4.C - Core Component 4.C

The institution demonstrates a commitment to educational improvement through ongoing attention to retention, persistence, and completion rates in its degree and certificate programs.

1. The institution has defined goals for student retention, persistence, and completion that are ambitious but attainable and appropriate to its mission, student populations, and educational offerings.
2. The institution collects and analyzes information on student retention, persistence, and completion of its programs.
3. The institution uses information on student retention, persistence, and completion of programs to make improvements as warranted by the data.
4. The institution’s processes and methodologies for collecting and analyzing information on student retention, persistence, and completion of programs reflect good practice. (Institutions are not required to use IPEDS definitions in their determination of persistence or completion rates. Institutions are encouraged to choose measures that are suitable to their student populations, but institutions are accountable for the validity of their measures.)

Argument

CWRU regularly compiles, analyzes, and utilizes data on student retention and/or persistence rates to improve its retention performance in all of its educational programs, as well as enhance overall student satisfaction.

1. Retention targets have been established for each of CWRU’s degree programs. The processes used for setting these targets vary according to the nature of the specific degree programs. Degree programs that span across several offering schools have retention targets that are set through processes that involve input from across the schools and a review within the relevant Faculty Senate committee. For example, as summarized in the annual newsletter of the Faculty Senate Committee on Undergraduate Education developed and endorsed an overall 85-88% six-year target graduation rate for undergraduate programs, to be reached over a five year period. The Faculty Senate Graduate Studies Committee established retention targets for the PhD programs to be 75%, while the target graduation rates for the MA and MS programs is 90%. The targets in individual degree programs are associated with specific time-to-degree expectations in each field.

Degree programs that are localized to a single school (i.e., the professional degree programs) have retention and/or persistence targets that are established by school-specific processes. Examples are given from the School of Law, the Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences, and the School of Dental Medicine. A summary of retention targets for the professional programs is shown here. When current retention statistics fall short of the established targets, the programs establish timetables to achieve the targets.

2. CWRU regularly collects, analyzes, and post data on student enrollments and degree completion. For example the University Registrar posts detailed data on enrollments in the various programs, and completion rates for first-time undergraduates. The Office of Institutional Research (OIR) annually produces other reports on enrollments and trends over time. For example, historical trends in enrollment and degrees awarded are posted for the campus community on the Institutional Research website. Data on degree completion of students through individual programs is also
CWRU also routinely monitors the number of undergraduates who are asked to leave the university for failing to meet the criteria for good academic standing. Reports from the Academic Standing Board, the faculty group that makes decisions to separate students on the basis of their record, show that only very few students leave students on the basis of poor academic performance.

The OIR annually performs a detailed study of retention, persistence, and completion for undergraduate students and prepares retention tables that include longitudinal analysis by gender, race/ethnicity and citizenship. This information is shared widely across campus and is used to inform retention efforts. Note that CWRU's actual retention rates fall short of the target values for the undergraduate programs, and so the university is investing energy and resources in undergraduate retention initiatives.

The OIR also prepares custom retention reports at the request of campus groups. An example of one such report is a study of completion and persistence rates for the PhD programs at CWRU, which drew data from the National Research Council study of research doctoral programs. Another report shows a comparison of CWRU's completion rates and time to degree for the PhD relative to similar information from other AAU schools. Data such as these are regularly used to benchmark CWRU's graduate programs, and provide justification to make appropriate adjustments in the graduate-level offerings. Still another example is a report on retention rates by grouping of undergraduate majors.

3. CWRU periodically embarks on major efforts aimed at improving undergraduate student persistence and retention. As part of the processes leading up to the establishment of CWRU's 2008-2013 strategic plan, a retention task force (comprising faculty members, students, and administrative staff) was charged by the Provost to use institutional data to understand our retention and graduation patterns and the role that student characteristics play in determining student persistence and success, to explore the ways in which curricular and co-curricular opportunities influence retention and graduation rates and the overall undergraduate experience, and examine the ways in which peer institutions are able to positively impact their student persistence, success, and satisfaction. The task force report was completed in early 2008 and was shared with various campus constituencies, including a presentation to the CWRU Board of Trustees. This report contained a number of recommendations, several of which have been implemented in full or in part. These include performing additional analyses of the reasons that students leave CWRU, the characteristics of students that make them at risk for non-retention, early alerts for students in academic or social difficulties, and better academic advising. Improving student retention had a prominent position in CWRU's 2008-2013 strategic plan.

More recently, in 2012, another, even broader retention task force (comprising more than 55 individuals representing various offices that contribute to the overall undergraduate experience) was formed. This group meets regularly to examine data on student retention, persistence, and completion and recommend changes based on this information. The most recent discussions and action items have focused on the characteristics of non-returning students, early alerts, advising, student mental health, URM retention and campus diversity, and student resilience. Based on an examination of the retention of STEM students, CWRU has engaged in a number of projects to improve their retention, including redesigns of some first-year core courses.

While CWRU is looking to improve its undergraduate retention rates, the university also recognizes that it needs to be patient and look at long-term trends (rather than year-to-year fluctuations) before making judgments on the efficacy of new policies and practices aimed at affecting retention. In any case, the university will continue to follow good research-based practices that increase student
learning, student engagement, and create a positive and welcoming climate, and recognizes that their beneficial effects may be seen only over the long term.

Retention efforts at the graduate and professional levels take on different forms. For example, in the School of Dental Medicine, the outcome assessment plan includes an annual evaluation of student persistence and retention as one metric of its success. The School of Law reports student retention and graduation to the ABA on an annual basis and makes any necessary changes to the academic and student support program that are necessary to achieve retention targets. Similarly, the School of Medicine tracks its completion rates and is required to report annually to the LCME (Liaison Committee on Medical Education) the number of students who have withdrawn or been dismissed from the medical school.

4. The OIR uses good practice in adopting standard CDS (Common Data Set) definitions for retention, persistence, and completion. These data are disaggregated by demographic groups and schools as appropriate. CDS reports are posted on the OIR website and contain detailed information about persistence and graduation rates. The undergraduate population of CWRU is primarily full-time degree-seeking with few transfer students, making the standard retention metric appropriate. Both graduation rate measures used in the US News and World Report rankings calculation and the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) Expected Graduation Rate Calculator are used to provide context for analyzing retention rates. The resulting calculations enable comparison between the actual CWRU graduate rate and the rate predicted for various characteristics of the student cohort. CWRU's enrollment statistics are available publicly, on sites such as the College Navigator operated by the National Center for Education Statistics, which collects standard IPEDS data.

Sources

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Undergraduate Education (FSCUE)
- Charge to Faculty Senate Committee on Graduate Studies
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- Common Data Set report (2013-2014) (page number 2)
- Completing College publication (2011) - from Higher Education Research Institute
- Graduate program retention rate targets - from Faculty Senate Graduate Studies Committee chair
- Information on CWRU - from College Navigator website
- Listing of Common Data Set (CDS) reports available - from Institutional Research website
- Listing of undergraduate completion rates - from University Registrar website
- Outcomes assessment plan, School of Dental Medicine (2014)
- Outcomes assessment plan, School of Dental Medicine (2014) (page number 2)
- Presentation of the Retention Task Force to the Board of Trustees (June 2008)
- Presentations at the Retention Task Force meeting (December 2014)
- Presentations at the Retention Task Force meeting (December 2014) (page number 4)
- Presentations at the Retention Task Force meeting (December 2014) (page number 13)
- Presentations at the Retention Task Force meeting (January 2014)
- Presentations at the Retention Task Force meeting (January 2014) (page number 11)
- Presentations at the Retention Task Force meeting (June 2014)
- Presentations at the Retention Task Force meeting (October 2013)
- Presentations at the Retention Task Force meeting (October 2013) (page number 20)
- Report on enrollment trends by school (2001-2014) - from Institutional Research
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- Report on graduation rate by intended major grouping - from Institutional Research
- Report on PhD completion and attrition rates at CWRU - data from National Research Council
- Report on PhD completion rates and time to degree, AAU schools - from National Research Council data
- Report on retention and persistence rate targets, Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences (October 2014)
- Report on trends in degrees awarded - from Institutional Research
- Report on trends in degrees awarded by field - from Institutional Research
- Request form for a custom study by Institutional Research
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- University Strategic Plan for 2008-2013
- University Strategic Plan for 2008-2013 (page number 10)
- University Strategic Plan for 2013-2018