

## **UMD Student Success Strategy Map**

### **- Highlights from the review of literature leading to development of the Strategy Map -**

Each of the core process areas represented on the UMD Student Success Strategy Map, Fit, Financial, Learning, Support and Culture, is grounded in research and serve as primary reference points in campus-wide efforts to improve student learning, satisfaction, and graduation rates.

#### *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 that are aligned with campus and program learning outcomes and lead to timely degree completion**
4. **Support – Students are connected to a strong network of caring faculty, staff, and students and supported through educationally effective practices, programs, and resources.**
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. 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, i.e. either its programs or its

culture, as a factor in their decision to leave. Intellectual competency and academic self-confidence have also been shown to have a strong relationship with college retention (Lotkowski, Robbins, and Noeth, 2004). Data collected by the American College Testing (ACT) indicates 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 needs to occur as early as possible in the admission through first-year timeline for maximum impact. Beyond the first-year, issues related to Fit reappear during the sophomore year 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; Schaller, 2005).

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. Numerous studies cited by Braxton and Hirsch, indicate 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 type of money students have access to also matter. 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 percent of respondents reported receiving no financial help from their family.

The third core process area, Learning, examines student engagement in challenging learning activities that are aligned with campus and program learning outcomes and lead to timely degree completion. This process area includes both students' perceptions of their learning as well as their actual learning achievements. Student learning is at 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 and supported through educationally effective practices, programs and resources, is UMD’s fourth core process area. Bean contends 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). These same studies indicate that institutions providing the most comprehensive orientation and advising programs report higher graduation rates. Additional evidence points to the need to also design targeted support during the sophomore year. Deliberate 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, rather, 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 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 culture that creates meaningful experiences and memories and promotes persistence (Kuh et al., 2007). The physicality of the campus environment also 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.

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