Report of Improved Graduation Rate Committee
December 2008

Introduction
The Improved Graduation Rates Committee was charged with identifying strategies for moving Auburn University (AU) into the top 25% of land-grant universities with regard to six-year graduation rates. Specifically, the Committee was asked to identify ways to improve the graduation rate from 63% to a desired rate in the 80% range and was provided with the following directive:

- Identify and evaluate options for improving graduation rates, consider: developing small one-on-one faculty-student mentoring relationships; developing small student interest groups; working with academic advisors; working with advisors on heavy course loads; making summer semester mandatory; offering incentives—summer at reduced tuition; increase number of transfer students; “conditional” admission; others (investigate “best practices”)
- Prepare a report, with recommendations, to the Provost by December 2008, which identifies the following: Which recommended actions will work best at Auburn University; how to implement; timeline/budget.

The Committee met nine times during the Fall 2008 semester to review data presented by the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (OIRA) and Educational Support Services, discuss best practices referenced in the literature, identify those practices already in place, and make recommendations regarding additional practices well suited for implementation at Auburn University.¹

What Our Graduation and Retention Data Show
Table 1 shows that for the past six years Auburn’s six-year graduation rate has spanned a low of 61.9% for the 1999 cohort and a high of 67.6% for the 1997 cohort. The graduation rate of 63.4% for the 2001 cohort positions Auburn as 14th among the 24 SREB schools and 24th among the 50 public universities with land-grant status. To rank among the top 25% of both SREB and land-grant institutions, Auburn needs to aim for a graduation rate of 75% or above.

Table 1. Six-Year Graduation Rates for Auburn University

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohort</th>
<th>6-Year Grad Rate</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Gender Gap</th>
<th>White, Non-Hispanic</th>
<th>Black, Non-Hispanic</th>
<th>Ethnicity Gap</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>63.4%</td>
<td>65.6%</td>
<td>61.0%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>66.1%</td>
<td>43.9%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>62.7%</td>
<td>66.6%</td>
<td>58.6%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>64.2%</td>
<td>45.4%</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>61.9%</td>
<td>66.0%</td>
<td>57.6%</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>63.4%</td>
<td>50.2%</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>65.0%</td>
<td>68.0%</td>
<td>60.7%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>66.2%</td>
<td>52.7%</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>67.6%</td>
<td>71.2%</td>
<td>63.4%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>68.4%</td>
<td>57.4%</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>67.5%</td>
<td>70.6%</td>
<td>64.0%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>68.2%</td>
<td>54.9%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
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</table>

Sources: AU Office of Institutional Research and Assessment and www.collegeresults.org.

Table 1 also provides data disaggregated by gender, revealing that females consistently have graduation rates 5-8 percentage points higher than males. The data disaggregated by ethnicity show a gap of 11-22 percentage points when the six-year graduation rates of White students are compared to those of Black,

¹ The Committee wishes to extend a special thanks to the contributions of the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment as well as Educational Support Services. We are grateful for the data and insights they shared with the Committee and their prompt responses to the questions we posed.
non-Hispanic students. An OIRA report presented in Appendix A compares graduation rates of Auburn and its SREB peer institutions. This report shows that graduation rates for AU Black, non-Hispanic Auburn students fall well below the SREB average for this peer group. Interestingly, a logistic regression analysis completed by OIRA (Appendix B) indicates that the graduation rate gap between White and Black, non-Hispanic students disappears if factors related to preparation for college (e.g., high school GPA/ACT score), first semester GPA, and financial aid are controlled. Clearly, efforts to increase graduation rates must include close attention to subsets of students with graduation rates significantly lower than the institutional average.

Withdrawal rates for recent freshman classes, shown in Table 2, predict an increase in graduation rates in upcoming years. For example, the withdrawal rate for the 2006 cohort was 13.9% after the first year and 21.4% after the second year. In comparison, the withdrawal rates after the first and second years were 19.0% and 24.1%, respectively, for the 1997 cohort which attained the highest reported six-year graduation rate. This decrease in withdrawal rates may be attributed to recent efforts to recruit highly qualified freshmen through an expansion of AU’s scholarship program. Cumulative withdrawal rates show that students are much more likely to leave Auburn during or after the first or second year than after three or more years. On a related note, a recent OIRA report of six-year persistence rates of Auburn students indicates that for the past three freshman cohorts (1999-2001), 63% graduated within six years, 34% left AU prior to completion of a degree program, and only 4% remained enrolled after six years. These data suggest that strategies focusing on the recruitment of well-prepared students and retention of these students during their first two years of college may have an even greater impact on graduation rates than strategies focusing on speeding up progression of currently enrolled students through their degree programs.

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<tr>
<td>Cumulative Withdrawal Rates (%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Year</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>13.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Years</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>21.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Years</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>26.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 Years</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>28.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cumulative Graduation Rates (%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Years</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 Years</td>
<td>40.2</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>36.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 Years</td>
<td>61.9</td>
<td>61.2</td>
<td>59.2</td>
<td>55.7</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>58.2</td>
<td>57.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 Years</td>
<td>67.5</td>
<td>67.6</td>
<td>64.9</td>
<td>61.9</td>
<td>62.7</td>
<td>63.4</td>
<td>64.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>8 Years</td>
<td>70.2</td>
<td>70.0</td>
<td>67.8</td>
<td>64.8</td>
<td>65.3</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>10 Years</td>
<td>70.6</td>
<td>70.6</td>
<td>68.3</td>
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*Summer and fall entering freshmen

Source: AU Office of Institutional Research and Assessment.
https://oira.auburn.edu/factbook/acadinfo/retention/wagrefc.aspx
Recommendations
A review of the literature regarding the improvement of graduation rates indicates that no one strategy fits all students and no one “best practice” program fits all institutions. However, the literature does suggest that institutions committed to increasing graduation rates compare best practices to existing practices in the following areas (Carey, 2004, 2005a, 2005b; Muraskin & Lee, 2004):

- Recruitment,
- Advising including comprehensive support services,
- Academic policies,
- Student engagement and commitment to the institution,
- Timely progression through degree programs,
- Teaching and learning, and
- Pervasive use of data related to student retention and graduation.

Based on a review and analysis of the literature, the Committee offers the following recommendations. A chart delineating a suggested timeline (including responsible parties) and budget for implementation of these recommendations is provided in a separate document.

1. Continue current emphasis on recruiting and enrolling well-prepared and diverse freshman cohorts.

Rationale: Enrolling well-prepared students is a proven strategy for increasing graduation rates: Students who are ready for college typically stay in college and graduate in less than six years. Over the past three years, the average ACT score for Auburn’s entering freshmen has shown a steady and significant increase (24.3 – Fall 2006; 24.9 – Fall 2007, 25.9 – Fall 2008). This increase is attributed primarily to enhanced marketing and recruiting efforts and an investment in university funded merit-based academic scholarships. Over the past three years, the University has increased the continuing operating budget of Enrollment Management Services by $1.5 million annually, provided one-time funding of approximately $2 million, and funded the scholarship program with at least $2 million per year in continuing academic scholarships. In addition, the Auburn Spirit Foundation for Scholarships was created in 2006 to enhance and direct credit card royalties and additional funding to academic scholarships. Retention data available for the Fall 2006 cohort and presented in Table 2 predict a significant improvement in the six-year graduation rate for these cohorts.

In addition, in response to the ethnicity graduation gap revealed in Table 1 as well as a decline in the enrollment of minority student Fall 2008, Auburn University has made several advancements in efforts to improve the recruitment of well-prepared minority students. Specifically, Financial Aid workshops are to be held in the major geographical recruiting cities, a reception is planned for accepted and prospective students of color, calls and emails targeting students of color are being made, and individual college efforts are directed toward recruiting well-prepared minority students. Interestingly, the rate at which tuition is discounted was higher for both in-state and out-of-state students of color than for the overall freshman class entering in Fall 2008. Several scholarship programs such as the Provost Leadership University Scholarship (Plus), the Advancement Scholarship, the National Achievement Finalists and National Hispanic Scholars and the Board of Trustees Scholarships directly and indirectly focus on the recruitment of well-prepared minority students.

The University Scholarships Office, reporting to the Dean of Enrollment Management, develops the scholarship programs and manages the funds and distributions of central university scholarship dollars.
In 2005, Noel-Levitz was engaged to help in developing scholarship strategies, as well as to provide assistance in enhancing the marketing and recruiting efforts described above. Regular reporting of scholarship awards, student demographics, student financial need and other data is provided through Noel-Levitz’s Enrollment Revenue Management reporting. Reporting for Fall 2008 is the first full cycle of recruiting and enrollment for which data are available and use of these reports is expected in the future strategic direction of scholarship dollars. However, at the present time, while the allocation of college/department scholarships is reported through this model, the decisions and strategies are decentralized and unique to each college, school, and department. Following are some examples of discrepancies that have emerged in this decentralized model:

• Some colleges focus on freshman scholarships (COSAM, Agriculture), while others provide scholarship dollars nearly exclusively to higher-level students (e.g., Business, Education, Human Sciences).

• Minimum GPA requirements for college and/or departmental scholarships may vary significantly from standards established for central scholarships (e.g., some COSAM scholarships require students to maintain a 3.8 GPA).

• Some colleges, schools, and departments wait until the completion of spring semester to award scholarships, while central awards are completed by March 31.

The potential impact of the varied practices on the graduation rate should be studied further to determine if more consistency would lead to improvements in the graduation rate.

In efforts to maintain high academic admission standards, some institutions grant either full or conditional admission to applicants. For example, if full admission is based on a minimum high school GPA and an ACT/SAT score, a percentage of students falling below these minimums is granted conditional admission. Conditional admission could be contingent on mandatory requirements such as summer enrollment, participation in a learning community, and/or advising through a designated center for at-risk students such as Auburn’s Cater Center.

**Actions:**
1.1 Assess the adequacy and effectiveness of current marketing, recruiting, and academic scholarship initiatives, including those aimed at minority students.
1.2 Based on the assessment of current practices, consider additional and/or expanded marketing, recruiting, and/or academic scholarship efforts such as targeting feeder high schools.
1.3 Explore concept of conditional admission for students not meeting pre-determined minimum academic admission standards.

2. **Review and improve the current advising system, including development of an early warning system.**

**Rationale:** Harvard professor Richard Light claims, “Good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience.”

2 A review of best practices in the area of advising indicates that Auburn’s current system has not kept pace with comprehensive advising systems developed by other institutions. A survey of non-returning students conducted by Educational

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Support Services in 2003 showed that 18% of the 517 respondents agreed that dissatisfaction with advising strongly influenced their decision not to return to Auburn.\(^3\) (See Appendix C for full report.)

Although the backbone of Auburn’s advising system is a group of dedicated and competent professional academic advisors, the system lacks sufficient funding and centralization to provide the services offered by many other institutions. Given the critical role advising plays in keeping students on track for program completion and connecting students to appropriate support resources, the Committee recommends significant attention be given to improving the current advising system. Although the literature suggests that the organization and delivery of advising services has no single “best” format, premiere advising programs feature sufficient staffing, campus-wide advising resources including coordinated student academic support services, and a system for identifying, referring, and working closely with at-risk students.

**Sufficient staffing.** Exemplary advising programs are first and foremost well staffed. Florida State administrators attribute significant increases in its graduation rate and the elimination of the gap between Whites and underrepresented minorities in large part to the addition of a significant number of academic advisors responsible for contacting each student at least three times a semester (Carey, 2005b) as well as the addition of Advising First, a program targeting undeclared and designated at-risk students.\(^4\) While the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) recommends advising loads of 300/1 for general advising, the current average AU advising load for a professional academic advisor is 541/1 with some colleges operating with a ratio of 949/1.

**Campus-wide advising resources.** Not only are exemplary advising programs well staffed, premiere advising programs such as the one at Penn State (graduation rate of 84%) feature extensive campus-wide online advising resources for students as well as for professional and faculty advisors. In addition, face-to-face advisor development programs are an integral part of the overall university advising program. Recommendations regarding continuous improvement of the advising system are the responsibility of a university advising council chaired through the Office of the Provost. In contrast, the existing advising system at Auburn University is highly decentralized with each college responsible for defining and providing advising for its students with most colleges using a combination of professional and faculty advisors. Neither new professional academic advisors nor new faculty assuming advising responsibilities are provided with a university-wide orientation regarding Auburn’s advising policies and practices, and no University handbook exists summarizing this advising information.

**Early warning system.** Many institutions have dramatically increased graduation rates through the development, implementation, and staffing of an early warning system (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1995; Tinto, 1995). Although the average ACT score for AU freshmen has increased significantly in recent years, 17% of the Fall 2008 cohort entered with ACT scores below 23. In addition, OIRA reports that 19% of freshmen in the Fall 2007 cohort would have been placed on academic warning after the first semester if they had been unable to invoke the grade adjustment policy. In identifying strategies for improving retention and graduation, the University must recognize that much variation exists among the academic readiness of its students. A comprehensive plan for

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\(^3\) Other reasons noted by at least 15% of the respondents included financial concerns (36%), family responsibilities (29%), too far from family and friends (22%), too far away to attend class (20%), and need to work fulltime (20%).

\(^4\) Florida State’s most recently reported graduation rate is 69%. The most recent ethnicity data available at [www.CollegeResults.org](http://www.CollegeResults.org) show graduation rates of 68.5% and 71.5%, respectively, for White and Black, non-Hispanic students and a graduation rate of 68.3% for all underrepresented minority students.
significantly increasing retention and graduation rates needs to include a system for early identification of and intensive support for those students who are at risk as defined by the system.

Essential to the functioning of any early warning system is the availability of staff to provide intrusive advising for targeted at-risk students. Intrusive advising typically includes frequent communication between students and professional academic advisors through e-mail, phone, or face-to-face meetings; registration holds to ensure that students receive appropriate advising; and interactions as needed with other academic support staff (e.g., career counselors, psychological counselors, academic coaches). NACADA recommends advising loads of 100/1 for at-risk students. Because success the first semester and year in college is a significant graduation predictor, early warning systems, though costly, have proven to be well worth the investment.

Early warning systems typically consist of several components used to identify at-risk students:

- Pre-identification (e.g., low high school GPAs or ACT scores, first generation students, significant financial need);
- College GPAs below 2.0;
- Excessive course withdrawals;
- Monitoring of actions such as application for financial aid, registration for classes during the allotted registration period, and frequent changes in major;
- Faculty reporting of midterm grades, excessive absences, and/or disengaged behavior during class; and
- Failure of students to successfully complete 30 credit hours during a full academic year (may include summer).

Once identified, students deemed to be at risk are contacted by an advisor and directed toward appropriate programs or resources intended to provide the support they need.

- **The Program for Students with Disabilities** – This program provides accommodations and services based upon the individual student's documentation.
- **Summer transition programs** - Clemson University, for example, hosts an Early Success Program which begins with a summer program and continues throughout a student’s first year. Florida State University similarly brings in such students during the summer before their first year. Such programs, like AU’s Summer Bridge and Summer Enhancement Experience (SEE) programs, may particularly aid in the retention of first-generation students and students with low ACT scores.
- **Developmental and/or basic course work** – Many institutions provide developmental and/or basic course work in writing, reading, and/or math. Students are encouraged or required to complete the course work based on ACT or other entrance test scores. Typically developmental course work is viewed as remedial and does not result in college credit. Basic course work, however, is designed to provide opportunities for students to master college-level skills with a high degree of support and serves as elective hours (e.g., MATH 1000). The literature indicates that developmental and/or basic course work is beneficial only if students complete it early in their college careers. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) reviewed the literature referencing developmental course work and found that these academic interventions assist the underprepared student short term and into the second year in academic adjustment and persistence. Further, some studies have shown a positive graduation effect for students participating in developmental work the first semester (Braley & Ogden, 1997). At this time, AU offerings of developmental and/or basic course work are extremely limited.
- **Academic support services** – Auburn, like its peer institutions, offers a variety of academic support opportunities. These services are provided through the Student Success Center housed in
Educational Support Services with oversight by the Office of Undergraduate Studies. The Student Success Center provides comprehensive services through five service centers: (1) Academic Support, (2) the Cater Center for Academic and Career Excellence, (3) Career Development Services, (4) Freshman Year and Students in Transition, and (5) Student Counseling Services.

- **Small classes** – Students who struggle academically tend to struggle even more in large lecture courses. Some institutions have increased their graduation rates by decreasing class sizes, particularly in 1000- and 2000-level courses. For example, Syracuse University (graduation rate of 81%) has reduced class sizes in all introductory-level classes. Currently AU reports an average class size of 37 compared to peer institutions such as Clemson with an average class size of 31. Small core classes not only allow for more individualized instruction but also assist in building community during the first two years of a student’s university experience. Minimizing or eliminating large, de-personalized lecture core courses helps students connect to both other students and to faculty members and also assists faculty in detecting and responding to warning signs. Reducing course seats as proposed in Auburn’s Writing Initiative is one method of addressing the issue; another method is to offer large lecture course with opportunities for small group supplemental instruction (e.g., Math Excel sections of calculus courses).

- **Financial counseling** – Students who consider leaving Auburn due primarily to financial reasons may benefit from assistance directed toward helping them understand the best ways to finance their education, obtain on-campus employment, and/or find loan and scholarship opportunities. In addition, the University needs to be aware of the kinds of support needed by students who are helping finance their education by working more than 20 hours a week. In the summary of the 2003 survey of non-returning students conducted by Educational Support Services, 36% of the 517 respondents indicated that they did not re-enroll due to financial concerns while 20% indicated that they did not re-enroll because they needed to work fulltime. The Committee is concerned that given the current state of the economy and based on recent informal conversations with students, financial concerns will pose a bigger threat to retention than in the past, particularly for students paying out-of-state tuition.

In addition to the strategies noted above, strategies that focus primarily on promoting engagement and commitment to the institution for all students provide additional layers of support for at-risk students. Specifically, strategies such as **learning communities**, **first year seminars**, and **mentoring programs** help students understand what the institution values, what successful students do, how to take advantage of institutional learning resources, and how to become engaged in campus and community life. These strategies are described in more detail in Recommendation #3.

Development and implementation of an early warning system at Auburn University would build on the general career, personal, academic, and counseling support currently provided by the Student Success Center, specifically expanding the services of the Cater Center which targets students in academic peril. In addition, development and implementation would need to proceed in a manner that creates an integrated, coordinated, comprehensive, and widely-supported advising initiative. Faculty buy-in is essential, for faculty are typically the front line in identifying and responding to initial warning signs. For example, the reporting of midterm grades can trigger forced contact with advisors, who can then provide the student with recommendations regarding study skills and adjustment counseling as needed. Clemson (graduation rate of 78%) requires faculty to submit grades at least five days prior to midterm. Auburn, in comparison, only **encourages** that a grade be returned to the student by midterm. The

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5 Academic Support includes Academic Coaching, Academic Counseling, Learning Communities, Study Partners, Study Smart, Supplemental Instruction, UNIV courses (first year seminars), and 7 Strategies for Academic Success.
University of Connecticut which has a 75% six-year graduation rate requires instructors of 1000- and 2000-level classes to submit grades for all students who have failed to earn a C or above at midterm.

**Actions:**

2.1 Establish a university student advising council, chaired by the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Studies, to oversee continuous improvement of an integrated, coordinated, and comprehensive advising system.

2.2 Identify ways to improve AU’s general advising system to include centralization of processes and resources through the Office of Undergraduate Studies; consider the following:

- General advising loads of 300/1; advising loads of 100/1 for at-risk students.
- Mandatory advising prior to registration for all academic units (to include all or targeted students).
- Improvement of online tools and software to support advising (e.g., online degree audit, effective online GPA calculator for students\(^6\) and online long-range course schedules).\(^7\)
- Use of software such as TutorTrac or SARS (a scheduling and reporting system) for tracking of advising and improved data collection.\(^8\)
- Development of centralized faculty and professional advising training, materials, and support.
- Articulation of University expectations for faculty regarding advising and its contribution to tenure/promotion and merit raises (e.g., require satisfactory teaching and advising as a condition).

2.3 Develop and implement a university-wide early warning system for targeting and supporting at-risk students.

3. **Review the impact of current academic policies on retention and graduation rates; recommend changes as appropriate.**

**Rationale:** Although it is important for institutions to aim for best practices pertaining to general advising as well as more intrusive advising for at-risk students, it is also important to systematically review the effects of the institution’s academic policies on student retention and graduation. For example, Auburn students can delay an academic warning or suspension through frequent and excessive use of course withdrawals or making use of the grade adjustment policy to “GAP” D’s and F’s, thus preventing academic action; therefore, it is unclear whether recent decreases in first year withdrawal rates are due primarily to increases in ACT scores of entering freshmen, use of withdrawals and/or grade gapping to mask academic failure, or some combination.

**Actions**

3.1 Review current academic policies in light of their impact on retention and graduation rates and make a recommendation regarding modifications if deemed appropriate. Following are sample policies that merit review:

- Attendance – Consider making attendance mandatory in 1000- and 2000-level courses.

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\(^6\) AU used to have an outstanding one and it was deleted from the grad school website. Current one is inferior. Efforts to find the old one were unsuccessful. See [http://www.back2college.com/raisegpa.htm](http://www.back2college.com/raisegpa.htm) for an example of an effective one.

\(^7\) COSAM currently has online schedules containing semesters and times courses are offered.

\(^8\) AU College of Liberal Arts is currently using SARS.
• Midterm grades – To ensure that students have time to make an informed decision about whether to remain in or drop a course, consider requiring faculty to make grades available to students in all undergraduate courses, based on at least one significant graded assignment, by five days prior to midterm (the last day to drop a course).
• Course withdrawal – Consider extending the deadline to 10 weeks for fall and spring semesters.
• Concurrent enrollment – Consider redefining concurrent enrollment to allow students to enroll in course work at another institution while taking course work from Auburn, particularly during the summer term.
• Grade adjustment policy – Examine the impact of the GAP on delaying needed intervention when the student’s grade point average falls below established guidelines; review the use of GAP as a means of avoiding academic action such as suspension; consider imposing guidelines for retroactive grade adjustment (e.g., allowing a student to GAP only after the course is retaken or substituted).

4. Expand strategies for promoting student engagement and commitment to the institution.

Rationale: The ability of an institution to attract and retain high caliber students also depends on its success in promoting student engagement and commitment to the institution, often operationalized by strategies that help students connect with other students, faculty, and the community. Data from a 2003 survey of non-returning students conducted by Educational Support Services indicate that the 517 respondents identified multiple reasons for their withdrawals from Auburn. Following are examples of reasons which might have been minimized or eliminated if the University had been more successful in helping these students engage and develop a commitment to the institution:
• distance from friends/family (22%)
• dissatisfaction with advising (18%) – also see Recommendation #2,
• dissatisfied with teaching (13%) – also see Recommendation #5,
• work schedule (13%),
• unfriendly/unhelpful faculty (11%),
• unfriendly staff (9%), and
• dissatisfied with social life (8%).
Auburn is currently utilizing multiple best practice strategies for promoting student engagement and commitment to the institution. These strategies include learning communities, first year seminars, small interest groups, and mentoring.

Learning communities. Auburn is developing and expanding residential-based living and learning communities (LLCs) and non-residential learning communities (LCs) as a primary means for promoting student engagement and commitment to the institution. Members of a LLC or LC cohort enroll in the same linked or clustered courses during an academic term(s) often structured around a college, major, interest, or interdisciplinary theme. This experiential learning builds community among students, between students and their faculty, and among faculty members and disciplines. A first year seminar (UNIV 1000, 1100, 1050, 1060, or 1150) serves as an anchor course for each community. Future plans include communities being developed for transfer students and sophomores. Fall 2009 Auburn University will have 780 available slots for freshmen in 32 communities (up from 17 communities in 2008), thus accommodating approximately 20% of the entering class. Outcomes for the cohorts from the Auburn University Learning Communities for both 2006 and 2007 demonstrate that students who participate in a learning community persist at a higher rate compared to the entire freshman class.
According to Educational Support Services, in 2006, 16.7% learning community students had some type of academic action (e.g., warning, suspension) at the completion of the academic year compared to 24.6% of the entire freshman class. In 2007, 9.6% of learning community students had some type of academic action at the completion of the academic year as compared to 13.7% of the entire freshman class.

First year seminars. As mentioned above, all students enrolled in learning communities share a common UNIV course, functioning as a first year seminar. Currently Auburn’s UNIV courses include the following:

- **UNIV 1000 The Auburn Experience (1 credit):** Assists first year students in making a successful transition to college; addresses academic policies, academic support services and resources, institutional history and tradition, and independent decision making and risk reduction strategies; involves students in small group discussions and activities including community engagement.
- **UNIV 1050 Success Strategies (1 credit):** Assists first year and transfer students with the development of college-level academic improvement skills, study strategies, and critical thinking skills; focuses on the development of time management skills and the learning process as well as an understanding of the role of higher education in students’ lives; engages students in small group discussions and activities.
- **UNIV 1060 Success Strategies II (2 credits):** Assists students in academic peril with the development of the awareness of academic, career, and personal issues that are negatively impacting academic success.
- **UNIV 1100 First Year Seminar (1-4 credits):** Designed as a learning community course, focuses on a discipline specific or specific theme of interest to first year students in a university setting through discussion, activities, reading, writing, teamwork, and community engagement.
- **UNIV 1150 First Year Seminar (2 credits):** Designed as a learning community course, focuses on issues relevant to first year students in a university setting through discussion, activities, reading, writing, teamwork, and community service, all of which are centered on a specific discipline or theme; also emphasizes the importance of academic improvement, career options, time management, personal development, and relevant social issues.

Although these first year seminars are a component of learning communities, they are also available, but not required, for students who are not part of these communities.

Small interest groups. Auburn offers multiple opportunities for students to engage in small interest groups structured as clubs and organizations as well as co-curricular activities. For example, at AU there are more than 300 student organizations, some as small as 15 members. In addition to university sponsored organizations, each AU college/school and some departments have their own organizations. This type of engagement provides students opportunities to build social and academic networks. In addition, involvement in such activities has a positive effect on graduation (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993).

Mentoring. Programs that structure peer and/or faculty mentoring of students are also effective strategies for promoting student engagement and a commitment to the institution. In peer mentoring, freshmen are paired with trained upper class mentors who help them successfully navigate the transition from high school to college. Faculty mentoring of students involves a structured relationship between a student and a faculty member. Most of Auburn’s mentoring programs such as Providing Opportunities for Diverse Students Program (P2ODS), The College of Engineering’s AT&T Minority Engineering Program, the Provost Leadership University Scholarship (PLUS) Program, and the College of Education’s Minority, Achievement, Retention and Success Program (MARS) focus on supporting minority students. The Undergraduate Research Fellowship Awards Program is a different type of
mentoring program that provides student research apprenticeships. Students and their faculty mentors are required to work together for the duration of their project, meet regularly, and co-present findings.

The strategies Auburn is currently implementing to promote student engagement and commitment to the institution are aligned with “best practices”; the challenge is to engage in continuous assessment of these strategies regarding their impact on retention and graduation rates and allocate additional resources to expand those strategies which are most effective.

**Actions:**
4.1 Expand learning community initiatives to provide opportunity for participation by at least half the freshman class within five years.
   - Recruit faculty to teach in learning communities
   - Work with Office of the Provost to identify faculty incentives for participation
   - Expand themed communities and college/school communities
   - Identify fiscal resources for maintenance of and expansion of learning communities
   - Utilize the Learning Community Planning Committee to analyze data and outcomes to report to the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Studies.

4.2 Increase the first year seminar course offerings to first year students not enrolled in learning communities, maintaining the benefit of small student/faculty ratio.
   - Recruit and train faculty for first year seminar courses
   - Work with schools/colleges to integrate into their college/school orientation courses a focus on student transitional issues to the university, academic policies, social and academic integration, and incorporation of small faculty/student grouping.

4.3 Expand and coordinate current peer and student-faculty mentoring opportunities, including the Undergraduate Research Fellowship Award Program.

5. **Encourage students to proceed in a timely manner through a degree program; eliminate roadblocks related to course registration.**

**Rationale:** Although the literature on improving graduation rates suggests that strategies focusing on recruiting high caliber students and retaining students during the freshman and sophomore years have a greater impact on improving graduation rates than strategies focusing on moving students more quickly through their programs, the Committee agreed that a comprehensive plan to improve graduation rates must also include strategies for encouraging graduation in 4-5 years and eliminating roadblocks related to a progression through a program due to issues related to course registration. The Committee anticipates that strategies eliminating roadblocks to course registration may have a positive impact on student retention during the early years of college and that the impact of strategies encouraging a timely progression through degree programs will increase as the number of students remaining for a third year and beyond increases.

The AU Bulletin includes a curriculum model for each undergraduate program showing completion in eight semesters, with each semester typically representing 15-17 semester hours. However, Fall 2008 data provided to the Tuition Restructuring Committee suggest that most students are not following an eight semester plan; specifically, only 36% of students are enrolled in 15 hours or more (32% of in-state students and 45% of out-of-state students). Encouraging students to enroll in sufficient course work each semester and finish a degree in a timely manner is an important component of a plan for improving graduation rates. Despite efforts to encourage students to follow an eight semester graduation plan,
students fall behind schedule for multiple reasons including course withdrawals, changes in major, and failure to meet prerequisites in sequenced course work. To graduate in a timely manner, students should be encouraged to enroll in one or more summer terms.

In addition, the University must take responsibility for informing students well in advance of when courses will be offered. Also, the use of a campus-wide procedures regarding waiting lists (e.g., through Banner) could help the University identify possible bottleneck courses and respond accordingly.

**Actions**

5.1 Emphasize in Camp War Eagle, SOS sessions, and all other advising sessions that students are expected to complete a minimum of 15-16 hours per semester or complete 30 credit hours per academic year so that they will graduate in a timely fashion (4-5 years).

5.2 Include in the early warning system (Recommendation 2.3) a method for identifying students for targeted follow up who do not complete at least 30 hours per academic year (which may include summer) as well as third and fourth year students who have not made adequate progress in their current majors.

5.3 Eliminate additional tuition for taking more than 15 hours per semester.

5.4 Limit football tickets to five seasons and/or 150 total attempted hours, whichever comes first.

5.5 Incentivize summer enrollment through smaller classes and tuition reduction; provide curriculum models showing a full summer term and/or indicating course recommendations for summer; consider guaranteeing football tickets for freshmen beginning with a summer term; and explore online delivery and/or concurrent enrollment options for summer term.

5.6 Require departments to provide a two-year rotation schedule of course offerings.

5.7 Identify bottleneck courses that may be causing students to remain one or more additional semesters due to inability to obtain a seat in a timely fashion; allocate appropriate resources to remedy problems.

6. **Provide data and resources to support faculty in the ongoing improvement of teaching and learning.**

**Rationale:** A critical component of any comprehensive plan to improve graduation rates is ongoing attention to the quality of an institution’s teaching and learning. Results of a 2003 survey of non-returning students conducted by Educational Support Services indicate that 13% of the 517 respondents identified their dissatisfaction with teaching at AU as a reason for withdrawal.

According to the literature, academic success during the early years of college is a significant predictor of graduation. Receiving a grade of D, F, U, or W during the first year has a significant negative impact on retention and, therefore, graduation. In an effort to pinpoint the courses in which students are most likely to experience academic failure during their early college years, many institutions systematically monitor grades distributions for 1000- and 2000-level courses and identify “gatekeeping” courses or course sections which have higher than average rates of failure.

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Bottleneck courses are defined as those courses which delay progression through a degree program as planned due to an inability to secure a seat in a required course, particularly courses serving as prerequisites to more advanced courses.

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While a grade assignment of D, F, U, or W in an identified gatekeeping course may result from legitimate lack of preparation on the part of students, high failure rates may also result from the following:

- lack of attendance;
- inappropriate curriculum alignment;
- larger than optimal class sizes;
- lack of sufficient supplemental instruction, study group sessions, or tutoring programs; and/or
- outmoded teaching pedagogies.

Once reasons for above average rates of failure are better understood, solutions can be developed that result in greater student success without compromising academic standards. For example, Notre Dame (graduation rate of 96%) identified first year chemistry and engineering courses as gatekeeping courses with unusually high grade distributions of D, F, or W. Alternative sections of these courses were developed which covered the same material but included mandatory study group sessions and resulted in significantly higher success rates, particularly for student who entered the institution with low math scores (Carey, 2005b). In recent years, Auburn has begun to identify gatekeeping courses and respond with implementation of Supplemental Instruction (e.g., HIST 1010, HIST 1020); however, a more systematic and comprehensive approach is needed.

**Actions:**

6.1 Develop a system for the regular review of courses and course sections that consistently and significantly exceed the average failure rate to include the following:

- analysis of grade statistics provided by ORIA to determine gatekeeping courses, especially at the 1000- and 2000-levels that have significantly higher D/F/W rates that the AU average; and
- explorations of possible reasons for high failure rates (e.g., low attendance, curriculum misalignment, large class sizes, lack of supplemental instruction, pedagogical issues) and response to the findings (e.g., required attendance; realignment of curriculum; decreasing class size; increasing supplemental instruction, study groups, and/or tutoring; study of pedagogical best practices through the Biggio Center).

7. **Develop a system for routinely collecting, analyzing, and responding to data related to retention and graduation.**

**Rationale:** Most Institutions that have been successful in significantly improving graduation rates have developed a comprehensive assessment system that includes procedures for collecting, analyzing, and responding to data related to retention and graduation (Pascarella & Terezini, 2005). This pervasive use of data has allowed these institutions to learn, adapt, and improve the ways they help their students achieve high academic standards and graduate in a timely manner. A commitment to a significant increase in graduation rates will require Auburn to develop an integrated and comprehensive database related to student retention and graduation and to remain vigilant in its efforts to analyze and respond to these data over an extended period of time.

**Actions:**

7.1 Develop an integrated and comprehensive assessment system related to student retention and graduation that includes the following:
• Identification and monitoring of retention and graduation data for at-risk student populations (e.g., Black/non-Hispanic, first generation students, students with low ACT scores, students with significant financial need)
• Ongoing assessment of effectiveness of strategies for improving retention and graduation rates (e.g., examining retention and graduation rates for who participate in supplemental instruction, learning communities, first year seminars, mentoring programs, etc.)
• Development and implementation of surveys or use of focus groups to gather information from students who leave AU prior to graduation (e.g., contact students who fail to register at a specified time in the semester) and for students who remain in enrolled but have not completed a degree program after six years.

7.2 Establish a process and structure with oversight by the Office of the Provost for sharing and responding to data related to student retention and graduation as well as coordinating strategies aimed at improving these rates among various university offices, colleges/schools, programs, and committees/councils.

Conclusion
Based on a review of best practices cited in the literature and an analysis of current AU practices, the Improved Graduation Rates Committee offers the following findings and recommendations in response to its charge of identifying actions that will result in significant improvement of Auburn University’s graduation rate.

1. Auburn’s advising system has not received adequate funding to keep pace with comprehensive advising systems developed by peer institutions. Specifically, the AU system lacks (a) sufficient staffing to allow frequent contact with students, particularly those at risk; (b) centralization of training, materials, and support for professional academic advisors and faculty advisors; (c) an early warning system that includes identification of at-risk students and appropriate response; and (d) an appointed university student advising council focused on continuous improvement of the system. Considering that academic success in the first year is one of the most significant predictors of graduation and that nearly 20% of the 2007 freshman cohort had ungapped GPAs below 2.0 after the first semester, the Committee strongly recommends that the University take the necessary steps, including reallocation of funding if needed, to improve and expand the current advising system with oversight by the Office of the Provost through the Office of Undergraduate Studies.

2. A comprehensive assessment system is needed as a foundation for learning about, adapting, and improving the ways Auburn supports the academic success of its students. The Committee’s recommendation is that the development of this system be assigned to the Enrollment Management Council with oversight by the Office of the Provost through the Office of Enrollment Services and include the following: (a) tracking of retention and graduation rates for multiple subsets of at-risk students (e.g., minority students, first generation students, students with low ACT scores, students with significant financial need); (b) assessment of the effectiveness of implemented strategies for improving retention and graduation rates (e.g., learning communities, first year seminars, mentoring programs); (c) systematic surveys or focus groups to gather information from non-returning students and currently enrolled students who have not completed a degree after six years; and (d) a process and structure with oversight by the Office of the Provost for collecting, analyzing, and responding to the data.

3. Recruitment is an area in which marketing and scholarship initiatives have resulted in significant increases in the average ACT scores of entering freshmen; however, a recent decrease in minority enrollment has led to concerted efforts to recruit not only a well-prepared but also diverse freshman class. The Committee recommends the expansion of effective marketing, recruiting, and
scholarship initiatives based on available funding and ongoing analysis of impact, particularly on subgroups of students identified as at risk.

4. A review of academic policies suggests that some AU policies may have a possible negative effect on retention and graduation. The Committee specifically identifies policies related to attendance, reporting of midterm grades, course withdrawal, concurrent enrollment, and grade adjustment for review.

5. Teaching and learning, particularly in 1000- and 2000-level courses, merits further attention. The Committee recommends a regular review of courses and course sections that have higher than average rates of failure to determine and respond to reasons for lack of student success (e.g., lack of attendance, inappropriate curriculum alignment, larger than optimal class sizes, lack of sufficient supplemental instruction, and/or outmoded teaching pedagogies).

6. Timely progression through a degree program is an area in which focused efforts should lead to fewer students graduating in less than six years. The Committee offers specific suggestions, most without cost.

7. Student engagement is an area in which best practices at Auburn are highly visible. Recommendations focus on expansion of current strategies (e.g., learning communities, first year seminars, mentoring programs) as funds allow and based on ongoing study of impact, particularly on subgroups of students identified as at risk.

Improving graduation rates is a complex and difficult task which must remain high on the University’s agenda for a very long time. The Committee acknowledges that any successful initiative to improve graduation rates must proceed in ways that ensure (a) integration with current efforts, (b) campus-wide commitment, (c) systematic and ongoing evaluation of existing and new strategies, and (d) coordination through the Office of the Provost of actions assigned to various offices, colleges/schools, programs, and committees/councils. The Improved Graduation Rates Committee is hopeful that the recommendations in this report will stimulate discussions across campus regarding the multiple issues and shared responsibilities inherent in achieving significantly higher retention and graduation rates. If Auburn University is to be successful in meeting its goal of moving into the top 25% of graduation rates among land-grant institutions, student success must be embraced as a top priority throughout the institution.

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