

Progress toward Graduation: The 30-60-90 Student Success Roadmap

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Abstract: Data-driven strategic planning within an environment that fosters creativity supplied the foundation for the University of Minnesota Duluth’s 30-60-90 Student Success Roadmap. Drawn from the campus’ strategic plan for improved retention and graduation rates, the Roadmap engages all students in monitoring their progress to graduation, delineates student on-track versus off-track status, provides benchmarks for data collection and analysis, and clarifies areas for process improvement. While results are still preliminary, the project’s stakeholder plan combined with a comprehensive communication plan have engaged stakeholders - students, faculty, staff, administrators, and parents – in supporting student success.

Introduction

Senior Vice President for Enrollment Management and Marketing at DePaul University, David Kalsbeek, stated that “institutions typically fail in their efforts to improve rates of degree completion because they focus more on persistence than progress and fail to develop processes which are centered on communicating to students (and to faculty, advisors, and staff) the importance of timely, successful progress towards degree completion and helping them be planful in degree planning.” He congratulated the University of Minnesota Duluth (UMD) on its approach and development of the ‘30-60-90 Roadmap’ and deemed it a “perfect illustration of how to approach student retention strategically” (personal communication, October 1, 2008).

UMD’s story of how it arrived at the 30-60-90 Student Success Roadmap is a journey in which significant institutional learning took place around strategy-driven organizational change. This article describes UMD’s strategic approach to improving graduation rates and the innovative thinking that resulted in development of the 30-60-90 Student Success Roadmap.

Background

UMD, a comprehensive regional university, enrolls approximately 9,200 undergraduate students and offers thirteen baccalaureate degrees in seventy-seven fields. Students are admitted to UMD on a moderately selective basis using high school rank, ACT/SAT scores, and academic preparation. Between the years 2000 and 2005, UMD’s first-year retention rate averaged 78%. Based on the fall 2000 freshman cohort, UMD’s four year graduate rate is 26%, five year graduate rate is 50.8% and six year

graduate rate is 57%. In 2006 the University of Minnesota's (UM) Board of Regents set ambitious goals for UMD to improve its graduation rates by the year 2012 to 40% at four years, 60% at five years and 65% at six years. Despite previous task force recommendations for improving graduation rates in 1986, 1997, and 2004, UMD's retention and graduation rates had remained relatively unchanged for the previous twenty years. Coupled with new graduation rate goals, a change in high school demographics necessitated closer scrutiny of UMD's student retention efforts. According to the Minnesota Office of Higher Education, the number of Minnesota high school graduates is projected to begin to decline in 2010, with an overall reduction of 10 percent by 2015 (2006). As a result, Minnesota higher education institutions are anticipating a similar decline in qualified applicants leading UMD to look to improved retention as one way to maintain current enrollment levels.

In response to the Regents' new graduation goals and the changing high school demographics, UMD Chancellor Kathryn A. Martin appointed a working team to identify actions UMD should take to improve its retention and graduation rates. As a result of her charge, the Student Success Work Team (SSW) was created in May 2006. The six-member SSW team was cross-functional, representing UMD administration, student affairs, academics, and student support services. A coach from the UM's Office of Service and Continuous Improvement, who is knowledgeable in organizational strategy, change and continuous improvement methodologies, helped guide the team throughout its activities. The team and coach met every 2–3 weeks between May and September 2006. During this time, the team conducted a review of the literature, studied best practices, gathered survey data and collected many ideas from students, faculty and staff on what UMD should do to improve its retention and graduation rates.

The team used continuous improvement tools to slow the process to define, measure, and analyze issues *before* recommending and taking a plan to action. One step in particular, creation of a campus-wide goal tree, caused the team to slow down and to deliberate the ideal representation of its findings. Creating priorities aligned with traditional organizational departments, i.e. aligned with current campus divisions and departments, was problematic in that it directed the team's thinking to existing services and processes. One member of the team proposed a new schema for naming priorities through "core process areas" based on extensive examination of the literature. Her presentation of the core process areas – Fit, Financial, Learning, Support, and Culture - to the SSW team provided an "aha" moment for the team. There was not only unanimous approval from the team, but there was a sense of relief because the newly identified process areas would not limit priorities or solutions. Using the structure of the core process areas, the team created the *UMD Strategy Map for Improving Student Success* (Strategy Map) (Figure 1). After an intensive time of campus presentations and discussions that were intentionally guided by the team's stakeholder plan and communication plan, the SSW team completed its work with a detailed set of recommendations on how to operationalize the Strategy Map. The Strategy Map provided the campus with a single visual picture of the many variables impacting student success and allowed for the many strategic cause-and-effect relationships to be effectively outlined and debated.

Beginning in the spring of 2007, campus-wide retention efforts using the Strategy Map were coordinated by two half-time positions. Both individuals had served as members of the SSW team. The scope of activities for the coordinators spanned the entire campus community. This was in accordance with reports in the literature that schools with higher than expected graduation rates all had a campus culture of shared responsibility for student success across the entire campus (AASCU, 2005). Significant activities during this phase included project-based training in continuous improvement strategies, department initiated student success projects, and implementation of a campus-wide communication plan.

Foundational Research

Favorable reception of the Strategy Map was supported through the research conducted by SSW. Each of the core process areas, Fit, Financial, Learning, Support and Culture, are firmly grounded in research and continue to be primary reference points in campus-wide efforts to improve retention and graduation rates.

Figure 1. Overview of UMD Strategy Map for Improving Student Success

5 Core Process Areas:

1. **Fit** – Interests and educational goals of students are aligned with UMD, its programs, and regional setting
2. **Financial** – Students have access to sufficient resources and knowledge to plan for and invest in their education
3. **Learning** – Students are engaged in challenging learning activities leading to timely degree completion
4. **Support** – Students are connected to a strong network of caring faculty, staff, and students
5. **Culture** – Students, faculty, and staff are valued participants in, and contributors to a diverse and inclusive community that is educationally purposeful.

Within the Strategy Map, each of the five core process areas is expanded with three strategic planning categories.

Core Process Area: five campus goals for improved student success

↳ **Strategic Priorities:** identify key findings from surveys, reports, and literature

↳ **Opportunities for Action:** highlight the best practices specific to each strategic priority

↳ **Initiatives for Action:** identify projects currently underway or completed

UMD’s first core process area, Fit, is defined as how the interests and educational goals of students are aligned with UMD, its programs and regional setting. Fit is important as students enter an institution and remains critical as students travel through their college experience. Commitment to attainment of a bachelor’s degree from the institution, academic preparation for college-level course work, and achieved social integration are key elements of Fit during the first year of college. Students’ attitude about attachment to the institution is essential for retention (Bean, 2005). Graunke, Woosley, and Helms found that first-year students with a high institutional commitment and a clear educational goal were more likely to graduate within six years (2006). Conversely, low educational goals have the strongest negative effect on student retention in the first year (Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2005). In a UMD survey of non-enrolled students conducted in 2006, UMD students cited a mismatch between themselves and the institution, either its programs or its culture, as a factor in their decision to leave. Intellectual competency and academic self-confidence also have been shown to have a strong relationship with college retention (Lotkowski, Robbins, and Noeth, 2004). Data collected by the American College Testing (ACT) shows that institutional persistence rates from freshman to sophomore year are directly related to the academic selectivity of the institution (Mortenson, 2005). Students with the most successful academic records in high school are most likely to be academically successful in college. The colleges that enroll these students are more likely to have higher persistence rates than other colleges that are less academically selective in their admissions (Bean, 2005). Identification of students not achieving social fit or who are academically at-risk must occur as early as possible. After students’ initial transition, issues related to Fit are prevalent during the sophomore year and beyond as students often lack a sense of purpose, experience uncertainty about major and career plans and encounter dissatisfaction with the experience at the university or in their personal relationships (Finning, 2008).

Financial, defined as whether students have access to sufficient resources and knowledge to plan for and invest in their education, is UMD’s second core process area. In numerous studies cited by Braxton and Hirchy, it is documented that “a student’s ability to pay and the student’s perceptions of the costs of his or her education influence persistence” (2005, p. 62). Finances play a major role in student withdrawal decisions, especially in the second and third years. Research indicates that students are significantly more likely to persist between the second and third years if they receive financial aid, (Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2005). Moreover, the amount and kind of money students have access to also matters to

student success. Too little money can make it impossible for students to pay for their college education, while too great a loan debt can hinder student persistence (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007). Respondents to UMD's 2006 non-enrolled survey, most often cited financial issues as a factor in their decision to leave UMD and 35% of respondents reported receiving no financial help from their family.

The third core process area, Learning, examines student engagement in challenging learning activities leading to timely degree completion. This process area includes both students' perceptions of their learning as well as their actual learning achievements. Student learning is the root of student persistence. As stated by Tinto, "students who learn, are students who stay," (1999, p. 6). Tinto continues, "Students who find support for their learning, receive frequent feedback about their learning and are actively involved in learning, especially with others, are more likely to learn and in turn more likely to stay" (p. 6). Similarly, student attitude and perceptions about being a student are also important for retention. Bean discusses the connection between students' belief in their ability to survive and adapt in an academic environment and the self-confidence that leads to achievement of academic success and degree completion (2005). In other words, successful learning leads to more successful learning. The types of learning opportunities provided are also critical. Numerous studies describe the merits of reforming the college learning environment to shift the emphasis from faculty teaching to student learning (Kuh, et al., 2007). Positive outcomes of such a shift include setting higher expectations for students, raising academic standards, and increasing student responsibility for their learning. This final item, student responsibility, is often associated with time on task. It is widely acknowledged that students are not spending enough time studying (Tinto, 2005). Tinto states that this is partly "because we do not expect enough of them or construct educational settings that required them to study enough," (Tinto, 2005, p. 321).

Support, defined as students are connected to a strong network of caring faculty, staff, and students, is UMD's fourth core process area. Bean suggests that successful institutions engage students in support activities that move them from an external to an internal locus of control (2005). Well formed first-year experience programs are one way to achieve this. Numerous studies point to the positive outcomes of coherent first-year experience programs, which include pre-college and ongoing orientation programs, first-year seminars, and other new student advising and study group experiences (Kuh et al., 2007). Institutions that provide the most comprehensive orientation and advising programs report higher graduation rates. Additional evidence points to the need to design further support during the sophomore year. Specifically designed learning environments that provide opportunities for self-exploration and reflection, resources supporting academic and career needs, and opportunities to enhance and establish social and academic connections are noted successful sophomore interventions (Finning, 2008).

UMD's final core process area, Culture, is defined as students, faculty, and staff are valued participants in and contributors to a diverse and inclusive community that is educationally purposeful. The commitment of the campus community to the success of all students, the physical environment of the campus, and the social integration of students are key elements of Culture. A study of twelve public four-year colleges and universities with higher than expected retention and graduation rates showed that these schools did not have a direct focus on retention or graduation rates but that their higher rates were a byproduct of creating a high quality learning environment and a campus culture committed to supporting students (AASCU, 2005). A campus culture that emphasizes shared responsibility for student success was also prevalent amongst these institutions. Kuh et al. (2007) agree that effective partnerships among faculty and student affairs professionals are essential to creating a campus culture that supports student success. This shared commitment to student success can be evidenced through reward systems aligned with enhancing the student experience. Tinto notes that "unless the education and retention of students is rewarded, in particular through promotion and tenure systems, many faculty will only give it lip service" (2006, p. 9). The importance of faculty-student contact is clearly articulated in the retention literature (Kuh et al., 2007) and, thus, faculty commitment evidenced through action is essential to this effort. Beyond the people that make up the institution's community, a strong sense of place also contributes to a campus environment that creates meaningful experiences and memories and, thus, promotes persistence

(Kuh et al., 2007). Likewise, the campus environment can significantly impact opportunities for social connections. Students' social integration represented by cohesion in the peer environment and participation in college-sponsored activities positively influence completion of a bachelor's degree (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). Kuh et al. (2007) state that connection to a social group that is achievement oriented and engagement in activities that develop skills and competencies further influence persistence. Making these experiences available and welcoming to all students is critical. Wathington states, "Gaps in achievement relate directly to disparate student experiences on college campuses. Minority students' expressions of alienation, exclusion, and discrimination on predominately white campuses remain an issue," (2005, p.190). Incorporating many of the elements already discussed, student satisfaction with the institution is an important variable in determining the overall quality of the student experience. "Satisfaction represents a sense that the student feels he or she belongs at, and is loyal to, the institution and is highly correlated with engagement, persistence, and academic performance" (Kuh, et al., 2007, p. 60).

The core process areas of Fit, Financial, Learning, Support, and Culture are the pillars of UMD's effort to improve student success. The elements of this framework should not be viewed as isolated components but as fundamentally linked. The five core process areas are tied to each other and, thus, consideration must be given to all areas. For instance, increased student engagement (Learning) will reap the greatest benefits if students are enrolled in courses that match their academic interests and abilities (Fit) and financial resources make it possible for all students to afford course tuition (Financial). Likewise, all campus departments are linked within the common goal of supporting a successful student experience. The responsibility for improved retention and graduation rates does not reside within any one unit or series of departments. The entire UMD campus community and every individual within our community contribute to the success of our students and the achievement of institutional learning outcomes. Collaboration and cooperation across units and individuals are fundamental to the success of this initiative.

30-60-90 Student Success Roadmap

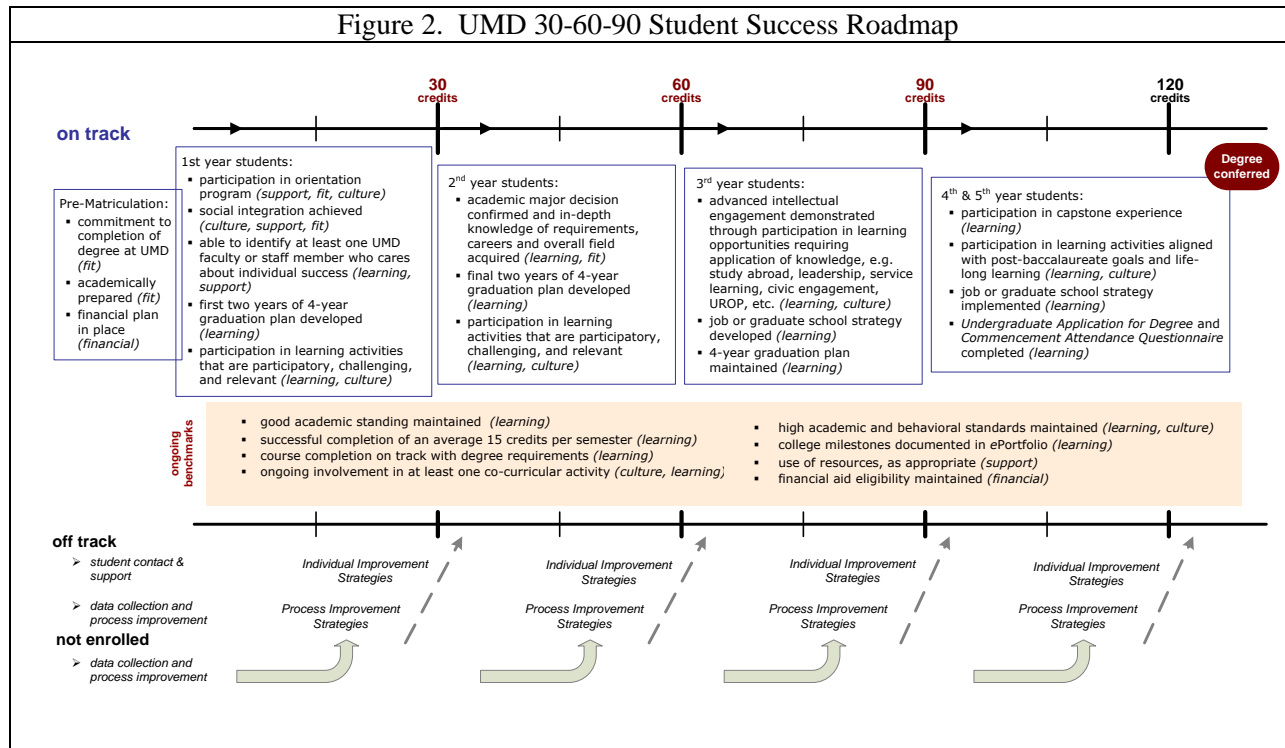
UMD's Strategy Map details the core process areas, strategic priorities and new initiatives to improve student retention and graduate rates and allows administration to clearly see both progress being made as well as gaps within those efforts. While the Strategy Map is the foundation to meeting campus graduation goals, as a nineteen page document it is not captivating to all stakeholders. Students, faculty, staff, and parents require a more succinct and personal way to engage in monitoring student progress toward graduation.

As the two campus retention coordinators began to conceptualize how to communicate the primary concepts of the Strategy Map to all stakeholders, they played with the concept related by Kuh and associates in *Student Success in College* (2005) - that of drawing a path to student success. This concept, along with a UM report plotting students along the 0 to 120+ credit continuum led the coordinators to consider what a map for student success at UMD would look like. To complete this exercise, they revisited the research conducted during development of the Strategy Map. An initial first step was to plot the strategic priorities of the Strategy Map, which encapsulated the key findings from the literature, along the credit continuum. The items were fine-tuned and the overall concept revised numerous times in order to deliver the desired outcome – a one page document providing a clear pathway to a successful student experience at UMD (Figure 2).

The UMD *30-60-90 Student Success Roadmap* (30-60-90 Roadmap; Roadmap) delineates student on-track versus off-track status and provides for data collection and ongoing process improvement. The 30 (sophomore status), 60 (junior status), and 90 (senior status) credit benchmarks are one set of measures of student progress to degree completion. However, the Roadmap is about more than the accumulation of credits. It also highlights successful student behaviors and experiences that lead to a more satisfying college experience. A student-friendly version of the Roadmap was also developed in order to share the

significant strategic priorities of the Strategy Map with students, faculty, staff, and parents in a less scholarly tone.

Since the metrics for many of the benchmarks listed on the Roadmap are clearly measurable, reports are being generated from a central database to identify on-track and off-track students. The reports serve as dashboards indicating where students are succeeding and where additional assistance is needed. These reports serve both as a means of identifying models of success and indicators for intervention. On an individual basis, the benchmarks are also conversational. An advisor can easily reference the Roadmap and ask a first-year student how many close friendships she has established or whether she has completed the first two years of her graduation plan and, in follow up, provide the necessary support based on the student's responses.



Acceptance and implementation of the Roadmap has taken place on three primary fronts. First, the collegiate associate deans were drawn upon for early feedback on the Roadmap and were ultimately asked to approve the benchmarks listed. The retention coordinators meet monthly with the associate deans. Second, both the Strategy Map and an early version of the Roadmap were presented to the collegiate deans and academic department heads at a breakfast hosted by the chancellor. This signified administrative support and invited feedback from key stakeholders. A follow up breakfast was recently held with this same group to provide updates on the project. Third, a cross-functional team was formed in summer 2008 to devise and implement a communication plan for the Roadmap. As a result, the Roadmap has been presented to all freshmen. The team has developed additional communications for off-track students, i.e. students not meeting particular benchmarks, as well as to reinforce the positive behaviors of all students. All academic advisors have also been introduced to the Roadmap and workshops for parents were held during Parent & Family Weekend. The Roadmap website receives nearly two-thousand hits each month.

Additional ways to engage students with the Roadmap are being sought. In fall semester 2009, freshmen enrolled in UMD's one-credit orientation course will participate in a series of self-assessments asking them to rate their status on key first-semester benchmarks, such as time on task, social connections, and academic performance. Results will be shared with the course instructor and appropriate

interventions made. The goal is not only to address student needs on a timely basis but to also engage students in monitoring their own progress on benchmarks contributing to a successful experience.

The 30-60-90 Roadmap is intended to communicate consistent expectations to students, to guide student actions, to facilitate discussions between academic advisors and students, and to reinforce the important role each member of our community plays in promoting student success. While we believe each student is the primary architect of his/her college experience, faculty and staff are responsible for engaging students in curricular and co-curricular activities and for reinforcing the positive student behaviors that contribute to a successful educational experience. The Roadmap provides a clearly marked route to a successful college experience at the University of Minnesota Duluth.

Reflections

During his plenary address at the 2008 CSRDE National Symposium on Student Retention (September 20, 2008), David Kalsbeek described what he terms *The 4 Ps of Student Retention*. While Dr. Kalsbeek's presentation was a bit surprising to some in attendance, for UMD's retention coordinator who was present it confirmed the strategic approach our campus has taken to improve graduation rates. Among his comments, Dr. Kalsbeek called on institutions to move away from a focus on persistence and, if degree attainment is the goal, to focus on progress and to concentrate on those processes and policies that help or hinder the majority of students in that progress. He stated, "A comprehensive model adopts a more systemic perspective which focuses attention on high-risk processes more than at-risk persons." UMD's 30-60-90 Roadmap provides a clear example of such a model.

UMD's strategic approach came about partly due to a campus culture that embraces continuous improvement strategies. Creative thinking, which led to development of the 30-60-90 Roadmap, was encouraged and celebrated. UMD's chancellor was a significant contributor to this success. She raised the level of discourse, insisting that progress to plan would be monitored by the vice chancellors and deans quarterly. Ownership of the Strategy Map was thereby transferred to the entire campus community and acceptance of the Roadmap was made easier.

Support from the Office of Service and Continuous Improvement was essential to a strategic initiative such as this. Training and coaching in strategic thinking and data-driven process improvement skills have allowed staff and administrators to feel more comfortable not immediately knowing the solution to complex questions. Use of these strategy, change, and performance improvement tools are becoming more commonplace across UMD, thereby increasing the likelihood other problems will be addressed in similar strategy-driven ways.

Initial results, albeit preliminary, show a 3.9% increase in freshman retention rates from 2007 to 2008. Projections suggest that if this modest increase is sustained along with an increased emphasis on student progress to degree completion, UMD is on target to meet graduation rate goals set by University Regents. Furthermore, if freshman admissions dip in accordance with Minnesota high school graduation estimates, the sustained improvement in retention has the potential to maintain campus enrollment near current levels.

Finally, it won't be known for a few years whether the Strategy Map and the 30-60-90 Roadmap facilitate achievement of UMD's long-term graduation rate goals. However, we are confident in the research and the collaborative efforts that led to creation and campus adoption of both of these documents. The strategy-driven Roadmap will continue to evolve as will the Strategy Map. Data collection and operational measures are still a work in progress and will continue to develop as the needs of our students and our campus are refined. Instead of focusing strictly on solutions, our emphasis is on a measurable strategic process that allows for different solutions at different points in time. This is a formula for innovative and continuous improvement of student success that is working at UMD.

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