

AAUP News

Cleveland State University Chapter

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Understanding Why CSU Struggles with Retention

What is CSU Currently Doing to Improve Retention?

It is critical that CSU improve its low undergraduate retention rate (3rd lowest in Ohio), not only for the sake of our students, but also for our long-term health as a university. President Berkman has reported to Faculty Senate that under new formulas from Columbus, state contributions to funding Ohio universities will be tied to performance indicators like undergraduate retention and graduation. At last report, at least 50% of our state funding will be tied to such factors. There are many positive indicators auguring future retention success for CSU--tuition costs below the state average, an application pool at a 30-year high, an uptick in out-of-state enrollments, increased funding for student activities, and improved campus housing for students. At the same time, with one of the lowest retention rates in Ohio, it is clear that the university must take further decisive action to improve our performance.

CSU has explored many avenues to improve retention and graduation. Last year, a task force called the Committee for Undergraduate Success was formed under Provost Mearns, which produced diverse suggestions like reducing Gen-Ed courses to 3 credit hours and rearranging the block structure of course scheduling to help students reduce their time spent waiting between classes. Senior Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, Jianping Zhu, has developed a new retention plan; Vice Provost for Academic Planning, Teresa LaGrange, has tracked our university's performance in the NSSE (National Survey of Student Engagement). Both plans emphasize the need to get students engaged via class presentations, working with other students in class, and studying together outside of class. These presentations also highlight the need for more innovative teaching strategies in "gateway" courses, encouraging effective non-traditional ways to teach large classes. The documents also highlighted baseline and progress data, concluding with the finding that we need to promote Campus-wide awareness of retention activities, to train faculty to identify at-risk students, and to provide them with additional opportunities for development.

In total, there are currently four different committees that currently study retention and graduation: a Retention-subcommittee composed of 19 administrators and service personnel; a Graduation Sub-committee of 13 administrators and service personnel; the Faculty Senate Ad-hoc committee on Student success, which has 3 bargaining-unit faculty of 12 personnel; and finally, the Provost's Sub-Committee on Student Success Implementation, with 7 administrators and service personnel. It is clear, then, that the CSU community is working hard to solve our retention problem, but answers remain elusive.

Is Curriculum Reform the Answer?

Right now, there is pending in the University Curriculum Committee (UCC) an administrative plan for converting all Gen-Ed courses to 3 credit hours, a reduction of all degree programs to 120 credit hours (except for those whose program hours are defined by accreditation), as well as a broader proposal to convert all undergraduate courses to 3 credits. The University Curriculum Committee will make a recommendation about these proposals to Faculty Senate in the spring. Like all of you, the CSU-AAUP Executive Committee awaits the University Curriculum Committee's recommendation, along with the crucial Senate discussion that will ensue.

Out of respect for our own faculty governance structure, the CSU-AAUP will not take an official position on curriculum conversion until we know what specifically is being recommended by the UCC, but we do have some information to report that is useful in assessing the 3 potential components to the conversion plan.

- There is strong pressure from Columbus, reported recently in the *Plain Dealer*, to limit degree programs to 120 credit hours. Under federal financial aid changes, students will soon lose Pell Grant eligibility after completing 120 credit hours, which could pose a huge obstacle to student success beyond that 120 credit threshold.
- CSU's general education requirements are already keyed to a 3-credit model, though many of our general education courses are 4-credits. One reason for that discrepancy is that the Ohio Transfer Module for general education, governed by the Ohio Board of Regents, mandates a 3-credit model, and CSU academic programs already have to give incoming transfer students equivalency for 3-credit general education courses (i.e. their 3-credit general education courses transfer in as equivalent to our 4-credit courses).
- While CSU has many more 4-credit courses than other Ohio universities, no institution has a uniform curriculum based on only one unit of credit hours. While 3-credit courses predominate at our peer institutions, many of our peers have a substantial number of 4-credit courses (and sometimes 1.5, 2, or 5-credit courses). A review of course catalogs shows the variation to be discipline- and course-specific, as departments and colleges have exercised local control over their curricula. Many members of the CSU community—faculty, students, and administrators alike—have reported to the CSU-AAUP serious doubts about a complete conversion of the undergraduate curriculum to a 3-credit model because of significant concerns regarding implementation, staffing, workload, pedagogical practices, and departmental governance of their curricula.

What is Our Answer? The Critical Role of Full-Time Faculty in Retaining Students

For our part, the CSU-AAUP has been investigating ways to improve our retention and graduation rates by collecting data from peer institutions and analyzing them to find what factors are most linked to undergraduate success. In past newsletters, we have led the push to test one obvious hypothesis: that hiring more full-time faculty will engage students inside and outside the classroom, especially in first and second-year courses, which presently are heavily staffed by adjunct faculty who have many other commitments besides CSU. The CSU-AAUP was encouraged by the Provost's announcement earlier this semester that a number of visitor professor lines will be ended and the funds transferred to the hiring of tenure-track faculty. This action may not increase the total number of faculty in the classroom, but it will produce greater continuity within those departments and build a more stable faculty base in those areas.

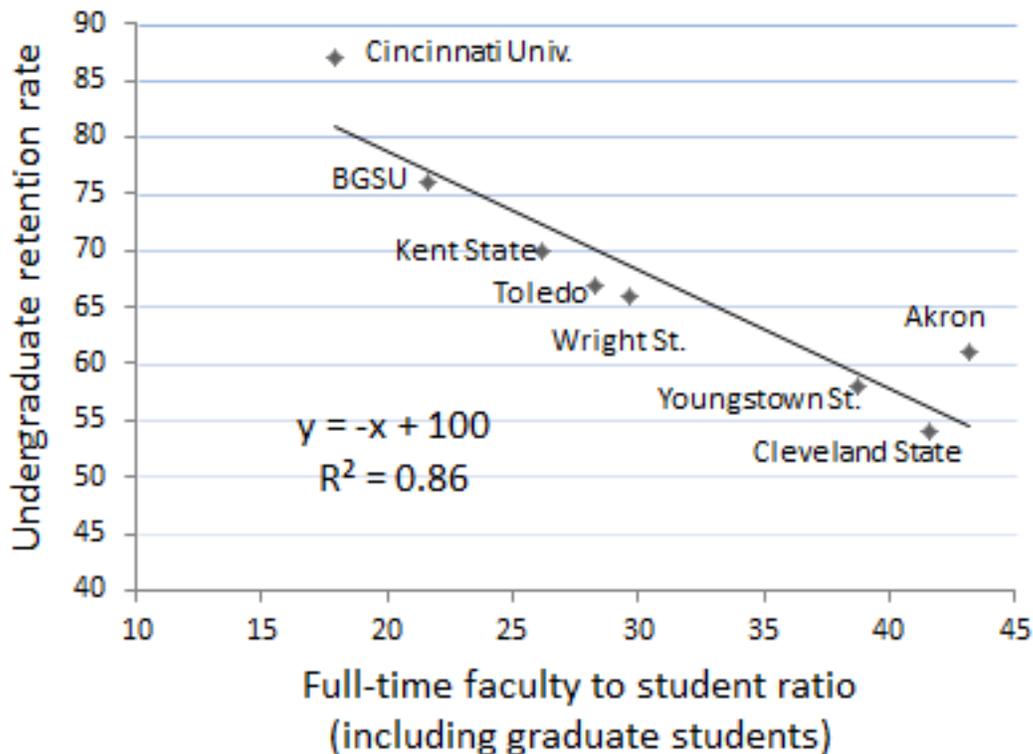
But, will more faculty help? Is our hypothesis plausible? In order to substantiate our hypothesis, here are the data that the CSU-AAUP has assembled on student faculty ratios and retention differences among selected Ohio public universities, restricting data to schools with significant graduate programs as a part of their mission.

University	Undergraduates	Graduate students	Tenure track bargaining-unit faculty	Full-time lecturers	Total full time Faculty	Total student to faculty to ratio	Undergraduate retention
Cincinnati	24638	5622	1344	342	1686	17.9	87
Bowling Green	15059	3000	530	304	827	21.8	76
Kent State	26938	6000	817	441	1258	26.2	70
Toledo	17844	4800	651	149	800	28.3	67
Wright State	14127	4000	438	173	611	29.7	66
Akron	24308	3931	560	93	653	43.2	61
Youngstown	13358	3550	403	33	436	38.8	58
Cleveland State	12236	5500	365	61	426	41.6	54

Students and faculty are by head count. Figures are current as of October 24, 2012. Since then, the CSU-AAUP has learned that six more faculty have joined our Bargaining Unit, bringing our tenure-track faculty total to 371 and our full-time faculty total to 432, for a faculty-student ratio of 41.1.

What do these results suggest? Across these eight public universities in Ohio, the correlation between the total student-faculty ratio and the retention of undergraduates is **-0.93**; the three schools with the best (=lowest) ratio have the highest retention, the two middle schools have a mid-range retention and the three schools with highest (bad) student- to-faculty ratios struggle the most to retain students. Cleveland State and Akron Universities express the highest student to faculty ratios and Akron has a higher retention rate than CSU, but still lies in the bottom 3; CSU is last. Here is a graph charting the relative effect of student-faculty ratio on retention at these institutions.

Does the number of faculty affect retention?



These results suggest that 86% of the variation in undergraduate retention is due to not having enough faculty to “engage” and by implication, retain and graduate our student body.

These student-faculty ratios look different from what you will see in the Book of Trends for several reasons. The Book of Trends uses data that is always a year behind (the 2011 Book uses 2010 data, 2012 uses 2011, etc.); ours is current as of October 2012. The Book of Trends also uses FTE (full-time equivalent) calculations for students, which reduces the head count by combining part-time students into virtual full-timers; that may make sense statistically to bolster our ratio for public presentation, but it does not reflect our experience as teachers. On an individual basis, each part-time student requires separate time and attention from whichever faculty member is teaching them. The Book of Trends also counts in the ratio all university personnel with faculty rank, whether they teach or not. We use the number of bargaining unit members from each university for comparison because that provides an apples-to-apples comparison of how many faculty are in the classrooms (rather than in administrative positions not primarily directed towards teaching) at CSU and other Ohio universities.

So if faculty ratios explain 86% of the variation in retention across Ohio universities, what can we hope to accomplish with all of the other retention and engagement plans if we don't have a critical mass of faculty to implement them? The short answer is probably not much. Students need to be interacting with full-time faculty in our gateway courses and throughout our curriculum. Until we try this approach, which has worked so well at our peer institutions, we run the risk of falling further behind our competitors, and both our students and our budget will pay the price.

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