In July 1998 the “Strategic Plan for Increasing Undergraduate Retention and Graduation” was developed and distributed. Included in the report was a discussion of the issues affecting retention and graduation, the calculation of GW’s “expected retention and graduation rates” based on the quality of the incoming class, and numerous goals to improve advising, to develop a degree-audit program, and to improve the undergraduate academic experience. The summary that follows highlights the main retention efforts to date. The attached spreadsheet charts the progress made in implementing the recommendations included in the Strategic Plan. It also serves as a testament of the commitment and involvement of the University community to improve retention.

Projected and actual retention rates

- **Projected.** The “Strategic Plan” projected a one percent yearly increase in retention for each entering class, with the expectation of achieving a 92% retention rate for the class entering in 2001. The goal for the class entering in 1998 was 89%.

- **Actual.** The first to second year retention increased substantially for those entering in 1998, establishing a new high for the percent returning in their second year. Of those who entered in 1998, 92% returned in fall 1999. This percentage replaces a previous one-year high of 91% achieved by the class entering in 1994.

- Although the goal has been achieved earlier than expected, the challenge is to maintain and possibly surpass this percentage in the next four years.

Table 1. Projected and actual retention rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR ENTERED</th>
<th>89</th>
<th>90</th>
<th>91</th>
<th>92</th>
<th>93</th>
<th>94</th>
<th>95</th>
<th>96</th>
<th>97</th>
<th>98</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Return ed for:</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td>86.0</td>
<td>84.5</td>
<td>87.7</td>
<td>88.2</td>
<td>87.9</td>
<td>90.8</td>
<td>88.1</td>
<td>88.5</td>
<td>88.5</td>
<td>92.3</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd year</td>
<td>75.1</td>
<td>74.7</td>
<td>77.8</td>
<td>77.4</td>
<td>79.9</td>
<td>83.2</td>
<td>79.6</td>
<td>79.5</td>
<td>81.4</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th year</td>
<td>73.9</td>
<td>69.8</td>
<td>73.2</td>
<td>72.4</td>
<td>73.3</td>
<td>74.5</td>
<td>73.6</td>
<td>73.0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 The expected retention and graduation rates were based on the quality of GW freshmen and calculated using a linear regression model developed by Alexander Astin and his colleagues at the Cooperative Institution Research Program at UCLA.
Projected and actual graduation rates

- **Projected.** The projected four-, five-, and six-year graduation rates for those entering in AY 2000-01 are 69%, 71%, and 72%, respectively.

- **Actual.** GW’s most recent four-year graduation rate, based on students who entered in 1995, is 60%; the five-year rate, based on those who entered in 1994, is 71%; and the six-year rate, based on those who entered in 1993, is 69%.

- The percentages of students graduating in four, five, and six years have increased, but still fall below GW’s “expected” graduation rate based on the quality of incoming students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR ENTERED</th>
<th>89</th>
<th>90</th>
<th>91</th>
<th>92 Actual</th>
<th>93</th>
<th>94</th>
<th>95</th>
<th>96</th>
<th>97</th>
<th>98</th>
<th>99</th>
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<tr>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>54%</td>
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<td>58%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>60%</td>
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<td>67%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Highlights of retention efforts for AY 1998-99**

- **Education of academic deans, department chairs, and student services directors about the importance of retaining students.** The “Strategic Plan” coupled with the budgetary implications of the shortfall of 100 returning students in fall 1998 provided strong impetus for the GW community to engage in efforts to improve retention. Especially noteworthy is the importance given this issue by the Vice President for Academic Affairs and the Academic Deans.

- **Establishment of the Office of Academic Planning and Assessment whose mission is to implement the “Strategic Plan.”** A half-time retention assistant was hired to meet with students considered “at-risk.”

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2 The first, second, and third year retention rates and the four-year graduation rate for the class entering in 1994 are higher than preceding and subsequent entering classes. Thus, its five-year graduation rate of 71% should be considered an anomaly and not reflective of any new trend.
• **Coordination of university-wide efforts to contact 1,000 at-risk students.** Approximately 1,000 students who received poor grades or who failed to make satisfactory academic progress after the fall 1998 semester were identified. The Director of the Office of Academic Planning and Assessment (OAPA) reviewed the list and identified special populations (i.e., international students, student-athletes, PREP students, and students with disabilities). At-risk students in ESIA, SBPM, and SEAS were contacted by letter, telephone, or e-mail by their academic advisor or dean and asked to set up an appointment. The lists of special populations were forwarded to the appropriate offices where the professional staff attempted contact via e-mail, letter, or telephone. The remaining students in CSAS were sorted by year in school and place of residence. About 90 at-risk students living in the residence halls were sent a resource manual and a letter stating the date and time of a pre-set appointment with a Community Director in the residence halls. The non-resident freshmen and upper-class students in CSAS were sent letters or e-mail inviting them to make an appointment with the retention assistant in the OAPA.

The success of this endeavor is mixed. It is (and has been) most effective in ESIA, SBPM, and with student-athletes, as the respective advising and support offices must approve students' registration. These systems have been in place for a number of years. It is difficult to judge the success with other students. About 20% of the residence hall students showed up for their pre-set appointments; 47 students out of 211 contacted by the OAPA (22%) responded to their letter or e-mail, and 11 set up interviews; about 30 international students responded. Incorrect addresses in Banner and student attrition contributed to the low response. Typically, students who responded were those who had taken steps to improve their academic performance. However, students seemed appreciative that “someone cared.”

• **Interviews with students who are leaving.** Approximately 53 potential transfers were contacted resulting in 19 interviews. The reasons for transferring include financial concerns, desire to be closer to home, preference for a less urban setting, and reapplication to first choice school. While interviews are informative, they do not typically provide an opportunity for intervention. Students interviewed had already notified the University they were leaving.

• **Development of virtual Academic Success Center.** The University Counseling Center developed an excellent website which includes tips, suggestions, and resources for improving one’s academic performance.

• **Faculty participation in mid-semester warnings.** The mid-semester warning program whereby students doing substandard work in freshmen courses are notified within the first eight weeks of the semester continues to alert students and their advisors about poor academic performance. Professors in
approximately 100 introductory courses participate in the program, and each semester, warning letters are sent to over 600 students, with copies sent to their advisors. Both groups are reminded about university resources and urged to discuss ways of improving performance. In the fall 1998, a staff member in OAPA called 158 students receiving multiple warnings. Mid-semester warnings are distributed every semester.

- **Formation of Student Ambassador Program.** Over 100 students who are not from the mid-Atlantic region, who attended the last Colonial Inauguration, indicated on a first semester survey that they were thinking about leaving, or who applied and were not admitted to the University Honors Program signed up to be “Ambassadors” for new students from their home state. Typically, students who are not from GW’s primary markets (New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania) are at greater risk of transferring elsewhere, as many have difficulty finding their niche. The first few weeks of the freshman year are the most difficult. The primary responsibility of the Ambassadors is to help new students feel welcome and to help with their transition from high school to college.

**Sampling of new programs initiated in fall 1999 designed to retain “better” students**

- **Funding for four professional advisors.** The Vice President for Academic Affairs provided funding to create four new professional advising positions, three in CSAS and one in SEAS. As of this date, two of the CSAS positions have been filled, and interviews are underway for the two remaining positions. SEAS hopes to have its position filled soon.

- **Engineering Science 1 revamped.** A new project-based experiential course in each of the engineering curriculum program areas was created. Included is a trip to the US Naval Academy to see a nuclear submarine and a weekend retreat to foster networking among freshmen.

- **Revision of computer science (B.S.) curriculum in SEAS.**

- **Expansion of the Women and Power Leadership residential programs at GW/MVC.** The Women and Power residential program was expanded to include four program areas, with a total enrollment of 175 women. Interest from new students necessitated offering two sections of Women in Historical Perspective, three sections of Women in International Leadership, and one each for Women in the Arts and Women in Science and Technology.

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3 For a complete listing of the new initiatives for AY 1999-00, see the report summarizing first-year retention efforts.
- **Freshmen Seminars.** Six new freshmen seminars were developed and offered to new students in CSAS. Topics included were: English 701: American City in Word and Image; English 702: Monsters and Medieval Identity; Psychology 701: Psychology of Leadership; Political Science 701: Politics and Religion; Biology 701: Biological Science: Promises and Threats; and Sociology 701: Jackie Robinson: Race, Sports, and the American Dream. Enrollment in each class was limited to 30 freshmen.

- **Expansion of University Honors Program.** The number of rising sophomores applying for and being admitted to the UHP has increased substantially. In addition, a concerted effort has been made to recruit more students from SBPM.

**Improving graduation rates**

Getting students to graduate continues to be of utmost concern. The percentage of students graduating in four years continues to be lower than most of GW’s market-basket schools, and it is lower than the “expected rate” based on the quality of GW’s students. While the programs discussed above will help to retain students experiencing academic difficulty and those earning high grades, there are other issues that negatively affect students’ desire and ability to complete their degrees at GW.

- **Financial concerns.** Because of limited university resources, financial aid offered to undergraduates is “capped” at $17,000 (an increase of $2,000 from the cap in AY 1998-99), and there is an $800 “gap” in financial aid awards and family need, which the student is expected to make up. In addition, financial aid is limited to eight semesters. Students who take longer to graduate must petition for additional aid.

  ✓ One-third of the 300 undergraduates who left before graduating in the past two years owed GW at least $500, and 15% owed at least $10,000 or had been “written-off” by Student Accounts. Included in this group are 83 students who received no financial assistance from GW.

  ✓ Each year, approximately 100 students who have been enrolled at GW for eight semesters and who have not earned a degree do not return to GW. To address students financial concerns, the Office of Financial Assistance instituted a GW Guaranteed Student Loan Program that debuted in December 1999. The program provides a private loan of up to 100% of GW’s annual cost minus any financial assistance. The loan will make money available to a broader range of students.

- **Student employment.** Coupled with financial concerns is the expectation and need to earn money. During any given semester, 50% of the undergraduates (and three-quarters of the juniors and seniors) are working for pay. Typically, juniors work an average of 19 hours per week, and seniors work, on average, 22 hours a week.
There is an inverse correlation between the amount of time spent working for pay and students’ grades. As the number of hours working increases, students’ grades decline. Students who work over 20 hours a week tend to earn lower grades and are more likely to need more than eight semesters to graduate.

- **Overcrowding in classes.** In several instances, faculty authorized enrollment in their classes by more students than the assigned classroom was equipped to serve. Faculty took this action, at the behest of students, in order to accommodate the larger than usual freshman class. Stories abound of students getting to classes ten minutes early to find a seat, while others sit on the floor or radiators. Anecdotal comments from new students suggest that this has caused much dismay, especially given the high cost of tuition. What, if any, impact this will have on retention and graduation remains to be seen.

**Status of degree audit**

In July 1999, funding was made available to staff, set up, and maintain the degree audit program in the Banner Curriculum, Advising and Program Planning module. Not only will it free professional advisors to assist students, it will help identify students who are failing to make satisfactory progress, block students from registering for courses inappropriately, and provide information on-line to students about their progress in fulfilling degree requirements. A staff person and space have recently been identified, and start-up for the program will begin in January 2000.

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Academic Planning and Assessment
Revised: February 2, 2000