WSU Vancouver Undergraduate Student Retention Update

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The following short report represents an 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:

- Student body growth over the past five years has come from greater numbers of freshmen and early transfers, while late transfer numbers have remained mostly flat.

- Late transfer retention remains steady. Freshmen retention has dipped considerably in the past three years. Early transfer retention was strong for the past year.

- The incoming fall 2014 class had an average unmet financial need of $6,013 and the number of students with greater than $10,000 in unmet need reached an all-time high.

- The retention gap between freshmen with a strong academic history (high-school GPA >3.7) and moderate to low academic history (<3.1 HS GPA) has widened in the past three years.

- Retention rate differences for men vs. women have fluctuated in the recent past. Multi-year analysis suggests significantly lower retention for men, in both freshmen (a 10 percentage point average difference) and late transfer populations (a 3 percentage point average difference).

- Retention differences between underrepresented minority students and white students have narrowed (a 5 percentage point difference in fourth fall retention). Lagging persistent gaps in graduation rates (12 percentage points) suggest continued attention to differences associated with race/ethnicity is warranted.
Enrollment

Historically, the largest number of new students arriving at WSUV have been transfer students with associate’s degrees. However, the past two years have marked a change. Beginning in fall 2014, new lower division students (freshmen and early transfers) outnumbered new upper division students.

Retention trends by admit type

The shift in growth of the student body is most relevant to the discussion of campus student retention due to pronounced differences in retention associated with student admit type. Late transfers (those admitted with 60 or more transfer credits) have historically demonstrated a retention rate considerably higher than their lower division peers. In recent years, the late transfer retention rate has held steady. However, the other groups have shown noticeable swings in retention rates over the past few years. Early transfer retention has shown early signs of improving, while freshmen retention has decreased. Freshmen first-year (Fall-to-Fall) retention and third-year retention (fourth fall) are at all-time lows (68.1% and 52.8% respectively).
Unmet need

As outlined in the 2015 retention and graduation report, unmet financial need (characterized as the difference between a student’s dispersed financial aid and financial need) is a strong predictor of increased risk of attrition. In recent years, average unmet need has remained high. For the incoming class of 2014-2015, this average increased to $6,013 from the previous year’s $5,545. Figures for unmet need will be available for the 2015-2016 class after spring dispersal.
The above figure further demonstrates the spectrum of unmet need as it has changed over time. Beginning in fall 2012, the number of students with unmet need greater than $10,000 has increased considerably. However, the gap in persistence associated with these students, as compared to peers without unmet need, has narrowed. This narrowing may be due to the relationship between unmet need and other indicators of success, rather than a lessening of the impact of financial need itself. For instance, as the percentage of students with unmet need increases, that group encompasses more academically qualified students. Quantifying the isolated impact of financial need on retention remains difficult.

**Academic History/Preparedness**

Student academic history, quantified by previous GPA of incoming new students, remains a strong predictor of retention. The academic history of incoming classes has remained largely steady over the past decade. One notable exemption is the 2015 early transfer population, which was marked by higher previous GPA than any previous class.
While the academic history of new freshman has stayed roughly flat since they joined campus in 2006, the past three years have seen a widening in the retention gap between those with high high-school GPA’s and those with lower high-school GPA. This suggests that the lower freshmen retention seen for the new fall 2012 and fall 2014 freshmen classes, was especially concentrated in students who arrived with a lower high-school GPA.
Demographics

Race and gender differences at WSU Vancouver are difficult to quantify with certainty due to the small populations that must be examined. In addition, unlike other population differences in retention, these demographic differences tend to surface in the 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} year of study. Therefore demographic effects are measured in terms of 3\textsuperscript{rd} year retention, or the 4\textsuperscript{th} fall of a student’s career.

Gender

At the time of the February 2015 report, gender differences were confined to freshmen students and were insignificant in the transfer student population. Analysis of recent data suggests gender differences in the late transfer population as well. Analysis of pooled 3\textsuperscript{rd}-year retention for 2009-2015 showed statistically significant gaps in male performance as compared female performance (a 3 percentage point average difference). However, this gap was absent for the most recent year. The average retention gap between Freshmen women and men for 2009-2015 currently stands at 10 percentage points. Close monitoring of gender differences in the future will be necessary to determine the scope and pervasiveness of retention impact.
Race/Ethnicity

Recent years have seen a narrowing of retention differences associated with race/ethnicity. For the most recent 3rd year retention data, the retention difference between white students and those identifying from an underrepresented minority group was 5 percentage points. Careful attention will be necessary to determine if this narrowing is a long-term trend, rather than a fluctuation. Furthermore, while the retention gap associated with race/ethnicity has traditionally levelled off in the third year, ultimately graduation rates are the most valid measure of equitable outcomes between demographic groups. The gap in 6-year graduation rates between white and underrepresented minority students was 12 percentage points for 2015.

Examination of the intersection of race/ethnicity with different student types (transfer vs. freshmen) is not meaningful on a year-by-year basis due to small population sizes.

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