAT of 800 was a data-driven decision that arose from a broader retention study (*Academic Tracking Report #3*) that demonstrated low levels of success among students who were admitted with SAT scores below 800, regardless of high school record. The one year retention of students with SAT scores below 800 was 54.2% with a two semester GPA of 1.81. After an additional semester,

half of the remaining students still had a GPA below 2.0, placing them at high risk to drop out and have difficulty resuming academic careers at any institution without academic forgiveness. While this policy goes into full implementation in 2005, it is fully expected that it will directly affect retention and graduation rates, and these factors were cited as part of the justification for making this change.

## *Assessment*

Impact of each admissions policy change has not been monitored or assessed in a systematic fashion. Since 2003-04, the Office of Institutional Effectiveness has provided more focused studies of retention rates that have included examination of academic inputs that have led to recent revisions of admission requirements (e.g. a minimum SAT requirement) and future plans to examine provisional admission status.

In this respect, the effectiveness of admissions policies is primarily measured by student success as gauged by grade point average and retention/graduation rates. By identifying groups of students with similar characteristics upon admission who do not remain at the university or who perform poorly (research indicates these are strongly correlated factors), admissions policies will continue to be assessed and modified. This process is ongoing as the university tries to optimize admissions policies to maximize student success and meet strategic goals to provide access to higher education and to grow at a moderate pace.

One significant factor that emerged from broader examination of graduation and retention rates was the identification of an anomalously high retention rate for the 1997 cohort (and a concomitant high 6-year graduation rate for this group) that parallels the removal of remedial courses from the curriculum and the effects it had on restructuring the statistical profile of the cohort.

## *Continued Development*

A major factor for review in the 2004-05 academic year is the designation of provisional admission status, both in terms of what the threshold for provisional admission is and how provisional students are served by and integrated into the university. Data indicate that entering students who were in the bottom 40% of their high schools are at high risk to perform poorly in the first year at USCA (1.74 two-semester GPA and a one-semester retention rate 20% lower than their peers). The Freshman Admission Action Team of EPT is reviewing data and formulating a proposal that would still allow these students to attend the university but would provide stipulations and support to these students and encourage their success.

# New Student Orientation

## *Overview*

### History

For the past 30 years, USCA has offered some type of freshman orientation for new students. However, in 2000-01, a new mission statement and goals were established which has shaped the orientation programs that we offer today.

### Purpose

*Mission Statement*

The New Student Orientation Program strives to provide new students with the information necessary for them to be successful at USCA, to assist them in the transition from their previous educational experiences to the expectations for students at USCA, to provide a foundation for their assimilation into the USCA culture, and to affirm their decision to attend USCA.

*Goals*

1. Identify and furnish information about relevant support services and programs.
2. Provide information about academic policies, procedures, requirements, and programs
3. Guide students in their transition to the college experience with an emphasis on expectations for and responsibilities of students in a collegiate setting.
4. Provide students with a clear understanding of the overall purpose of higher education and mission of the university.
5. Initiate the processes of self-explorations and learning with an emphasis on the importance of the holistic development of an individual.
6. Provide intentional opportunities for new students to interact with faculty, staff, and students in order to foster a sense of community.
7. Create an atmosphere in which students feel affirmed in their decision to attend the university.
8. Offer orientation programs that are appropriate for specific target populations.

With these goals in mind, Orientation programs have been designed and operationalized which assist in the assimilation of the student into the University environment in a more intentional manner, which we believe leads to higher retention rates.

### Organization

While there is not an office designated as the "Orientation Office," the responsibilities of Orientation are assigned to the Vice Chancellor for Student Life and Services. She has designated her administrative assistant and the Director of Student Activities as the primary staff persons who perform the majority of the administrative and communication issues. However the planning, , and assessment of the Orientation process is a campus-

wide effort and is accomplished thorough the efforts of the Orientation Planning Committee.

This Committee is composed of:
- Vice Chancellor for Student Life and Services
- Director of Student Activities
- Administrative Assistant to the VC of SL&S
- Staff members from the Offices of Finance, Career Services, Academic Advisement, and University Housing
- Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Services
- Students (2)
- Faculty members (3)

Orientation sessions are offered in both July and August. Programs are specifically targeted to discrete populations. All programs include orientation, advisement, and registration.
- Freshman           (2 ½ day program)
- Transfer/Readmit    (1 day program)
- Parents program     (1/2 day program)

**Integration**
Efforts to integrate orientation with other activities that promote graduation and retention rates have been limited. Orientation is designed to introduce students to their academic advisors. There has been some discussion of including more academic elements in Orientation by offering ASUP 101 during a summer session in which Orientation would also take place. Other courses (such as English, math, and history) have also been identified as possible pieces of Orientation as part of a larger Bridge Program, but these ideas have not developed impetus for implementation.

The Orientation itself does integrate all areas of campus in its delivery. Individuals involved in the process include the entire campus, but more specifically:
- Committee members: who not only plan, but actively participate in other roles throughout the program.
- Pacesetters: 32 students nominated, interviewed and chosen to serve as peer leaders throughout the 2 ½ day program. Each group of about 15 students has 2 Pacesetters to lead them through the process. (In addition each group of 15 students has a staff and a faculty facilitator assigned to their group.)
- Staff Facilitators: (Staff members who spend 2 days with the students in their small orientation groups, answering questions and assisting the Pacesetters (student leaders) when needed.
- Faculty Facilitators: (Department Chairs, School Heads who make presentations about their academic programs to students who have declared that area as their major.)
- Senior Administrators, Staff, Faculty who make additional presentations or program events throughout the week.

This Program is essential in communicating to the students and exposing parents to the process, expectations, requirements, and opportunities of higher education.

## *Assessment*

Assessment of Orientation activities has primarily revolved around satisfaction with programming and immediate outcomes (understanding of academic requirements, etc.). These data are collected by means of several surveys administered throughout the two and a half day Orientation. The assessment of the extent to which participation in Orientation affects retention and graduation rates has not been assessed, in part because of the difficulty of isolating particular factors and controlling for other influences between entry and exit points.

Orientation is used, however, to administer the CIRP Survey of Freshmen (Higher Education Research Institute). Because about an hour of structured time is set aside in the Orientation process, USCA is able to collect CIRP data from 85-90% of the entering freshman class. Future assessment plans include use of these data to identify some non-academic predictors of persistence.

## *Continued Development*

There are no plans to make significant alterations to Orientation for the 2005-06 Academic Year.

# Advising and First Year Advising

## *Overview*

**History**

Academic Advisement at USC Aiken has a long history of being a campus-wide process. It involves faculty from every discipline, and every student is required to be advised prior to registration.

In 1989 the office of Academic Advisement reported to the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and employed 3 full time individuals, (a Director, Assistant Director and Administrative Assistant.) During that year, the Director left that position and the office became a 2 person office for the next 14 years. In 1995 the Division of Enrollment Services was established and the Office of Academic Advisement became a member of that group. The Director of Advisement and the administrative assistant were responsible for coordinating all academic advisement activities, including the recruitment and training of faculty advisors. The formation and work of the 1998 First Year Committee was very important to this office. One of the major recommendations of this First Year Committee was the need for a comprehensive First Year Advisement process for students. In Fall 2001, after faculty assembly approval for this initiative, a subcommittee composed of two senior and one junior faculty members, and the Director of Academic Advisement recruited, trained, and implemented a first year advisement program. It also marked the first time that the campus utilized professional staff members as academic advisors. Another campus wide planning effort (the Strategic Plan of 2002) gave strong support for the enhancement of this area and recommended the hiring of a freshmen year advisor. This was accomplished with the hiring of a professional academic advisor dedicated to first year advising in the Fall of 2003.

**Purpose**

*Advisement Office*

The mission of the Office of Advisement Services and academic advisement is to assist students in the development of meaningful educational plans compatible with their life goals. Academic advisement is a continuous process of clarification and evaluation of these goals. The mission of the Office of Advisement Services is accomplished through a collaborative effort of the student and the advisor. Recognizing that the ultimate responsibility of making decisions about life goals and educational plans rests with the individual student, the office personnel and advisor assist by helping to identify and assess alternatives and consequences of decisions. Together, the office personnel and the advisor provide guidance to the student in developing and completing an acceptable program of study leading to graduation.

*First Year Advising*

The purpose of creating the First Year Advisement Program and introducing First Year Advisors was to:
- Create an atmosphere wherein the student feels comfortable asking questions and sharing information.

- Help the student have a clear understanding of higher education and the educational goals of USC Aiken, and reaffirm the decision to pursue higher education.
- Provide the student with needed information on academic policies, procedures, requirements, and programs.
- Aid the student in decision-making and help the student become an effective and confident decision-maker.
- Serve as a resource person by connecting the student with relevant support services and programs.

*Gateway Advising Program*
The Gateway Program is a first semester early intervention program for residential students with low GPAs. These students are at high risk to drop out of college. The program's purpose is to

- Identify at-risk residential students, and provide them with a more "intrusive" First Year Advisement Experience.
- Encourage these students to enroll in ASUP 101
- Coordinate activities with Minority Achievement Program; Residential Life, Judicial Affairs, the Athletic Department and other units as appropriate.
- Meet with each other at least once a semester to discuss and evaluate the program, and discuss individual student issues

**Pervasiveness**
All degree-seeking students have an advisor. Fully 97% of students beyond their first year have an advisor who is a faculty member, and all students are required to be advised before registration each semester. Special advisors have been designated for First Year Students, so that each fall, 600 freshmen are assigned to 60 First Year Advisors, representing all academic disciplines and various staff offices. Fifty students living on-campus who were determined to be academically at-risk (measured by predicted GPA) were selected to participate in the new Gateway Program which provides them with high contact or "intrusive" advising.

**Organization**

*First Year Advising*
The first 2 ½ years of its existence (2001-2003), the first-year program was run by a subcommittee of an ad hoc University committee composed of three faculty and one staff person. The 2003 hiring of a fulltime staff member resulted in this person becoming the responsible party for this program.
This position is responsible for:
- Recruitment of qualified First Year Advisors
- Initial and continuous training of First Year Advisors
- Assignment of advisees to First Year Advisors
- Organization, communication and assessment of the First Year Advisor Program
- Coordination of early warning process for freshmen

- Development and implementation of an advisement program for "At-Risk students" (Gateway program)

*Gateway Advising*
This pilot program in Fall 2004 included:
- Five specially trained First Year Advisors
- No more than 11 "At-risk" students per Gateway advisor
- Minimum of six meetings with advisor during first semester
  1. Initial Registration
  2. August 23rd  (First Day jitters/time management/preparing for class)
  3. September 6th (Settling In)
  4. October 4th  (Halfway there)
  5. October 25th (Priority Registration Prep)
  6. November 29th (Finish up)
  (Each session included an assessment of how the student is doing, providing guidance as to where the student should be at that time, and making appropriate referrals to services or individuals on campus.)

**Integration**
With the utilization of faculty and staff throughout the campus, each department is aware and supportive of this program. More meetings, training and debriefing sessions now take place due to the coordination by a full-time person rather than a faculty subcommittee, resulting in a much more effective advisement process for freshmen. An Early Warning Process also utilizes First Year Advisors who are contacted if the Academic Advisement Office receives an Academic Progress report from a faculty person teaching a freshman. In addition to the First Year Advisor, the Advisement Center notifies the Director of University Housing if the student resides on campus. Both the Academic Advisor and Resident Life staff contact the student for a follow up conversation or action.

## *Assessment*

Satisfaction surveys administered to current students and recent alumni have indicated an extraordinarily high level of student satisfaction with the advising process between 1998 and 2004, with no statistically significant variation in the results. Survey results specific to faculty advisors are included in regular performance review discussions with Department Chairs and School Heads; results from these surveys also are included in the tenure and promotion process. The results regarding staff advisors are monitored by the Director of Academic Advisement.

| Percentage of Students/Alumni Responding "Satisfied" or "Very Satisfied" on Advising Surveys | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Question | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 |
| 1) Overall satisfaction with advising[a] | -- | -- | -- | 98.6 | 98.3 | 99.2 | 99.2 | 95.4 | 95.6 | 96.5 |
| 2) Satisfaction with advisement by faculty in chosen major | 79.6 | 73.7 | 85.0 | -- | -- | -- | 91.4[b] | -- | 91.5[b] | -- |
| 3) Availability of academic advisor[c] | -- | -- | -- | 97.4 | 98.2 | 96.2 | 97.6 | 98.4 | 98.4 | 98.6 |
| 4) Overall satisfaction with the Office of Advisement Svcs. | N/A | 89.1 | 91.0 | 86.7 | 91.9 | 88.3 | 87.9 | 86.3 | 90.7 | -- |
| (a) Question added to 1998 Advising Survey.
(b) Question dropped from Annual Student Survey and placed on the biannual Alumni Survey in 2001 and 2003.
(c) Reported as a performance funding indicator. | | | | | | | | | | |

Even with relatively high response rates (50-60% for current students, 20-25% for alumni), these data belie institutional retention and graduation rates, which have identified first-year retention (ranging between 68% and 77% within the USC system over the past eight years) as a priority area for improvement in institutional performance and in advising in particular. This discrepancy has prompted two changes in the future assessment plan. First, identification of outcomes goals for the advising process will be collectively formulated in 2004-05 to better reflect professional guidelines and practices endorsed by the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA). Second, while data collection instruments will continue to monitor student satisfaction with advising and advisor availability, more outcomes-oriented measures will be applied to collect data on developmental outcomes, career planning, and other pertinent information as collected by instruments such as the nationally benchmarked Academic Advising Inventory. Finally, a study of faculty advising load revealed some wide disparities in the distribution of advisees among faculty members; this issue is under review by Academic Council to identify unit-specific solutions to distribute advising load more evenly.

A preliminary analysis of assessment findings about advisement at USCA led to the creation of a First-Year Advising Program in 2001. Assessment of the initial years of the program further prompted the subsequent hire of an additional staff member in the Advising Office for the 2003-04 academic year. This individual's primary responsibility is to coordinate first year advising initiatives and monitor their success. A specially targeted mission and goals have been developed for first-year advising.

Initial assessment of the Gateway Program following Fall 2004 revealed that participants were spending only about 10-12 hours each week studying. While this amount of time appears to be an institutional norm (and is a figure that we seek to improve for all groups), students in this at-risk population will be special targets in the future to increase time spent on academic work.

# First Year Experience (FYE)

## Overview

**History**

USCA has been developing aspects of the First Year Experience since at least 1996 through relatively disparate programs such as New Student Orientation, advising, academic support, scheduling, and core experiences. In Spring 2005, a Director of the First Year Experience and Academic Support was hired to unify these elements. The evolution of this program over the past nine years includes the following highlights:

 1996 Implementations of voluntary 1-credit Academic Skills Development Course (ASUP 101)

 1998 Formation of First Year Committee – began work on purpose and goals.

 1999 Assessment of institutional environment (focus groups) and research on various institutional models for FYE

 2000 Approval of initial plan and continuing development of goals.

 2005 Director of FYE and Academic Support begins in new position.

**Purpose**

A specific purpose for the FYE Program has not been identified and agreed upon; decisions were in many cases intentionally deferred until a Director was hired in 2005. The FYE Committee in 2003 identified the following elements that the FYE should include:

- Student link with a faculty/staff member and with an upper-class student.
- A common core of experiences (academic and/or non-academic) for all students
- Features that make it adaptable to individualized needs
- Features that address the needs of different populations (first generation college students, transfer students, etc.)
- Features that build a sense of community on campus
- Explicit connections to the USCA Values statement
- Opportunities for individual reflection
- Clarity about the purpose of a four-year college experience and how it differs from high school, technical school, community college, etc.
- Features that promote independent learning and accountability
- Clarity about the institution's sense of responsibility for ensuring academic quality and integrity
- Communication of the "relevance" of a four-year liberal arts education
- Communication of what it means to be a "liberal arts" institution
- Guidelines for good conduct, courtesy, respect for others, etc.
- Discussion of performance expectations and standards
- Development of goal setting and plan development skills
- Development of problem solving and conflict resolution skills
- Development/refinement of basic academic skills (note taking, test taking, etc.)
- Links to first year advising

*[Draft Goals from 2003-04 – Under Discussion at the FYE Committee Level but not Formally Adopted]:*

Guided by USCA's institutional values to embrace a high quality learning environment, collegiality, character, and citizenship, full-time students in their First Year Experience will pursue the following goals:

1. **Discovery:** Students will discover the purpose and meaning of the college experience at a four-year liberal arts institution. They will also take inventory of the range and scope of their own skills, knowledge, and values as well as their responsibility for evaluating, using, and developing these abilities in the university environment.

2. **Connection:** Students will connect with other individuals and campus organizations and become campus citizens as they develop a sense of belonging and build relationships with other students, faculty, and staff.

3. **Transformation:** Students will transform themselves and the new college community in which they are members. As students internalize the college learning process, they will identify, understand, and begin to exhibit key attributes of successful scholars and lifelong learners. As campus citizens they will actively engage in shaping the college community.

**Pervasiveness**
Participation figures below are for respective pieces of the program in Fall 2004:

- ASUP 101 Academic Support: five course sections, total Fall 04 enrollment of 99; taught by one adjunct faculty member (3 sections), one administrator (the Academic Vice Chancellor), and one student services staff member.
- Orientation. Two sessions (July and August) had a combined FY participation of 537 (86% of all incoming FY students, 92% of FT FY students); about 25 staff and 25 faculty participate as facilitators in orientation, along with 20-30 student orientation group leaders.
- First Year Advising. All FY students have a designated academic advisor (see Advising).
- Common Fall courses for FY students: 85% take English 101, 50% take Math 108, 50% take Psychology 101.

**Organization**
The new Director of the First Year Experience and Academic Support Services reports directly to the Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs.

Until 2005, ASUP 101 had no administrative structure and was loosely sponsored by the Enrollment Services Division and the Office of Academic Affairs. The course is primarily taught by one lecturer (adjunct) as well as several staff members from Student

Affairs. While there is consensus among various constituencies on campus that more sections should be offered, a mechanism to staff the courses and include more faculty members in teaching the course has not been developed.

Common courses are not intentionally organized. Some experiments with learning communities or linked courses have surfaced and submerged in the past seven years. There has been little impetus or motivation to sustain such linkages, and participating faculty have cited additional work as a disincentive with little perceived benefit.

Orientation – see separate section on Orientation

First Year Advising – see separate section on Advising

**Integration**
A major weakness of the current FYE activities is the lack of connection among various elements. This weakness was recognized internally in the strategic planning process in 2001-03 (Objective 2a) and reinforced by a report from an external consultant in 2004. The addition of a Director of the First Year Experience in the Academic Affairs Division is designed to more formally integrate these elements.

**Impact**
Given the loose coordination of first year activities, impacts have been assessed primarily in isolation from other factors:

- A larger study of first-year retention (*Academic Tracking Report #3*) revealed that ASUP 101 had a positive and statistically significant retention impact on white women. Among the 31 white women who took the course in Fall 2002, they were retained at a level over 90% for one year and outperformed their predicted GPAs. No effects were observed among other demographic groups.
- Data from course evaluations and surveys about orientation have been used to modify programs and curricula, but no specific impact on retention or graduation has been cited.

## *Assessment*
The campus has only begun to assess the extent to which FYE activities impact first year retention. USCA regularly administers CIRP to incoming freshmen and administered NSSE for the first time in 2004, with plans to administer it again in 2006. CIRP results suggest that incoming students arrive with lower assessments of their own academic and social efficacy than freshmen nationwide (this may mirror their overall lower academic inputs). NSSE results indicated that First Year students at USCA reported higher levels of personal and academic growth than did those attending peer institutions, although the time spent on academic work was a bit below benchmark.

Further assessment will continue with these instruments, along with more detailed examinations on first year retention, such as *Academic Tracking Report #3*. Additional assessment techniques will be developed by the new Director.

## Continued Development

There are plans to double the number of sections of the course for Fall 2005; offering two sections, co-taught by faculty, for students interested in majoring in Education or Business. Additionally, one section of the course will be piloted as a 16-week model (the total contact hours will remain the same as the other sections that follow the traditional 8-week format). The process for changing the course name to Pacer 101 is underway (the Pacer is the university mascot), and there is a concerted effort to unify the content to create a strong, positive identity for the course. To this end, there are plans to possibly adopt a common textbook and create online supplemental course resources for both students and course instructors. Instructors will have the opportunity to participate in a comprehensive training program, and will receive continued administrative support throughout their teaching experience. As the course continues to evolve, there is a need to identify outcome goals and develop a comprehensive outcomes data collection instrument.

# Integration, Leadership, Campus Culture, Context

## Context

As a four-year public baccalaureate-general institution in South Carolina, USCA has acknowledged that efforts to improve graduation and retention rates must be placed within an institutional and environmental context. Goals to improve learning and strategic objectives point naturally to an improvement of graduation rates as an indicator of success, yet some important aspects of the institutional mission, including but not limited to access and regional service, can depress these rates. Most prominently, these factors are: institutional history, institutional size, low levels of educational achievement, performance gap among African American students, and state funding and budget cuts.

### Institutional History

The institution's earlier identity as 2-year feeder campus has not faded from local memory, and many students and parents view USCA as a stepping stone to the USC Columbia campus. Data from the 2003 administration of the CIRP indicate that 33.9% of men and 20.2% of women reported there was a "very good chance" they would transfer to another institution before graduating. These levels are three times the national average for men and twice the national average for women, and these intentions clearly depress both retention and graduation rates.

### Institutional Size

In part, the size of the institution limits the range of academic programs that can be offered. For instance, about 7% of students enter 2-year programs in engineering, pre-pharmacy and allied health, for which they *must* transfer to another institution to complete their degrees. In other instances, students from the local area choose to attend USCA to reduce the costs of living expenses before transferring to the Columbia campus, which is deemed a more prestigious institution and also has a more traditional college culture and a wider range of student activities, including Division IA football (USCA has no football team, nor the resources to field one).

### Low Levels of Educational Achievement and Degree Attainment

South Carolina has historically had low levels of academic achievement, with the lowest SAT scores in the country and only about 50% of high school freshmen completing high school in four years (the state ranks #49 in this category). Regional culture has not set educational excellence as a high priority, and investment in the K-12 educational pipeline in Aiken and in neighboring counties is significantly lower than in counties closer to urban centers. CIRP data indicate that students entering USCA have a lower perception of their academic abilities or self-efficacy than their peers, and they are about 50% more likely to believe they need remedial work in an array of subjects (reading, writing, math, science) than do their peers nationally. This problem is further exacerbated by a legislative mandate that prohibits public four-year colleges in the state from offering remedial courses. As a result, among the entering freshman class each year, 30-33% earn a fall semester GPA below 2.0 (about the 10th percentile among all CSRDE institutions).

**Performance Gap among African American Students**
One quarter of USCA's students are African American or Black. This demographic portion of the student body has been growing, yet the academic performance of these students lags behind their white peers; the Fall 2004 GPA of first-year African American students was only 1.98, while white first-year students had a mean Fall 2004 GPA of 2.42. Preparation and economic factors clearly play some part in this performance gap, although support systems for this population could be strengthened to serve them better.

**State Funding and Budget Cuts**
Like many states in the early years of the decade, South Carolina experienced difficult economic times that resulted in severe budget cuts. Fiscal spending on higher education in South Carolina was reduced more dramatically than in other states. Indeed, according to SHEEO, constant dollar expenditures per FTE in South Carolina have declined more than any other state in the nation for a total decrease of 42.3% between 1991 and 2003. USCA like other institutions has responded by raising tuition to make up a portion but not all of this lost revenue, and the result has been a tighter institutional budget than many colleges and universities in other states. For students, the cost of attendance has become an increasingly larger issue for continuance, especially since more than half of the incoming students with merit based aid from the state do not perform at levels that allow them to have their scholarships renewed. As a result, students spend more time working and less time studying. Indeed, findings from the NSSE indicate that USCA students, especially seniors, spend about 50% more time working for pay than their peers and about 2 hours less per week on academic work.

## *Integration*
Integration of features designed to promote retention and graduation rates is perhaps one of the weakest aspects of USCA's efforts to retain and graduate students. While some dramatic improvements have been made over the past five or six years, integration of efforts will continue to present a challenge to the institution. Nevertheless, some organizational and budgetary shifts have been effected that will lay the groundwork for much of this integration. For instance:

- The Strategic Plan provides a guiding vision for improving retention and graduation rates.
- The Enrollment Planning Team and the Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Services are currently in place to coordinate many of the current initiatives, and this structure has demonstrated recent and ongoing success with crafting admissions policies structured to promote student success (measured by retention).
- The addition of a staff position for first year advising and a Director of the First Year Experience and Academic Support also are indicative of organizational realignments around pursuit of improved student learning and cultural integration that will lead to higher graduation rates.

Theses structures have been implemented to address some of the challenges of cross-institutional coordination and communication. One of USCA's strengths is its collegial institutional culture, and these structures are aimed to leverage that culture to produce more integrated efforts on improvement of retention and graduation rates.

## *Campus Culture*

While not evaluated explicitly in this self-study, some aspects of campus culture likely have a very positive effect on retention. USCA strives to provide student-centered education and services by maintaining small class sizes, providing personalized and friendly contact with students, and a range of student-oriented services such as counseling and academic support. Indeed, the current branding campaign touts the slogan, "USCA Focused on You!" Results from the NSSE indicate that when controlling for institutional and student characteristics, USCA is in the 98th percentile in the area of Supportive Campus Environment, and campus surveys have yielded remarkably high levels of satisfaction across all campus units. In addition, there is a low level of faculty and staff turnover, providing a stable environment of support over the long term. A focus on the student is in many ways central to the culture and identity of USCA, and there is a genuine desire to promote student success. The direct impact that this environment has on student success is difficult to measure, but it likely plays a significant role in why students remain at the institution.

Also present within this larger atmosphere of individual attention and collegiality, however, is a strong sentiment that student success, which translates into high retention and graduation rates, is the responsibility of students, not the institution. Many on campus are quick to cite students' lack of preparation or motivation to succeed as the primary cause of student attrition. In cases where students appear to lack either motivation or ability (or both), the "blame" for student failure or departure is placed firmly on the student. While this attitude is not unique to USCA, its presence in many ways runs counter to the student-centered focus of the institution and often sidetracks the discussion of questions like "how can the institution better motivate and prepare students to meet the expectations and challenges of a college education?"

# Summary and Evaluation of What Was Learned

## Important Campus Aspects Contributing to Retention and Graduation Rates

A significant reason for undertaking this self study is that the direct effects of various campus efforts on retention and graduation rates are not known. Key factors that likely contribute to success in retention and graduation rates largely derive from intentionally prioritizing student success by integrating students into the university environment. In this regard, the Strategic Plan represents the intentionality of directing efforts to improve retention and graduation rates, and the Enrollment Planning Team coordinates the implementation of these efforts. The integration of students into the academic environment is accomplished through a variety of mechanisms including Orientation, the First Year Experience, Academic Advising, and Academic Support Services, although the integration of these features themselves could be improved substantially.

### Intentionality and Strategic Planning
The Strategic Plan developed over the course of several years through a campus-wide collaborative process has provided a primary means of highlighting priorities, developing initiatives, and integrating efforts around the improvement of retention and graduation rates. The significance of the process and the document cannot be underestimated in this respect. The strategic plan provides for ongoing efforts with direction, intentionality, and impetus that would otherwise be absent. The organizational changes and additions that have occurred in recent years were directed and facilitated by the Strategic Plan, and continuing initiatives often cite the Strategic Plan as a motivation for implementation and development.

### Organizational Structures, Implementation and Resources
The Strategic Plan has prompted some organizational changes that are designed to more effectively promote student retention and graduation. Foremost, the Enrollment Planning Team, chaired by the Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Services, has been formed to include members from all areas of campus and is pursuing a broad charge by dividing tasks into functional areas for action teams. These areas address weaknesses in retention that have been identified through research. Further, the loosely collected elements of the First Year Experience have been assembled under the purview of a single office and a Director has been hired and given a budget to administer the program. Such organizational changes and resource allocation have positioned USCA to address issues identified to impact student success and retention.

### Integration of Students into University Culture
Most efforts to improve graduation and retention rates described in this report aim to effectively integrate students into the university community or improve their acculturation to an academic environment. In many cases, goals of the various features described in this report explicitly mention student integration as a goal. While in many cases, the success of such integration is not currently measured, the driving premise of retention efforts appears to be the idea the students will be more likely to succeed when

they feel they are members of the community, and further they will be less likely to depart from a community to which they feel a sense of belonging.

**Cross-Functionality**.
Most efforts to improve graduation and retention rates draw upon resources and personnel that include members from all areas of the institution. In all instances examined in this study, committees or working groups included faculty and staff from multiple areas; these groups occasionally included students. This effort to include a wide range of individuals in various retention efforts has lent legitimacy to issues and also helped to generate solutions that address concerns from various corners of the institution. The collegiality that stems from this use of cross-institutional expertise also helps promote the success of retention initiatives.

## *Reasons for Evaluation*

This evaluation was undertaken for two primary reasons: 1) to document and explore successful initiatives in order to identify factors contributing to success; and 2) to acknowledge the increasing priority of improving the quality of learning on campus that will result in higher retention and graduation rates.

As a public baccalaureate-general institution in the Southeast, USCA appears to have higher graduation rates than most comparable institutions. In this respect, USCA has been quite successful in retaining and graduating students who are less likely to earn bachelor's degrees. While rankings in *U.S. News and World Report* and other similar publications include somewhat dubious measures, USCA's consistent ranking in the top three public baccalaureate-general colleges in the region does provide some indication of the institution's effectiveness compared to other universities with similar missions.

Nevertheless, USCA recognizes that significant progress can and must be made in improving the level and quality of learning on campus that will translate into higher retention and graduation rates. The institution has recognized a need to identify the extent to which retention efforts are successful, why they exhibit this level of success, and take what is learned to improve effectiveness.

## *Key Challenges in Achieving Success*

While the past five to seven years provide evidence of organizational growth and alignment to improve retention and graduation rates, significant challenges remain. These challenges include: the *integration and coordination* of these initiatives, effectively *including more individuals* in retention efforts, and the *assessment* of effectiveness.

**Including More Individuals in Retention Efforts**
Even though retention efforts to date have been cross-functional and included individuals from all units on campus, substantial work remains to expand efforts outward from a core group of personnel. Perhaps most central to this issue is the development of faculty "buy-

in." While a core group of faculty devote countless hours of service to programs such as Orientation, the First Year Experience, and other activities, many others are skeptical of these efforts. To some faculty members, improving retention and graduation rates appears like a call from the administration to lower standards. To others, lack of student achievement or progression is not an institutional issue but a result of poorly motivated or prepared students. Still other faculty are willing to accept such improvement as an institutional priority, but maintain that they have neither the expertise nor the resources – primarily time – to effectively address improving graduation rates. For example, many faculty members have agreed that having faculty teach ASUP 101 would be beneficial, yet faculty members have not taught the course for reasons that include but are not limited to understaffing in the home department, subject matter issues, and lack of an acceptable compensation structure.

**Integration and Coordination**
Again, while acknowledging that retention efforts have drawn on resources from across the institution, the alignment and coordination of these efforts with each other has not been effected to a large degree. For instance, there are at least three different academic warning systems on campus (Athletics Department, Minority Achievement Program, Advisement Office). Until January 2005, responsibility for the First Year Experience was diffused throughout the administrative structure. Academic support services have not been fully coordinated. New organizational features such as the Enrollment Planning Team and the Director of the First Year Experience and Academic Support aim to accomplish more integration and coordination of retention efforts, but given how new they are, there has been little opportunity for significant impact.

**Assessment**
An ongoing challenge in all of these efforts is assessing their actual impact on retention and graduation rates. In some cases, initial assessment has begun in the Institutional Effectiveness Office by providing detailed analysis of the 2002 First Year Cohort during the 2002-03 academic year and retention into Fall 2003. These analyses include retention rates by course performance patterns (e.g. the retention rates of students earning an "A" in English 101), demographics, and academic inputs. Future research on the 2003 and 2004 cohorts will also include data from the CIRP and NSSE, which are now on a regular cycle for administration and analysis. Despite such strategies, it is still difficult to draw reliable conclusions about the direct impact that a program may have had on retention one year later or graduation six years later.

## Key Strategies for Overcoming Obstacles

**Communication**
Both the Strategic Planning Committee and the Enrollment Planning Team have recognized communication across the institution, throughout academic and administrative units and into the student population as key strategies to convey the significance of retention efforts and the institutional priority to improve graduation rates.

**Setting Goals for Outcomes**
Assessment processes will yield significantly more meaningful data if process-oriented goals can be transformed into outcomes-oriented goals. The lack of clear outcomes goals in many programs also inhibits effective assessment. Many initiatives couch goals and objectives in process-oriented language such as "The program will provide…" rather than student outcomes like "Students will demonstrate…" The Office of Institutional Effectiveness consults with all programs and offices across campus about fashioning goals and objectives for learning and behavioral outcomes, but the transformation of process-oriented goals to outcomes-oriented goals is painstaking and slow.

Perhaps more importantly, once these outcomes-oriented goals and objectives have been set, some of them can be identified as correlates of or proxies for retention. In this respect, the development of such outcomes will substantially assist in the assessment process and provide better quality information about program effectiveness and allow the institution to monitor progress more easily.

**Continued Assessment and Implementation**
An ongoing commitment to assessment and improvement of effectiveness will continue to assist in overcoming obstacles to achieving success. Key players also recognize that it is of paramount importance to keep retention initiatives moving forward to meet their goals even in the absence of complete information.

Ongoing implementation strategies will continue to emphasize institutional strengths of intentionality and campus culture to leverage the success of new initiatives. By coordinating and aligning current efforts, even as new initiatives are developed, USCA expects to improve retention rates and over the next few years, which subsequently should translate into improved graduation rates six years down the road.