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# REPORT OF THE STUDENT SUCCESS TASKFORCE

MAY 31, 2014

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## BACKGROUND

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In July 2013, the Academic Affairs Division held a Strat Ops meeting that focused on improving retention (first to second year) and graduation rates to 81% and 60% respectively. The next month this same topic was the focus of Faculty Day activities. One of the key outputs of those meeting, beyond setting the 81/60 goal, was the commission of a taskforce to make recommendations to the Provost and Vice President of Enrollment Management and Student Affairs to improve student success and career services initiatives. A charge was presented to the taskforce in February 2014 by Provost Bernier. (See appendix A)

The issue was clear, declining enrollment numbers are hurting the financial stability of the university. For a number of reasons, chiefly a changing demographic in New England, increasing enrollment through admissions alone will not be a sustainable path to follow.

The first to second year retention rate has declined from a peak in 77% in 2009 to 72% in 2012. The combination of decreasing numbers of incoming students and a decrease retention has resulted in a total enrollment of 3,986 undergraduate students; down from 4,227 in 2010.

With that change, retention and persistence rates become more critically important to the future of Plymouth State University. This taskforce, after reviewing institutional data, national trends and Plymouth State University specific assets and procedures, identified areas that the institution could address and successfully boost enrollment and meet the 81/60 goal.

As mentioned by Vincent Tinto during his workshop presented at Plymouth State a few years ago, retention is not the target. Quality educational experiences and support lead to improved retention. The target of this report then is to improve the educational experience and the support structures as they relate to the charge.

## TASKFORCE MEMBERS

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University Studies  
Counselor Education  
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Nancy B. Dyer	Counseling Center and Human Relations Center
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Annie Elizabeth Hager	Math Department
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## INITIATIVE ONE: BETTER COORDINATION OF CURRENT STUDENT SERVICES AND RETENTION EFFORTS.

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Current research indicates a strong need for oversight of retention and persistence activities. Such oversight does not currently exist at Plymouth State University. Further, the taskforce was united in identifying a need for a single person on campus who has the responsibility to oversee and coordinate retention and persistence efforts. In the Education Advisory Board report *Hardwiring Student Success*, a well-resourced retention office is noted as the number one recommended practice. The establishment of such an office would impact student retention in two ways: increase effectiveness of current student services and monitor student issues with specific interventions tailored to those needs.

Plymouth State University has a number of offices that have improved the educational experience for students that they serve. PASS, Undergraduate Advising and University Studies all have provided an improved learning experience to the students that they have served. These offices have the services that students need and organizational maturity that is well attuned to student needs. However, they can only serve the students that connect with them either by design or by chance. Best practice research suggests that we could capitalize our successes and enhance our outreach to students if we were to co-locate these offices and blend their operations to maximize effectiveness. This could be a situation where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

As an example, having a stronger relationship between career services and academic advising could yield a better educational outcome for the student in both areas. Advising could begin the career development activities at an earlier stage than a student might seek them out through a career office. In turn, that career-prepared student would be ready for further development from the career office when they interact with them. For instance, the career office would be able to more readily assist the student to understand the application of their curriculum to their career goals. The end result would be a more seamless academic and career education for Plymouth State students.

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## ACTION PROPOSAL 1A: THE CREATION OF A CHIEF UNIVERSITY RETENTION OFFICER TO COORDINATE STUDENT SERVICES WITH A FOCUS ON THE 81-60 GOAL

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This position would have primary responsibility of the following:

- Lead new student success center. This would include supervising the directors of each component department. (See Action Proposal 1B)
- Monitor the early alert system and organize interventions and initiatives.
- Work with key departments and campus committees on retention efforts. This would include committees such as the diversity commission to be sure we address academic and social issues for students of color or any student diversity-related issue.
- Assist in the development of better virtual services that are functional at non-traditional work hours.
- Assessment of effectiveness of all retention initiatives.
- Establish and report appropriate data to departments concerning enrollment.
- Serve as a campus resource in student retention and persistence.

Given the importance of the position's goal, the holistic nature of retention activities and the responsibility described, this position would report to student affairs and enrollment management as well as academic affairs. Therefore, this position would be housed in and financed by each division equally and report directly to both the VPMSA and Provost. This organizational structure is important to the success of the position and initiative as it would allow all assistance options to be engaged for students. This person would be able to better identify issues and use resources from both areas in order to resolve them. Students would be able to be provided with an increased holistic experience helping them to achieve success in all aspects of student life.

The best practice research is unequivocal; this position is needed in order to significantly improve graduation and retention rates.

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## ACTION PROPOSAL 1B: CREATION OF A STUDENT SUCCESS CENTER, COMBINING COMMON STUDENT SUCCESS SERVICES INTO A SINGLE LOCATION

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Create a single space that houses common student academic services. The space that this would occupy would allow student to have a single contact to access common resources. The space must be located in an area that students either currently frequent or remodeled to encourage student traffic. Currently, there are two locations that the taskforce has identified as suitable for this new office.

1. Lower floor Lamson Learning Commons. This would allow the inclusion of the PASS office and Writing Center in the new center. This is the ideal location.
2. Mary Lyon Garden Level. Currently houses two of the offices and has some space but would need some remodeling to encourage traffic. This could also serve as a location until Lamson could be available for use.

The following offices would be located in the new center:

1. Undergraduate Academic Advising Center
2. University Studies Department
3. Career Services (See Action Proposal 2A)
4. Academic College Advising Professionals (See Action Proposal 2B)
5. PASS and Writing Center (if location is Lamson.)

## INITIATIVE TWO: IMPROVE AND BETTER INTEGRATE CAREER AND ACADEMIC ADVISING

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The current model of academic and career advising is not integrated and does not have formalized communication structures in place. Students are in need of and desire academic advising that has a strong career component. Further, developing career readiness is commonly cited in the literature as a major reason students attend college and attain a degree. The current political climate further demands attention to the career needs of our students. Outside constituencies, (e.g., the Obama administration), are starting to demand career preparation as part of the college experience.

Plymouth State primarily employs a faculty-based advising model that is tightly embedded in the operation and culture of the University. While embracing this advising delivery system, there are areas that currently experience a significant benefit from having an advising professional embedded in academic departments, namely Elementary Education, Business and Criminal Justice. Further, the advising professionals in the Undergraduate Advising Center and University Studies have improved both graduation and retention rates.

Therefore, in response to the charge of the taskforce and those issues, the taskforce proposes the following actions:

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### ACTION PROPOSAL 2A: HIRE TWO ADDITIONAL CAREER SERVICES STAFF MEMBERS

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The average students-per-staff ratio nationally as reported by the National Association of Colleges and Employers annual benchmark survey is 2,370.2 per staff member. In order to simply meet that average ratio, Plymouth State would need two career counselors.

Currently Plymouth state University has an 80% time Career Services Manager (CSM) (20% time for internship placement) and a 20 hour a week graduate assistant to serve its 6500 current undergraduate and graduate students. The CSM also supports alumni career services when asked. The current staffing level is clearly insufficient. Therefore, we recommend that two (2) additional professional staff members be hired. One would support individual student appointments with the second focused on developing a robust employer relations program and strategy. Further, the CSM and these positions would be part of the new student success center. The CSM would report to the new Chief University Retention Officer while the career services staff members would report to the CSM. This relocates the career function from the Global Education Office and allows that office to focus on internationalization and globalization, a noted enrollment focus in its own right.

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## ACTION PROPOSAL 2B: HIRE THREE ACADEMIC ADVISING SPECIALISTS TO WORK WITH THE THREE ACADEMIC COLLEGES

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Faculty advising is not something the task force feels needs adjustment in currently. The role that faculty advisors have with our students is of utmost importance. This critical aspect of teaching and learning is one that students cherish.

To be clear, the task force supports the faculty advising role that is described in the faculty handbook. (See Appendix) The elements described include:

- provide advice that assists students in meeting career aspirations and/or graduate education,
- promote student orientation and involvement in profession or discipline,
- participate in and support student activities (orientation sessions, convocations, Commencement, award ceremonies, honorary societies, etc.),

The handbook further describes faculty advising:

“Recognizing that students differ in terms of the variety and urgency of their need for help, advisors should be particularly interested in the academic planning, scholastic achievement, career planning, and social adjustment of their assigned students.” (Pg 29, See Appendix B)

However, as noted earlier, academic departments, such as Elementary Education and Business that have an advisor embedded report positive outcomes. By adding additional advising resources, faculty would be able to have access to additional support and students would gain more access to quality, discipline specific advising.

Therefore the taskforce recommends the adding academic advising specialist positions to work with each academic college. These advisors would be housed in the new Student Success Center and report to the Chief University Retention Officer. These positions would be in addition to the advising positions that already exist (e.g., Criminal Justice advisor would remain, not be transferred). The primary functions of these positions should include:

- Provide advising support for the academic departments within the college that they are assigned by assisting faculty advisors in their roles. Specifically assisting in the career development aspects of the disciplines.
- Work with CETL in providing educational support for advising development.
- Carry an advising load in order to keep advisee/advisor ratios to levels that support student success and cover sabbaticals/absences.
- Maintain walk in hours in the Success Center.
- In conjunction with the Chief University Retention Office, monitor students within college for early alert.

## INITIATIVE THREE: EARLY ALERT FOR STUDENT ATTRITION AND ACADEMIC DIFFICULTY

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Research consistently shows that being able to provide the right service at the right time for students requires information gathering and the use of data in a way that alerts providers in a timely fashion. While there are some programs in use at Plymouth State University currently, there is no one repository of this data.

The CARE form is a relatively new but functioning alert system in use at PSU. It has shown effectiveness in providing a conduit between faculty and staff concerning students' issues. The process is straight forward and is funneled to a single office where it can be managed. While it shows the promise of what an early alert system can provide, it relies solely on qualitative data provided on an "as needed basis" by community members. Even the current practice of six week grades requires faculty input and does not even apply to every student; something the task force sees as a must for any alert system. The input of such data is not universal; many students do not receive a full complement of grades or receive grades that do not provide useful feedback (for example a grade of "IC" at the six week mark). Further, the six week grades are made available only to the listed advisor through email and are not retrievable by allied support staff or faculty.

As noted in the EAB research overview, what we currently have cannot be considered to be a fully functioning early alert system. There is a strong need for other systematic, quantitative data analysis that is predictive of student withdrawal, academic difficulty, at risk for transfer and/or otherwise not persisting. Then, when this qualitative and quantitative data is collected, it must be analyzed and acted upon. With the six week grades, CARE form and WPS data, Plymouth State University certainly has some rudimentary components of an alert system. However, when compared to best practices, they are inadequate by themselves and not integrated.

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### ACTION PROPOSAL 3A: INSTITUTE A COMPREHENSIVE STUDENT ALERT SYSTEM

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Plymouth State University needs to centralize and formalize an alert system. At the very minimum, this alert system would need to combine the current efforts of the Maxient System/CARE form, 6-week grades, registration status and the warning/probation/severance advisories. This data would need to be compiled and quickly disseminated in a user friendly format. This could require an information technology assistant who specifically worked with the Chief University Retention Officer to organize and analyze this data. At a minimum, all of these items need to be fully implemented. Currently, six week grades are only offered to students who have earned less than 47 credits. If the target is to affect both retention and graduation rates, this should be something that is afforded to all undergraduate students.

Perhaps more cost effective and certainly a more robust application would be to purchase the EAB Student Success Collaborative software. Its system is research based, would be able to integrate what we already do and provide a robust predictive alert system that would be near impossible to replicate on our own without a large expenditure of resources. In a quote received by the taskforce and the provost, the software would require an initial cost of \$20,000 and \$65,000 per year for five years. While this is certainly comes with a great upfront cost, it may be more cost effective than creating our own system or modifying Maxient to meet our needs. The operating staff position of Information Support Technician would be required to initiate the minimum recommendation in paragraph one. This position is graded at OS 15 according to the USNH Classification list with a minimum starting salary of \$41,050.08.

(<http://www.unh.edu/hr/sites/unh.edu.hr/files/pdfs/classified-titles.pdf> and [http://usnh.edu/hr/compensation/pdf/2014\\_01012014\\_OS\\_with\\_Annual\\_Rates.pdf](http://usnh.edu/hr/compensation/pdf/2014_01012014_OS_with_Annual_Rates.pdf) respectively) After calculating benefit cost, step increases over five years and the possibility of not hiring at the lowest salary level possible, the cost factors very well may favor purchasing the Student Success Collaborative software. This would require training the staff of the Student Success Center and the new Chief University Retention Officer on its use.

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### ACTION PROPOSAL 3B: ENCOURAGE USE OF NEW SCHOOL COUNSELING/SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY ON CAMPUS CLINIC

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The new counseling clinic will be able to increase the capacity of short term, focused counseling opportunities for students. This can provide some support not only to the faculty and student success center but as a proactive tool for our alert system. The clinic should be encouraged to develop and provide a “menu” list of services that could be of use to students who need assistance. This would allow advisors of any capacity to recommend/require students to get assistance from the clinic. Items that would be beneficial to develop include:

- Counseling for academic difficulty issues (e.g., specifically designed interventions for students in academic warning or probation or those returning from severance).
- Student conduct issues assistance.
- Career exploration services such as Holland type indicator assessments
- Assessments for student learning issues

A strong working relationship between the Chief University Retention Officer and the clinic leadership would provide a comprehensive starting list and allow for the development of new services as needs are identified.

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## MOVING FORWARD TO 81/60

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The issues at hand for Plymouth State are certainly daunting. The combined issues of lower first year enrollment with declining retention rates leaves PSU with a reduction in undergraduate students of 6% over the past four years. Projections are for these trends to continue over the next four years with smaller first year classes. These issues require significant and effective structural

interventions. This taskforce's proposals are based on best practices research and an examination of PSU's culture and practice. While it comes at a cost, these proposals are not radical in nature and are consistent with interventions at other successful institutions. The process followed by the task force was one of collegiality that allowed for individuals to provide input from their specific areas and an attention on research into best practices. Having worked through this process with a sizable and diverse group, there are many endeavors that could have been considered in order to improve the student educational experience. The proposals submitted here are the ideas that garnered the most support, both from research and the task force members' experiences on campus.

By design, these proposals are surface level recommendations. As retention, persistence and overall enrollment management are specific areas of expertise; we recommend that key personnel from the areas be given latitude in the creation of the structures and interventions suggested herein. While a vision has been laid out with respect to career counseling, advising, early alert systems and better utilization of existing resources; once the implementation phase begins, we recognize that new realities will occur. Therefore, we encourage the University to allow the actual staff who will be in leadership roles to further develop the needed details.

Without a doubt, Plymouth State University has the opportunity to become more effective in providing an educational experience to its students that is without equal. Many of the pieces of best practice are already in place. When looking at part five of the charge, the task force found that the process for readmission had been revised recently and was a smooth and reasonable process for students. This is just one example of promising practice happening here now.

During the task force's process of focusing on improving the current challenging situation, we realized that great things are currently occurring here. It is our hope that this plan will help strengthen existing support structures and create new areas that will lead Plymouth State University closer to its 81/60 goal.

## APPENDIX A

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### TASKFORCE CHARGE

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1. To look at our structure of support services for achieving a goal of 81% first-to-second-year retention and 60% graduation rate, and provide recommendations for structural improvement to the Provost and VP of EMSA.
2. Make recommendations for a more comprehensive early-alert system.
  - a. Identifies at-risk students and encourages them to use available support systems at optimal times rather than waiting for times of crisis.
  - b. Review and make recommendations regarding possible elements of the alert system such as absence tracking, academic alerts, financial distress, behavioral/social/emotional concerns, and a method or follow-up and intervention tracking.
3. Examine and make recommendations regarding the optimal relationship between academic advising and career services.
4. Improve accessibility, both virtual and physical, to student services.
5. Create a system to identify potential transfer risk and a more student-friendly process of “dropping in” through a re-enrollment initiative.

## APPENDIX B

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### FACULTY MENTORING AND ADVISING EXPECTATIONS FROM FACULTY HANDBOOK

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#### **F. Expectations of Full-time Faculty for Mentoring and Supporting Students**

Consistent with the University values and mission that establish a commitment to actively preparing students to participate respectfully and responsibly in a pluralistic society, faculty members are expected to participate in mentoring students. Mentoring students is different from the basic function of providing registration information to students; it implies that faculty will share experience and expertise that contributes to the intellectual, social, and professional development of students for success in their studies and success in their transition after graduation.

**1. Mentoring Students** All faculty members are expected to mentor and support student development. Specifically, faculty shall

- a. provide advice that assists students in meeting career aspirations and/or graduate education,
- b. make him/herself accessible to students (advisees and students in courses/major),
- c. promote students for awards and scholarships,
- d. promote student orientation and involvement in profession or discipline,
- e. engage students in scholarly and professional activities when feasible and appropriate,
- f. participate in and support student activities (orientation sessions, convocations, Commencement, award ceremonies, honorary societies, etc.),
- g. help the student feel welcome and to provide pertinent general information relative to University life.

#### **2. Advising**

Student success hinges on meaningful academic advising. Faculty advising of individual students involves being available to assist students in a variety of their life activities while at Plymouth State University. Recognizing that students differ in terms of the variety and urgency of their need for help, advisors should be particularly interested in the academic planning, scholastic achievement, career planning, and social adjustment of their assigned students. Such counseling should be based on the evaluation of skills and abilities and the identification of personal priorities. Faculty members who are assigned advisees are expected to

- a. know the curriculum and provide effective and accurate curriculum advising,
- b. assist students with academic progress and time to degree,
- c. establish a basis of contact with students upon which personal, academic, and administrative processes may be integrated,
- d. promote student awareness of their personal responsibility for the development of an appropriate academic program,
- e. familiarize students with the procedures and regulations relative to curricula offered, requirements for graduation, required courses and electives, and the content and values of specific courses,
- f. assist students in completing registration and utilizing the drop/add process,
- g. develop communication with students that is consistent, frequent, and confidential.

More detailed information can be found on the Advisor Information website at:

<http://www.plymouth.edu/office/undergraduate-advising/for-advisors/> .

The Graduate Advising handbook is available through the CoGS Moodle site.