

System Summary

Report of the Review Team on the 2014 Compact Submission

April 2015



West Virginia
Higher Education
Policy Commission

HIGHLIGHTS

- Technology continues to play an ever-increasing role in critical areas such as academic advising and tracking progress toward degree. Most institutions in the system have implemented software like DegreeWorks, a tool designed to help advisors guide students along the most efficient path to degree completion. The software provides faculty, staff, and students with valuable information related to course selection and academic progress.
- The review team noted that several institutions, recognizing the importance of early intervention with academic at-risk students, have adopted “Early Alert” or “Early Warning” systems. These systems are designed to identify students who are struggling academically and steer them toward the programs and personnel that are best equipped to provide assistance.
- Institutions system-wide have begun to recognize the growing demand for higher education among adult learners, and are focusing recruitment efforts on this population. Efforts to recruit adult learners are being reinforced at many institutions through the introduction of specialized degree programs geared toward the unique needs of the adult learner.
- A comprehensive financial aid literacy program is critical to ensuring that students make sound financial decisions while in college and can lead to lower rates of indebtedness and student loan default. The review team has recognized several institutions for best practices in the area financial literacy. These best practices included redesigning financial aid award letters to provide students with a clearer picture of the cost of a college education, the integration of financial literacy topics as required modules in first-year experience and freshmen seminar courses, and working with companies, such as Inceptia, to analyze borrower data and identify students with the highest risk of default.
- The *15 to Finish* campaign promotes on-time completion by encouraging students to take at least 15 credit hours per semester. The review team was pleased with system-wide efforts to promote *15 to Finish* and strongly encourages those institutions not participating to explore the benefits of this initiative.
- The review team recognizes as best practices efforts by several institutions to promote faculty scholarship by providing mini-grants and other campus-based financial support to fund research projects, faculty travel, and other scholarly pursuits.
- To improve first-year retention and decrease student costs, a number of institutions have abandoned the traditional developmental education model, which often included non-credit courses in English and mathematics, in favor of a co-requisite for-credit model. In this new model, students are simultaneously enrolled in a traditional credit-bearing course and are required to completed supplemental instruction or tutoring.

- Increases in graduate student enrollment are expected at several institutions thanks to the implementation of innovative programs offering non-traditional and accelerated pathways to graduate degrees. Some programs offer guaranteed admission to specific graduate programs for students meeting eligibility requirements, while others offer 3+2 and 4+1 accelerated master's programs.
- Outreach initiatives designed to expose K-12 students to the college experience, promote student and faculty involvement in the community, and educate students and families on the college-going process are underway statewide. The review team recognizes as a best practice efforts to measure the effectiveness of these initiatives at boosting enrollment by tracking students who participate in outreach programs to determine if they subsequently matriculate.

CONCERNS

- The review team noted the general absence of focus on low-income, first-generation students throughout the institutional Compacts. Although many of the institutions' retention and graduation efforts would affect these students, the lack of specific mention was concerning. Many of the gains needed to reach institutional and state 2018 targets will require greater success with these students. As of the most recent data available, only 66.8 percent of low-income students are retained to their second year of college and only 34.9 percent go on to graduate in six years.
- While the review team appreciates system-wide efforts to support developmental education students, it notes that very few institutions offered plans focused on developmental mathematics. Math pass rates at a number of institutions are extremely low, and the team has identified this as an area in need of improvement across the system.
- The review team was pleased that most institutions offered comprehensive financial aid plans with innovative strategies aimed at promoting financial literacy and reducing student debt; however, the team believes that institutional plans should also include strategies to educate and assist students who stop-out, or leave the institution prior to degree completion.
- The review team was concerned that few strategies system-wide engaged students in planning and implementing improvement efforts, outside of their participation in general assessment. The team believes that many of the strategies proposed throughout the institutional Compacts would benefit from direct student involvement.

REQUESTS

- The Commission has established a requirement that certain strategies must include activities that target specific populations (low-income, underrepresented minority, returning adult, and transfer students). The review team is concerned that a number of institutions failed to offer strategies directly aimed at these target populations and requests that all institutions review the target population requirements in the HEPC Master Plan and submit updated strategies if those populations are not addressed. If an institution has failed to address a target population, it has been noted in the institutional summary.
- A number of institutions set targets for key metrics (graduation rates, degree production, etc.) nearly equal to or lower than current values. The review team asks all institutions to review the metrics submitted with their compact proposals, with particular attention focused on 2018 targets to ensure that they have set realistic targets that also contribute to the overall mission of reaching institution- and state-level goals. The Commission's Policy and Planning Division will be initiating a review process prior to the November 1st, 2015 deadline to revise institutional targets.