


Date: February 24, 2003

To: Jolene Koester
President

From: 
Michael Neubauer
Faculty President and Co-Chair of the Graduation Rates Task Force


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Provost & Vice President for Academic Affairs and Co-Chair of the Graduation Rates Task Force

Subject: Graduation Rates Task Force Final Report

Improvement of graduation rates and reduction of time to degree completion continue to be matters of great concern to institutions of higher education and to society at large. The need for a well-educated population is particularly acute in times of a severe state budget crisis. The role of the CSU in educating leaders of the future who are talented professionals and scholars with the intellectual grounding provided by a liberal arts education, is a vital one. The CSU, including CSUN, is and will continue to be an essential part of the academic success of the people of the state of California.

The overall graduation rate for the CSU is above 60%. For our campus, the November 13, 2002 Accountability Report from the CSU Committee on Educational Policy shows that the eventual graduation rate for our first-time freshmen at CSUN is approximately 45%; for community college transfer students the rate for eventual graduation is approximately 72%. These are the numbers for students who will eventually graduate. When we look at the numbers for graduation in a timely manner (within six years for first-time freshmen and within four years for upper-division transfer students), we note the need for improvement.

The attached Report of the Graduation Rates Task Force sets forth recommendations in support of facilitating student progress to graduation. The Task Force, composed of faculty, administrators, and students, developed this set of recommendations after extensive review of data and existing literature on graduation rates and improving time to the degree, wide consultation with the campus community, and careful deliberation about how to facilitate graduation of our students while maintaining high standards for student learning.

Jolene Koester
President

February 24, 2003

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We know that improvement of graduation rates and time to degree is a complex issue. As the process for implementation of the recommendations commences, we are confident the campus community will continue to provide suggestions and guidance for the development of processes and procedures to facilitate our students as they progress to the baccalaureate degree.

LK/MN/PJ/lh

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CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

GRADUATION RATES TASK FORCE REPORT

February 2003

INTRODUCTION

The level of graduation rates for students at four-year institutions has become a matter of increasing concern at the state and national levels as well as at CSUN. During the Spring 2001 semester, a group of faculty, administrators, staff, and students from across the campus came together to address the problems of low graduation rates and a lack of timeliness to degree at California State University, Northridge, and to propose recommendations for what the University can do to assist our students to graduate in a more timely manner. Recommendations to improve graduation rates, along with explanations (rationales) for the recommendations and proposed action plans were developed by the Graduation Rates Task Force and are presented in this report to University President Jolene Koester and the campus community.

Data have shown that graduation rates are impacted by a variety of factors that are external to the University, as well as internal and institutional. Students' economic circumstances, number of hours of off-campus work per week, and family obligations are important factors impacting academic progress and time-to-degree. Studies have shown that one of the most important factors is the quality of students' academic preparation prior to university admission. Members of the Task Force reviewed the literature on retention and graduation rates, and are aware of the impact and importance of these external (environmental) factors. However, the Task Force concentrated its inquiry on factors affecting graduation rates that can be impacted by the institution and this is reflected in the recommendations.

The Report is divided into three sections: (1) Addressing the Issue of Graduation Rates with a review of the data on time to degree completion and information on CSUN graduation rates and the work of the Task Force, (2) Recommendations of the Task Force with discussion and description of the issues identified, the rationales for the specific recommendations, and proposed action plans for consultation and implementation and (3) Plan for Distribution to the Campus Community.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE OF GRADUATION RATES

Policy Concerns When There Are Low Graduation Rates and Lengthy Time to Degree

The need to improve graduation rates and length of time to degree at public universities has become a priority at national, state, and local levels. As Congress considers re-authorization of the Higher Education Act, it is expected that increased attention will be

given to retention and graduation rates at four-year institutions. In March 2002, the Bush Administration called upon the Department of Education to draft proposals related to renewal of the Higher Education Act that demand greater accountability and increased performance from colleges. Colleges were specifically criticized for failing to graduate students in a timely manner. Similar positions have been stated by Democratic representatives. For example, in an April 15, 2002 speech to students from Allen University and Benedict College, Connecticut Senator Joseph I. Lieberman urged federal policy makers to give more attention to policies which ensure college students graduate within a reasonable period of time including 'plain language report cards' that set forth the graduation rates of public colleges and universities "so that schools can be held accountable by the people and communities they serve."

Within California, a review of historical data from student records shows that graduation rates are low both for first-time freshmen and transfer students at CSU campuses. To respond to this concern, the CSU Joint Provosts-Academic Senate Task Force on Facilitating Graduation was formed. In December 2002, the CSU Task Force issued its report entitled "Facilitating Student Success in Achieving the Baccalaureate Degree" (available at <http://www.calstate.edu/AcadAff/RelatedDocs.shtml>). In the report, the CSU Task Force proposed recommendations for the CSU campuses, for the CSU system, and for the CSU Board of Trustees. The Board of Trustees will consider the report for approval at its March 2003 meeting.

Of particular concern to our campus was data from the 2000 CSU Accountability Report that showed that the graduation rates of CSUN students are among the lowest in the CSU System. On average only 2.7% of our first-time freshmen graduate in four years or less; only 28.2% graduate in six years or less. Even an extension of the data out to thirteen years from the date of entry shows that less than half of our students, 45.8%, graduate from CSUN or another CSU campus. The graduation rate figures for transfer students are also low. On average only 40.8 % graduate within four years of beginning their academic careers at CSUN. At thirteen years, just over half, 52.6%, graduate. Based on recent accountability data, it is estimated that approximately 74% will eventually graduate.

The low rates are unacceptable to the University. As part of the WASC accreditation process, California State University, Northridge was recognized for its efforts in promoting student achievement but was also encouraged to assess student learning and improve progress toward the degree. Furthermore, the University has identified as one of its "Goals and Initiatives" the support of student achievement through an increase in graduation rates for undergraduate, graduate, and credential students, an effort which includes decreasing the average time to degree.

The impact of low graduation rates is a serious concern to our students and to the institution. Low graduation rates and the accompanying problems related to time-to-degree and dropout rates can have a demoralizing impact on both students and faculty. University financial and physical resources are negatively impacted when students repeat courses numerous times or, as a result of inadequate advisement or a lack of

understanding of course requirements, enroll in the wrong courses or without the appropriate prerequisites.

The personal impact of failing to graduate or taking many years to graduate can be devastating to our students. A student survey conducted by the Task Force during the Fall 2001 semester showed that nearly all first-time freshmen expect to graduate within four to six years with approximately 95% expecting to graduate in five years or less. Student expectations of what is “timely” for graduation fell within the four to six-year range for freshmen and the two to four-year range from date of entry for transfer students. However, less than 30% have been able to achieve that goal and unless there are significant improvements, half may never achieve the goal of graduating from CSUN.

Even for the persistent students such as those who take thirteen or more years to graduate, the academic and financial consequences are significant. By the time the student graduates, many of the requirements and expectations for entry-level positions requiring a bachelor’s degree, especially in the technological and scientific fields, will have changed since the time the student was enrolled in the related courses. Both the students who are delayed in progressing toward their degrees and potential employers may find that the course material studied many years earlier has become out-of-date. Furthermore, there is a significant loss of potential lifetime earnings when graduation and entry into the workforce at levels requiring a college degree are delayed.

Addressing the Issues: The Graduation Rates Task Force

Addressing the problem of improving graduation rates is not a simple task. There are many reasons suggested for the low graduation rates of our students such as financial need and the necessity of working long hours, family responsibilities, and inadequate preparation for college level work resulting in large numbers of our students requiring remediation. Some have suggested, “If better prepared students would graduate more quickly, why don’t we just admit better prepared students?” The answer to the complex issue of graduation rates and time-to-degree is not that simple. The University follows admission practices set forth in Title V of the California Code of Regulations to admit high school graduates, qualified under the eligibility index, who have completed the course subject requirements. These students rank in the top one-third of California’s high school graduating classes. Transfer students are qualified for admission if they have G.P.A.s of 2.0 or higher in transferable units, are in good standing at the last college or university attended, and meet qualifying standards including completion of Basic Subjects. Although the University has established an enrollment policy group to examine issues at CSUN related to enrollment and to recommend enrollment management strategies, the University will continue to enroll eligible students, many of whom will continue to need remediation. Many of the external reasons for low graduation rates, such as those cited above, may be beyond the ability of the University to control. However, we can examine University practices and policies over which we have control: identification of barriers to timely graduation and implementation of changes to improve graduation rates.

At the January 2001 Faculty Retreat, Provost Louanne Kennedy presented information about concerns related to low graduation rates at CSUN and announced the formation of a Graduation Rates Task Force, co-chaired by herself and the then Faculty President, Diane Schwartz, to identify University barriers to graduation and make recommendations to improve graduation rates. The other members of the Task Force included faculty, staff, students, and administrators with particular interest in or expertise related to the issues. (See [Appendix I](#) for a list of the current Task Force members).

The charge to the Task Force was to review existing data, including the CSU Accountability Report; identify research already underway; explore and identify major barriers to timely graduation; evaluate interventions currently in place; recommend other processes to help students graduate in a more timely manner; determine whether the university should establish milestone measures of progress to graduation; help students and departments to establish plans for graduation; identify strategies for teaching and learning that are central to retention and graduation; identify best practices; identify how faculty can directly address retention and graduation in their classrooms; and develop a process whereby students earn their degrees by completing 120 units.

The Task Force met during the Spring 2001 semester to review and modify the charge, establish working subcommittees, review currently available data pertaining to graduation rates, and discuss current research and interventions on retention and graduation rates. A Graduation Rates Data Group was charged with reviewing available data and designing a research plan for a graduation rate study that would inform the Task Force of the major factors that impact our students' progress toward the degree. The Graduation Rates Data Group implemented the first phase of the research plan, a pilot study of a small number of enrolled students. The students were asked about expected time to degree, scheduling, and understanding of graduation requirements. The survey results were used to refine and further develop a focus group study of enrolled students, alumni, and students who withdrew prior to degree completion.

In July 2001, a summary of the work of the Task Force to date, the "Graduation Rates Task Force Preliminary Report 2000-2001," was issued to the campus community. Subsequent to issuance of the Preliminary Report, the Task Force reviewed reports from the Graduation Rates Data Group and other subcommittees, continued to review and evaluate data and research materials about graduation rates, and developed a set of recommendations of what can be done by the University to improve graduation rates. The report on the focus groups identified obstacles to graduation including both external obstacles (student-based) and those that the University can affect (University-based). Information from the report was used by the Graduation Rates Data Group to further refine the Fall 2001 Student Survey of student perceptions about factors impacting the time to degree. The student survey was administered during the Fall 2001 semester and the Task Force analyzed the results. The process for development of the student survey, information about administration of the survey, a summary of the results of the survey, and list of the members of the Data Group are set forth in [Appendix II](#).

During the 2001 - 2002 academic year, three subgroups were formed to propose recommendations to the Task Force related to university policies, advisement, and pedagogy. An additional subgroup, the Research Subgroup, reviewed fifty-seven articles and several books related to graduation rates and graduation attainment and reported on conclusions in the literature about what seems to impede undergraduate students' degree completion and what strategies seem to facilitate undergraduate students' degree completion.

Each of the subgroups met several times; reviewed data from the Student Survey and focus groups, the report and recommendations from the Research Subgroup, and other data and literature in the field; developed sets of recommendations for inclusion in the preliminary final report; and submitted the recommendations for discussion and review by the Task Force as a whole.

In January 2002, Provost Kennedy and Faculty President Michael Neubauer presented the draft recommendations of the Task Force for discussion and feedback at a plenary session of the Faculty Retreat. Responses from participants at the breakout sessions were collected and discussed at the first Task Force meeting of 2002. The Task Force revised the preliminary recommendations and in March 2002, the "Graduation Rates Task Force Preliminary Final Report" was distributed to the campus community for review. A Graduation Rates Task Force Web Site (www.csun.edu/academic.affairs/grtf/) was established to provide electronic access to the report as well as more detailed information about the Student Survey Data, our student population, Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), and how to access members of the Task Force.

The Task Force received extensive comments and feedback about the recommendations from the campus including comments from the Educational Policies Committee, the Educational Resources Committee, the Graduate Studies Committee, the Educational Equity Committee, Provost's Council, ARC/EOP staff, College curriculum and academic planning committees, academic departments, and College administrative councils, as well as individual faculty, staff, students, and administrators. In response, the Task Force revised the recommendations, provided more complete explanations of the problems the recommendations were designed to correct, and set forth action plans for consultation and for implementation of the recommendations. On September 12, 2002, the revised draft report was distributed to the University community for review.

Between September 2002 and January 2003, the Task Force continued to review data and literature about graduation rates as well as the extensive comments and suggestions from the campus community. The comments and suggestions about the draft recommendations varied: many were positive while others were critical of some of the recommendations. The questions and concerns expressed by those who provided feedback focused primarily on the processes for implementation of the recommendations and the resource implications as new processes and policies are implemented. Some of the recommendations will require the redistribution of resources. Others, such as those in the area of advisement, may require a refocus of direction and priorities.

The Task Force believes that during the process of evaluating and implementing the recommendations, the questions and concerns of members of the campus community should be carefully considered. While it is not clear how representative of faculty, staff and students the responses are, some matters emerged as recurring concerns and issues. Consequently, in addition to statements of the recommendations, rationales for the recommendations, and proposed action plans, additional sections have been added to the report outlining the issues and concerns about the recommendations expressed by members of the campus community.

After careful review and consideration, the recommendations of the Graduation Rates Task Force have been revised and are presented to President Jolene Koester in this final Report.

In the following pages, a number of recommendations that will aid the University in its progress toward facilitating student retention and graduation are outlined. The recommendations are separated into three areas: Policy, Advisement, and Pedagogy. Each recommendation is followed by a discussion of the reasons for the recommendation, an action plan, and, where applicable, a statement of issues and concerns that were raised in comments to the Task Force from the campus community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I. Policy Recommendations

Policies and procedures employed by California State University, Northridge in processing students through their academic careers have evolved over time. Over the past forty plus years, policies have been created and procedures put into operation in response to perceived problems or directives and in response to both internal and external forces. The Policy Subcommittee of the Graduation Rate Task Force was charged with evaluating the University's policies and procedures for their impact on students' progress toward degree completion with a focus on how they promote, interfere with, or even delay the satisfaction of graduation requirements.

After a review of policies and procedures, it became apparent that unintended conflicts have resulted from some policies. A policy designed to smooth progress through the academic system might create a culture that altered student, faculty, and staff behavior, and resulted in prolonging rather than accelerating time to graduation. The following policy and procedure recommendations are intended to help modify campus culture, specifically to reduce delays in graduation. In addition, the proposed policies and procedures are designed to promote clarity of expectations regarding graduation.

Recommendation 1: For every major, departments should develop the following semester-by-semester plans to graduation:

For first-time freshmen, a sample four-year plan and a sample five-year plan

to graduation that includes general education, required courses in the major, and electives.

For transfer students who are GE certified and satisfy the lower-division requirements of the major, a sample two-year plan and a sample three-year plan to graduation that includes upper-division GE, required courses in the major, and electives.

These plans should address both day and evening programs.

Rationale: Many students are unaware of course sequencing and the courses in which they should enroll to move toward graduation. Often students are caught in the situation of not having completed necessary prerequisite courses and are therefore unable to proceed through a program with a full course load. The Fall 2001 student survey showed that 54% of the respondents had taken at least one course, usually two or more, that they thought was necessary, but later discovered was not required.

A plan for first-time freshman and a plan for upper-division transfer students, coupled with DARS reports, will help students map out their academic careers. We have learned from cohort programs such as PACE that published two-year plans of study contributed to over 90% of upper-division transfer students graduating in two years. This compares to a 10% rate for transfer students who were not in the cohort groups.

Publishing graduation plans by major will have three identifiable outcomes. First, demand on overused advising services (especially during peak demand periods such as registration) will be reduced. This allows those resources to be directed toward other problem areas. Second, students will be able to assume greater responsibility for their academic choices and thus graduate in a timelier manner. Third, academic departments will develop greater awareness of program difficulties that lead to slower progress toward graduation.

This policy recommendation is directly related to *Advisement Recommendation 2* to provide a simple, straightforward explanation of requirements for the major.

Action Plan:

Prior to the beginning of advisement for Fall 2003: Department curriculum committees will provide the advisement centers in the eight colleges with sample plans for first-time freshman and transfer students.

Issues and Concerns: Concern was expressed that the recommended major plans may be interpreted as guarantees that students will graduate in a specified time period and thereby create a potential legal liability for the university. It was suggested that disclaimer language be added to the plans. Strategies for use of the plans by students who change their majors should be developed. These strategies will better inform student choices as they consider alternative majors.

Recommendation 2: Double count GE breadth courses to include one upper-division GE course in the major.

Rationale: The University has already recognized that some courses within major requirements also satisfy the objectives set forth for general education. CSUN permits double counting of lower-division GE courses and has already expanded this double counting by one lower-division course. Each major or program has been authorized to select one lower-division major course which also serves as general education for non-majors and count the course to satisfy both the major and the general education course requirement. This has an impact on students completing their lower-division, general education program at CSUN, but fails to address the growing transfer population. An inequitable situation arises when native CSUN students are able to double count a major course with a GE course but upper-division transfer students cannot. The proposed policy change gives transfer students the same opportunity for double counting a course in the major and general education as students who begin their college work at CSUN.

Over 60% of CSUN students are transfer students and 84% of these transfer students arrive as upper-division students. Beginning with Spring 2003 transfer admissions, all transfers will be upper-division students.

Action Plan:

2002 - 2003 academic year: This policy will be reviewed by the CSUN community in the GRTF report and sent to the Educational Policies Committee for their deliberation.

Concerns and Issues: Some faculty raised concerns about the potential adverse enrollment effects the reduction would have on departments that have large numbers of GE course sections but with small numbers of majors. As the campus considers adoption of this recommendation and recommendation #3, it is important to engage in a discussion about the nature of a liberal arts education and the scope and philosophy of upper-division GE. One department expressed a concern about a need for exposure to a wide range of academic course work especially in majors that may not include material from a wide variety of academic disciplines.

Recommendation 3: The total number of units in General Education (including Title V) will be reduced to 48 units.

Rationale: Our general education/Title V program is the largest in the California State University system. The program is complex, difficult to explain in a clear and concise manner, and may provide an incentive for students to turn to local community colleges to complete a clearer, shorter general education program. For example, the Intersegmental General Education Transfer Curriculum (IGETC) requires 38 lower division units for transfer students who are certified. A gross inequity exists between the number of lower-division GE units required of native CSUN students and transfer students. This policy change will push the University toward examining the content and desired

outcomes of general education. A reduction in general education will provide the students with greater course choices while pursuing a liberal education, focus deeper into non-major disciplines, and add minors to their degree objectives. A reduced GE program will continue to provide depth and breadth because of the dispersion of courses through section A-F. This change brings the CSUN general education program into alignment with the lower-division, transfer curriculum and fulfills Title V requirements for general education.

In a study of the over 35,000 students who graduated from CSUN between 1992 and 2000, those students who started at CSUN as freshmen graduated with an average of almost eight more units than did our upper-division transfer population. This difference is consistent with a larger general education program for our freshmen as compared with the transfer students. In the Fall 2001 student survey, 36.3% of the respondents identified units in general education (after work and financial pressures and units in the major) as a significant obstacle to graduating in a timely manner.

Action Plan:

2002 -2003 academic year: The CSUN community will review this policy. A small task force to review general education will be created. Any proposed changes will go through the regular curriculum process.

Concerns and Issues: Concerns were raised about the placement of Title V courses, the lack of data tying the size of GE to delays in graduation, and the potential adverse enrollment effects for some departments and colleges. Some respondents expressed opposition to any reduction in units in general education. Others suggested that central to any consideration of reduction of GE is a discussion about the role of GE in providing a liberal arts education.

Recommendation 4: The total number of units in the major outside of general education requirements should be 45 units or less.

Rationale: Majors should be structured so that there are free electives outside of General Education and major requirements. Student programs that allow for free electives provide more flexibility and allow students to explore other fields of study.

Major requirements at CSUN have evolved over the past several decades, often with the addition of courses to expand coverage breadth. As part of program review, it is suggested that departments examine their major requirements to determine whether a concentration on depth within the major would provide clearer outcomes that better serve the students and to evaluate the units required for the major portion of the degree. The faculty in the departments have the primary responsibility to conduct an in-depth review of major programs.

Limiting the size of the major will provide students with an opportunity to pursue minors

in other fields, gain greater breadth and depth in other areas of study, or continue with a more in-depth study of the major discipline. For example, a 45-unit major and 48-unit General Education Program would leave students with 27 units of unrestricted electives. Some departments may require more than 45 units in the major, for example, majors with extensive lower-division math and science requirements.

An analysis of students who graduated from CSUN between 1992 and 2000, showed that students from colleges with higher-unit majors took longer to graduate than did comparable students in colleges with lower-unit majors. In the Fall 2001 student survey, half the students identified units in the major as a significant obstacle to graduating in a timely manner.

Action Plan:

This recommended policy will be incorporated into the program review process. Majors and programs under review will address the issue of size of major and provide rationales for both the size and content of the major.

Concerns and Issues: Concerns were raised regarding size of major and accreditation requirements for some programs. For example, some majors require extensive math/science preparation at the lower division level. Consequently, a 45-unit major may not be feasible for all programs.

Recommendation 5: Departments may explore modifying the required and elective courses in their majors from three-unit to four-unit courses.

Rationale: Conventional wisdom at CSUN has limited departments to thinking in terms of a three-unit course structure. As part of major and program review, some areas may find it beneficial to use a four-unit course structure to provide greater depth and coverage. For example a course could be taught with three hours per week in the classroom and additional time for group meetings either face-to-face or on-line.

A change from three-unit to four-unit courses may help reduce the students' time to graduation by lowering the total number of courses needed to graduate. The number of course preparations (and final exams) for faculty and students would be reduced but with the total number of units in the major remaining the same. For example, instead of requiring 15 three-unit courses in a 45-unit major program, 11 four-unit courses (plus one unit) would be required.

Departments which chose to revise the unit-size of their courses in order to reduce the number of courses offered in the major should make such changes as part of a complete review of the entire program.

Action Plan:

If departments pursue this recommendation, they will propose program changes through

the regular review process in the department, college, and Education Policies Committee.

Concerns and Issues: Among the concerns were the potential scheduling problems caused by unit differences in GE and major courses, “watering down” of course content if student contact hours are reduced, and making certain that student course work is consistent with the unit value for each course.

Recommendation 6: Consider alternate course scheduling patterns. The “prime-time” schedule will be revised to more effectively meet the needs of our student population.

Rationale: In the Fall 2001 student survey, the need to work was most frequently identified as an obstacle to graduating in a timely manner. Work demands create scheduling difficulties. A study of student enrollment patterns reveals a preference for a two-day per week rather than a three-day per week schedule. While 35% of our day students attend five days per week, almost 30% attend two days per week and 23% attend three days per week. Providing a prime time (8 AM to 2 PM) schedule that reflects student demands should promote easier scheduling, improved attendance, and faster progress through the educational system.

Action Plan:

2002 - 2003 academic year: The Provost and the Faculty President will form a working group to review and propose an implementation plan for alternative schedules.

One proposed recommendation is to schedule prime-time classes on Monday/Wednesday, Tuesday/Thursday, and Friday. The Friday classes would meet in three-hour time blocks (e.g., 8:00 a.m. – 11:00 a.m., 11:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m.).

Concerns and Issues: This recommendation was strongly supported in comments and feedback to the committee. Concerns were raised about the impact of scheduling changes on use of facilities, public safety, programs for commuters, and faculty preference in setting teaching schedules. Other concerns related to the impact of this change on pedagogical strategies: some courses may need to meet more frequently or for shorter periods of time.

Recommendation 7: Registration priority should be used to facilitate faster graduation times. Specifically, when a student has completed 140 semester units and has not graduated, the student will return to the lowest registration priority until filing for graduation. Once a student has filed for graduation and received graduating-senior priority registration twice, the student is no longer eligible for this priority registration status.

Rationale: In Spring 2002, there were 2,216 students who had completed 140 or more

units. Of these, 887 students had already filed for graduation at least twice.

Students with large numbers of units and students who fail to graduate after multiple filings reduce the opportunities for other students to enroll in needed courses. The proposed changes to registration priority are intended to reduce some abuses and to encourage students to avoid taking excessive units. It should be noted that if students file for graduation at 140 units, they will receive priority status twice so they actually have priority up to a number of units that is greater than 140.

Action Plan:

2002 -2003 academic year: This policy will be reviewed by the CSUN community and sent to the Educational Policies Committee for their deliberation.

Concerns and Issues: Concerns were raised about detrimental effects of this policy on students enrolled in high unit programs and on students who change majors late in their careers.

II. Advisement Recommendations

The approach used to provide academic advising at California State University, Northridge has evolved in response to a variety of factors. In 1988, a report from a team of outside reviewers from the statewide Organization of Counseling Center Directors in Higher Education resulted in the formation of the Academic Advising Review Committee. The Committee was charged with reviewing the entire General Education advising process and suggesting ways to make the process more effective. The Review Committee's recommendations set into motion a process of change that eventually resulted in the relocation of the advising function from the Counseling Center to a distributed model between the eight Colleges and the central Advising Resource Center/EOP for students who had not as yet determined a major program of study.

In 1992, the Office of Academic Programs revisited the 1988 recommendations and utilized the *Standards and Guidelines for Academic Advising*, published by the Council for the Advancement of Standards for Student Service/Development Program, to guide the review. Their analysis of the status of academic advising identified numerous needs not being met by the advising structure. Detailed recommendations were made with the intent to refine the structure, organization, and delivery of academic advising services. The 1994 Northridge Earthquake negatively impacted implementation of the 1992 recommendations and, while progress was made during the subsequent years of recovery, they were not a priority. (Copies of the 1988 and 1992 reports are available for review in the office of the Vice President for Student Affairs and the Office of Undergraduate Studies)

With the establishment of the Graduation Rate Task Force in 2001, the issue of academic advisement at CSUN was revisited from the perspective of impact on graduation rates,

retention, and time to degree. The Advisement Subcommittee was charged with making recommendations that would respond to the issues and needs that were expressed by students through a variety of GRTF assessments. Among the issues addressed by the focus groups were difficulty in accessing an advisor, little guidance in selecting majors, the lack of coordination between lower-division and upper-division advising, and the unreliability of information provided by advisors. The Graduation Rate Task Force Undergraduate Student Survey conducted in Fall 2002 shows that more than half of the students viewed advisement from faculty (54%) and staff (57%) as important or very important to meeting their expected graduation date. Inadequate advisement was viewed by 37.5% as quite a bit or very much an obstacle to expected graduation date, 31% cited lack of advisement, and 23.4% cited lack of clarity for completing a major. Interestingly, 44% of the respondents indicated that no one assists them in selecting classes. When asked to name the one most important support that CSUN provides that helped them to achieve their college goals, academic advisement was the most frequently cited item (17.2%). As found in 1988 and 1992, advisement has an important role in guiding students successfully toward graduation. The Advisement Recommendations are intended to establish priority action based upon expressed student needs.

The last round of feedback received by the GRTF noted some issues and concerns related to the recommendations made by the Advisement Subcommittee. These concerns have been listed under the applicable recommendation and will be taken into consideration during the implementation of the proposed action plans.

Recommendation 1: Complete a best practices review and needs assessment of advising policies, procedures, organizational structures, advisor training and development, communication, service delivery, human and fiscal resources, and other factors that contribute to a successful advising program. A review and needs assessment should address staff as well as faculty advisement. Propose and prioritize changes, implementation strategies, and resource needs.

Rationale: The decentralized nature of the advising system has resulted in a high degree of variability in access to and delivery of advisement. Varying definitions and expectations of advisement from exclusively course selection to a more holistic developmental process may be influencing this variability. Additional variability is found in the knowledge and skill of those providing the advisement as well as the amount of time provided for individual advisement activities. There is a need to develop and implement strategies that support ongoing efforts to insure consistency and accuracy of advisement. A comprehensive review and needs assessment is necessary to identify opportunities for improvement. Assessment tools will be needed in order to track the effectiveness of implemented recommendations.

Action Plan:

By April 1, 2003: The Provost and the Faculty Senate President will appoint a review committee.

By September 15, 2003: The review committee will develop procedures for needs assessment and review.

By March 15, 2004: The review committee will complete a comprehensive review and needs assessment of advising policies, procedures, organizational structure, personnel training and development, communication, service delivery, human and fiscal resources, and other factors that contribute to a successful advising program.

By June 15, 2004: The review committee will develop and report on recommendations based upon the finding of the review.

Issues and Concerns:

Suggestions and concerns about this recommendation related primarily to the implementation process. These included suggestions that the unique needs of transfer and evening students as well as equity and diversity issues be considered and that the needs assessment focus on quality advisement and flexibility. Concerns were raised about the availability of resources to conduct the review and needs assessment. Development of a shared understanding about the definition of advisement was suggested: is it simply course selection and procedural advice, or should there be a more holistic approach to guiding student decision-making and development?

Recommendation 2: *Policy Recommendation 1* is for departments to develop semester-by-semester plans to graduation. In furtherance of this, it is recommended that assistance be provided to all academic departments for the development of simple and straightforward paper and web-based materials that explain all requirements, options, policies, and procedures leading to the degree. This pathway must include the process for transitioning students from undeclared and/or lower division GE advising to major and upper division GE advising.

Rationale: Students express confusion about the requirements of the curriculum. They express particular frustration with the impact of changing majors on their progress toward graduation. Simplifying communication regarding degree program requirements could be achieved by providing students with simple, straightforward materials that explain relationships among the various requirements, options, policies, and procedures leading to the degree. While preference may exist for face-to-face advisement, the number of students exceeds the ability of staff and faculty advisors to meet the demand. The development of web-based advising modules that provide basic information and identifies the courses still needing to be taken may reduce demand on academic advisor time thus increasing access to advising for those students needing face-to-face advising. The development of advising technology is a significant challenge but one that is being successfully achieved throughout the country.

Action Plan:

Prior to the beginning of advisement for Fall 2003: Undergraduate Studies, college departments, and college-based student support areas and EOP Satellites will identify advising requirements for the major during a student's course of study. Undergraduate Studies, college departments, and college-based student support areas and EOP Satellites will collaborate to develop and implement clear processes and procedures for transitioning students from undeclared and lower-division GE advising to major and upper-division GE advising.

Prior to the beginning of advisement for Fall 2004: Undergraduate Studies, college departments, and college-based student support areas and EOP Satellites will develop, for all majors, simple and straightforward printed and web-based materials that explain all requirements, options, policies, and procedures leading to the degree.

Prior to the beginning of advisement for Fall 2005: Undergraduate Studies, college departments, and college-based student support areas and EOP Satellites will develop and implement web-based advising modules for all majors.

Issues and Concerns:

Concerns were raised about the impact of this recommendation on the advisement process. Some identified the need for students to take responsibility for their roles in the advisement process including efforts to seek out and read material in the catalog and on department web sites. Others identified a need for face-to-face advisement especially for those students who are poorly prepared.

Questions were also raised about the role of faculty in the advisement process. It was suggested that faculty participation in the advisement process be increased. Some faculty noted, however, that if students do not review the needed information, it increases faculty and staff time to correct errors.

It was suggested that departments provide career path information as well as information about the requirements, policies, and procedures leading to the degree.

Recommendation 3: Replace the current manual graduation check with an automated graduation check linked to DARS; develop automated systems whereby students and advisors can easily track degree progress and identify implications of academic program decisions; develop automatic benchmarks that denote that a student may be at risk; and develop a system to respond when benchmarks are not reached.

Rationale: The number of students seeking advisement significantly exceeds the capacity of the advisement system through the college advisement centers. The demand for advising means less time per advisee and, therefore, the risk of incomplete or insufficient advisement. Strategies to facilitate student access to advisement are needed.

Additionally, providing students and advisors with an improved ability to track degree progress and identify implications of academic program decisions would improve the efficiency and effectiveness of advisement. Technology-based advising applications such as web-based modules would increase timely access to information.

Action Plan:

By June 15, 2004: Colleges will replace the current graduation check with the DARS Exception Module and develop redundant systems to insure the availability of the DARS information.

By August 15, 2004: Colleges will develop a process for identifying and responding to at-risk students.

Issues and Concerns:

Concerns were raised about the implementation process including the need for faculty and staff to receive on-going training and the possibility of an increase in student errors in the use of technology-based, student-directed (self-service) advisement.

Recommendation 4: Establish a working group to be charged with enhancing and further developing collaborative relationships between academic advisors and career counselors in order to guide the development of an integrated approach to academic program planning and career development. Explore and develop means to interface with the curriculum.

Rationale: A significant factor in student persistence and graduation is having a clear goal for one's academic work. Early linkage of career planning and development that is integrated with major exploration and subsequently linked with the appropriate curriculum can assist students to more quickly identify a direction for their studies, thus facilitating completion of a course of study.

Action Plan:

By April 1, 2003: The Provost, Faculty President and Vice President for Student Affairs will establish a working group to be charged with developing collaborative relationships between academic advisors and career counselors in order to guide the development of an integrated approach.

By Fall 2003: The working group will begin to develop a model for early career exploration and opportunities for connection to the curriculum.

By Fall 2004: Implementation of the model.

III. Pedagogy Recommendations

The hallmark of the teaching profession is a body of knowledge that includes not only extensive knowledge of the subject matter but also the pedagogical skills to convey that knowledge to students. Traditionally, faculty members have relied on the instructional methodology with which they are most familiar – the lecture format. However, recently reported research in national journals indicates that reliance upon only one mode of presentation, the traditional lecture method, may be less effective than the use of a variety of teaching models and strategies.

University faculty have begun to experiment with alternative pedagogical approaches which involve active/cooperative learning, the use of supplemental instruction, the use of technology, and the infusion of mentoring into faculty interactions with students both inside and outside the classroom. They are sharing with one another the results of their sophisticated sustained research. Interest in advances in pedagogy and the scholarship of teaching are evident at the state level (e.g. the CSU Institute for Teaching and Learning) and with newsletters and publications (e.g. *The Teaching Professor*). On a national level, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the National Research Council Committee on Developments in the Science of Learning publish studies about learning and classroom applications.

At CSUN, similar efforts by faculty to develop alternative teaching methods are underway with the Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT) taking the lead and providing assistance. Such faculty efforts have shown positive results in terms of student learning and success. There is a need not only to encourage and facilitate those efforts by faculty but also to acknowledge their success.

Recommendation 1: Promote efforts to enhance student involvement in learning and hence student success by rewarding faculty who demonstrate effective instructional improvement strategies.

Rationale: Research shows that good learning results from good teaching and good mentoring, yet most graduate programs have not emphasized the development of such skills. Excellence in teaching is of particular importance at CSUN in light of the University Mission Statement that identifies, as the University's first priority, "to promote the welfare and intellectual progress of students" and the University Value Statement that we will honor and reward high performance in learning and teaching.

The University has recognized the importance of the scholarship of teaching. Section 632.4.2.a. of the Academic Personnel Policies and procedures states that, "The University defines publication to include: a. Scholarly books, articles and reviews that appear in scholarly or nationally recognized journals devoted 1) to the candidate's academic discipline or closely-related fields; **and 2) to pedagogical research and/or teacher education in the candidate's academic discipline or closely-related fields.** Departments

may prescribe publication requirements deemed appropriate to the discipline. Such additional requirements are subject to the approval of the College Personnel Committee.” (Emphasis Added)

Studies show that faculty-student interactions both inside and outside the classroom result in enhancement of the educational experience of students, improve graduation rates, and, for many students, result in placement in graduate and professional schools and other professional advancement.

Increased support and recognition will be given to faculty members engaged in the scholarship of teaching and to faculty members who demonstrate the implementation of effective pedagogical and mentoring strategies. Recognition and rewards will be given to faculty members who are involved in developing new pedagogical models which enhance student involvement in learning and student success through (1) implementation of innovative classroom practices and innovative teaching methods, (2) classroom research to identify which pedagogical content knowledge results in better learning, (3) technology-based instruction to increase student knowledge, and (4) pedagogical strategies centered around mentoring and who can demonstrate through an assessment component that the development and implementation of their models leads to student success should be recognized and rewarded.

Action Plan:

2002-2004 academic years: Departments, Colleges, and the University (Personnel Planning and Review Committee) will be encouraged to review their standards, policies, and missions to define criteria for what is effective instruction and to develop methods and programs for recognition of effective teaching and mentoring. The criteria for personnel evaluation will be aligned at the three levels (department, college, and the University) to reflect the importance and recognition of the scholarship of teaching.

At the request of departments, CELT will assist them in the development of alternative strategies for delivery of curriculum including the development of active learning and technology based teaching skills.

Issues and Concerns:

In response to recommendations from the campus community, the importance of effective mentoring was added to the recommendation.

Although this recommendation received very strong support from faculty, a few respondents expressed concern about encouraging faculty to engage in the scholarship of teaching. Questions were raised about the relationship between research and publication in the area of pedagogy and being a good teacher. It was also suggested that definitions and understandings be developed about how to evaluate whether faculty demonstrate effective instructional strategies.

Recommendation 2: Identify courses where significant numbers of students get poor grades. Departments will be encouraged to examine the causes for such high failure rates and develop strategies to improve student performance in the courses. Support for development of instructional strategies in the classes will be provided.

Rationale: The time to graduation is clearly delayed if large numbers of students are failing courses. Support for faculty and departments, especially those which have courses with high enrollments and low pass rates, should improve student learning and success in mastering course work and thus improve both retention and graduation rates.

Based on data showing that we lose students primarily at the lower division, initial efforts will focus on 100 and 200 level courses. This will include support for assessing the impact of student factors such as level of academic preparation. In addition, support will be provided for assessment and development of discipline-based and cross-disciplinary pedagogical strategies to reach different types of learners.

The Learning Resource Center, through its Supplemental Instruction Program, is currently providing tutoring/extra help to our students in selected courses. An analysis of data shows that for some courses, especially in mathematics and the sciences, such instruction has had a significant impact on improving class performance and thus improves student progress toward the degree.

Action Plan:

2002 - 2003 academic year. Courses where significant numbers of students get poor grades (30% or more with grades of D, F, or U) will be identified with the help of Institutional Research, and the data made available to the departments offering the courses for examination and for use in developing strategies for improving student performance. Initial efforts to identify the courses will focus on 100 and 200-level courses. The instructors of those courses will be provided with support to facilitate efforts to experiment with alternative pedagogical approaches to improve student learning.

2002 - 2004 academic years. Courses where supplemental instruction can be used to improve student success will be identified during the Spring 2003 semester. Support will be given to departments with identified courses to develop supplemental instruction plans with the Learning Resource Center for the 2003-2004 academic year.

Issues and Concerns:

Comments from the campus community emphasized the importance of evaluating the cause of high failure rates in certain courses as an integral part of the process for identifying strategies for improving student learning. Some who commented were particularly concerned that the process not be one that involved assigning blame or assuming that high failure rates are necessarily the fault of the individual faculty member. Concerns were expressed about the availability of resources to support the evaluation

process and to support individual faculty members or teams of faculty in a department in their efforts to improve student learning and success.

Recommendation 3: Create formal and informal forums and other opportunities for faculty and other members of the campus community to share ideas about promising teaching and learning practices.

Rationale: Many of our faculty members are interested in receiving information about pedagogical strategies which improve student learning and success in their courses. Programs by the Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT) and other campus units to communicate information about effective teaching strategies developed both on and off campus have been particularly effective in providing forums for the sharing of ideas.

Action Plan:

2002 - 2004 academic years: Departments and campus groups will develop programs and other opportunities for faculty and others to share promising and successful practices and ideas about teaching and learning. Special efforts will be made to involve newer faculty and part-time faculty in such discussions.

Spring 2004: An annual forum on improvement of graduation rates through development of successful teaching and learning strategies will be organized. Experts in the field of pedagogy and teaching scholarship will be invited to present their work. The first campus forum will be scheduled for the 2003 - 2004 academic year and continued on an annual basis.

DISTRIBUTION TO THE CAMPUS COMMUNITY

Throughout the process of developing its recommendations, the Graduation Rates Task Force regarded its work as that of not only the Task Force members themselves but also the broader campus community. The development of the recommendations was a dynamic process. Comments and feedback were important to the process of developing the recommendations and will continue to be essential to the designing of effective procedures and policies for our students. We are pleased to have had thoughtful conversations with members of the campus community and we appreciate the time that faculty, staff, and students took to put their thoughts into writing.

This final report, which includes the revised recommendations, will be delivered to University President Jolene Koester and distributed to the following members of the campus community for review and discussion:

- The President's Cabinet

- Academic Affairs including the Provost's Council, the Academic Affairs Associate Vice Presidents, the Director of Institutional Research, the Director of Academic Advising Centers/Educational Opportunity Program, the Director of Admissions and Records, the Director of PACE, and the Director of CELT.
- Student Affairs
- The Faculty President for distribution to the Executive Committee of the Senate and all standing committees of the Faculty Senate
- The College Deans for distribution to their policy and academic planning committees, associate deans, department chairs, and program coordinators
- The Council of Chairs
- Associated Students President for distribution to the Associated Students Senate and all standing committees of the Associated Students Senate
- Director of CSUN at Channel Islands

A copy of the Graduation Rates Task Force Report will be placed on the Academic Affairs web site <http://www.csun.edu/academic.affairs/grtf.htm> for review.

CONCLUSION

The definition of who is considered to be a “typical student” has changed dramatically both at CSUN and throughout the country. The majority of our students do not fit into the definition of “traditional students,” namely those who enroll in college directly from high school and are dependent on their parents for financial support. The vast majority of students are older and work full-time or part-time. Many are supporting dependents themselves. Of our undergraduate students, 15 to 20% are “first-generation students” meaning students whose parents did not attend college. Many are the first in their families to attend college.

We recognize the challenges of and opportunities for educating our students in the 21st century. We understand that because of environmental or personal factors our nontraditional student population may not be able to achieve the same graduation rates within the same time periods as at institutions with more traditional students. However, we are committed to assisting our students to proceed to the timely completion of their degrees free from institutional impediments and obstacles, and with the opportunity to be educated by a highly skilled and accomplished faculty. Through this Report, we hope to advance the campus-wide focus on continued student excellence and success.

APPENDIX I: MEMBERS OF THE GRADUATION RATES TASK FORCE

Louanne Kennedy (co-chair), Provost & Vice President for Academic Affairs

Michael Neubauer (co-chair), Faculty Senate President

Margaret Fieweger, Associate Vice President for Undergraduate Studies

Philip Handler, Vice Provost

Fran Horvath, Director of Institutional Research & Planning

Penelope Jennings, Assistant Provost

William Jennings, Chair, Finance, Real Estate & Insurance

Carol Kelly, Child Development & Adolescent Development

Ah-Jeong Kim, Theatre

Josh Lodolo, A.S. President

Leah Marcal, Economic

Gloria Melara, Computer Science

Mary Pardo, Chicano/Chicana Studies

Terry Piper, Vice President for Student Affairs

Rosentene Purnell, Pan African Studies

Harvey Rich, Sociology

William Roberts, Associate Dean, College of Business & Economics

David Rodriguez, Chicano/Chicana Studies

Diane Schwartz, Interim Associate Dean, College of Engineering & Computer Science

Merril Simon, Educational Psychology & Counseling

Saundra Sparling, Educational Leadership & Policy Studies

Jose Luis Vargas, Director of Educational Opportunity Program

Omar Zahir, Chemistry

APPENDIX II: GRADUATION RATES DATA GROUP

The Charge

The charge to the Data Group was to review available data and design a research plan for a graduation rate study that would inform the Task Force of the major factors that impact students' progress toward the degree. In Fall 2001, the Data Group reviewed available data that showed graduation rates at CSUN to be lower than those at other CSUs or comparable institutions nationwide. The Data Group attempted to use available student record and alumni survey data to identify important factors impacting graduation but found information lacking in several key areas requiring input directly from students: advisement, class availability, student work, and study habits. The group decided to create a research plan to capture those missing data elements.

The Research Plan

The research plan that was implemented had three phases: an initial pilot survey of a smaller number of enrolled students, a focus group study of enrolled students, alumni, and former students who withdrew, and a student survey administered to a large sample of the current student population.

Phase I

The pilot survey questioned students about expected time to degree, the importance of class scheduling, and the students' understanding of degree and graduation requirements. A sample more heavily weighted towards upper-division students was selected with the assumption that these students had more experience with CSUN. The sample also represented the colleges and day/evening students as proportionally as possible. The pilot survey instrument was administered to 847 students in early Spring 2001, and 626 usable responses were obtained (74% response rate). The resulting data were used to refine the final survey.

Phase II

The second phase involved the use of student and alumni focus groups to identify key factors affecting degree completion. This information was used to further refine the student survey.

Members of the Data Group identified possible topics of inquiry and determined the most appropriate groups of students to include in the study: current students, alumni, and students who withdrew prior to degree completion. These three groups were further broken down into various subgroups in order to encompass key areas of the student experience. An outside consultant conducted the focus groups, analyzed the data, and provided a report late in Spring 2001.

A total of 144 students and former students took part in the focus group study. Although every attempt was made to randomize the participation of the participants, a focus group study is still a voluntary process. In addition, the number of individuals could not constitute a large enough group to be representative of the student body as a whole.

The focus group report identified both student-based and University-based obstacles to graduation. Of those obstacles that the University can affect, students in the focus groups identified quality and access to advisement, lack of class availability, lack of school pride, poor communications, and parking as key issues. At the same time, the students identified the ability to connect with other students and a stimulating cultural and ethnic environment as key University strengths.

Phase III

The final version of the student survey was administered in classes to undergraduate students in Fall 2001. Students were asked to identify expected time to degree at the beginning of their enrollment and currently. They were also asked about a variety of potential obstacles including class availability, advisement, course repeats, degree requirements as well as the need to work and financial pressures.

Classes were selected randomly after stratification by college to provide a student sample proportional by college but weighted heavily toward juniors and seniors. 1,785 students out of a total possible 2,124 in the selected classes answered the survey for a response rate of 84%. The demographics of the respondents matched the general undergraduate student population fairly well.

Summary of Results

The student survey identified three categories of variables impacting time to degree that cut across most colleges: advisement issues (lack of advisement, inadequate advisement, unclear requirements); course-related issues (repeating courses, unclear requirements, lack of class availability); and personal issues (the need to work and financial pressures). Further details about the survey and results can be accessed at the Graduation Rates Task Force web site (www.csun.edu/academic.affairs/grtf).

Members of the Data Group

Fran Horvath, Institutional Research and Planning, (chair)
Paul Baum, Systems Operation Management
Margaret Fieweger, Associate Vice President, Undergraduate Studies
Magnhild Lien, Mathematics
Roberta Madison, Health Sciences
Michael Neubauer, Faculty President
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Mark Schilling, Mathematics
Omar Zahir, Chemistry