2016 WSU Vancouver Undergraduate Student Retention Update

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Summary

The following report represents the second annual update to the 2015 report entitled: Understanding WSU Vancouver student retention and graduation. Global retention trends are presented to facilitate close monitoring. Student outcomes associated with previously identified risk factors are presented as a means of better understanding the evolving retention landscape.

Highlights:

- Late transfer retention remains steady. Retention for students admitted as freshmen has rebounded to near historical averages. Early transfer retention has improved greatly over the past two years.
- Graduation rate differences tied to race/ethnicity have narrowed considerably. Transfer students graduated at equal rates for the first time this year. Students admitted as freshmen show an average 6-point disparity in graduation rates between underrepresented minority and white students.
- Retention rate differences for men vs. women have fluctuated in the recent past. Multi-year analysis suggests significantly lower graduation for men, in both freshmen (a 12 percentage point average difference) and transfer populations (a 3 percentage point average difference).
- The fall 2016 class of new transfer students was the most academically prepared on record. High-school GPA for new freshmen remains constant. The retention gap between students with a high high-school GPA and those with a low high-school GPA continues to widen.
- Average financial need for incoming students is down from historical peaks during the recession. However, students from minority groups now show a $5468 greater need than their peers.
- The direct relationship between unmet financial need and student retention has lessened.
Retention trends by admit type

Freshman 1st-year retention rebounded this year to 75% from its all-time low level of 68% last year. It is difficult to determine if the improvement is connected to a substantive difference in the student experience. Small populations are vulnerable to wide fluctuations so performance for a given year should always be viewed cautiously. Retention for this year is now in line with historical numbers.

Due to low historical rates of success for students transferring into WSU Vancouver with only freshman or sophomore status (referred to as early transfer students), special effort has been made to monitor this group. The past two years have seen a marked improvement in 1st-year retention for early transfer students (78% for 2015, 75% for 2016) to levels comparable to that of freshmen. This improvement is cause for optimism. However, it will be essential to watch this population closely to determine if retention improvements translate into graduation benefits. 6-year graduation rates for late transfers (80%), early transfers (50%), and students admitted as freshmen (59%) remain marked by wide differences (Averaged over the 5 most recent years).

The figure below illustrates graduation rates over time. While these rates have fluctuated in recent years, at present there is no evidence for a long term trend in overall graduation averages.
Narrowing differences between racial/ethnic groups

Graduation rate differences between WSU Vancouver students from underrepresented minority groups and white students have historically fallen in a range consistent with national disparities. However, over the past few years, retention data for WSU Vancouver students have indicated a trend toward closing these gaps.

For the first time in 2016, graduation rates for transfer students reflect no differences between these groups both in terms of 3-year graduation rates and 4-year graduation rates. Similarly, graduation rate differences between white and underrepresented minority students admitted as freshmen have narrowed to six percentage points in the most recent 6-year graduation rate.

Encouraging 1st-year retention data for new classes over the past few years show no gap between underrepresented minority students and white students. However, historical patterns have shown differences associated with demographic group continue to surface throughout student careers, traditionally showing an increased separation between groups in the second, third, and fourth year. Only graduation rates can truly be used to understand whether the campus has succeeded in erasing demographic gaps. WSU Vancouver has made great progress toward eliminating racial/ethnic disparities. Further monitoring will determine whether this progress is complete and lasting.
As outlined in the 2015 report, disparities associated with demographic groups tend to mirror underlying disparities in academic history (i.e. previous GPA) or unmet financial need. Notably, these disparities have not shrunk substantively in recent years (see the *financial need* section below for further discussion).

**Sustained Gender Disparities**

Differences in graduation rate associated with gender have continued to fluctuate without substantive difference. For transfer students, there has remained a small graduation deficit (three percentage points for 3-year graduation) for men across most graduation years. For students admitted as freshmen, the deficit amounts to 12 percentage point gap in 4-year graduation rates and a 11 percentage point gap in 6-year graduation rates (averaged across 5-years).

**Academic History/Preparedness**
Student academic history, quantified by previous GPA of incoming new students, remains a strong predictor of retention. Continuing an upward trend from last year, this year’s incoming transfer student class had the highest average transfer GPA in at least 13 years (3.18 in 2016, up from 3.02 in 2008). This trend is likely to increase the chances of high future graduation rates for transfer students.

Academic history of incoming freshmen characterized by high-school GPA (3.39 for 2016) has remained near historical averages. As identified last year, a very strong relationship between academic history and academic success has solidified for incoming freshmen at WSU Vancouver. In this past year, the difference in 1st-year retention between the top and bottom academic quartiles only grew. Students with a high-school GPA above 3.7 were retained at a rate of 92%, while students with a high-school GPA of 3.1 or lower were retained at a rate of 60%. As the freshman class continues to expand in the coming years, it is clear that students with a history of decreased academic success are the ones who will require the most immediate assistance in transitioning to college if WSU Vancouver is to maintain its historically high rates of success.

Financial Need

Estimated average financial need for incoming student FAFSA filers has decreased by $2,059 to a total of $17,135, since its peak in 2012, likely due to a combination of decreased tuition and improving economic conditions. For the last full year of aid dispersal (2015-2016) the average unmet need (the difference between a student’s calculated financial need and financial aid accepted) stood at $3479.

However, financial need estimates for fall 2016 are not markedly decreased from last year, despite a decrease in tuition. It is likely that several factors have contributed to this outcome: (1) an unexpectedly

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1 Financial need is defined as Expected Family Contribution – Cost of Attendance.
2 Financial need and financial aid information are not finalized until the start of spring semester after spring aid dispersal. All numbers for 2016 are estimates.
large drop in need last year, (2) an all-time high number of new out-of-state students in the incoming class, (3) an increase in students from lower-income households.

It is worth noting that financial need estimates for new classes of students over the past four years have shown a divergence along divisions of race/ethnicity. During this period, a wide gap has emerged between white and minority new students so that for fall 2016 the average minority freshman has a financial need that is $5468 greater than the average white freshman. Freshmen from minority backgrounds are the student group that has shown the greatest growth as a portion of the WSU Vancouver population over the past few years and for whom the most growth is projected. The financial disparity identified has strong implications for retention as well for institutional support. A portion of this additional financial burden on students has been met by financial aid. However, the inability of financial aid to cover all need leaves minority students with a higher unmet financial need and likely a higher burden.

Unmet financial need has proved predictive toward student retention and graduation in past analyses. In recent years however, the relationship between unmet need and student success has weakened somewhat. As the landscape of need and aid continues to shift, it remains necessary to monitor how financial burden affects the WSU Vancouver student population.
First-Generation Students

An extensive literature exists detailing obstacles encountered by students who are the first in their families to attend an institution of higher education. At WSU Vancouver, in 2016 47% of undergraduates were first generation students. It is remarkable that while obstacles no doubt exist for these students, these obstacles have not manifested in retention or graduation deficits. Over the past five years, first generation students have shown a 4 percentage point advantage over their peers in terms of 6-year graduation rates.

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