STUDENT SUCCESS TASK FORCE

ACADEMIC PROGRAMS AND POLICIES COMMITTEE

REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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Introduction

With the numerous challenges in higher education, retention and timely program completion are probably the most critical factors facing colleges and universities today. Among Southern’s first-time, full-time freshmen, the current four-year graduation rate is 15%. Using retention and graduation rates as our primary focus, the Student Success Task Force on Academic Programs and Policies Committee examined how current university policies and program guidelines could have an impact on student success and developed recommendations on improvement as summarized in this report.

This committee is co-chaired by Monica Raffone and Winnie Yu. Members are Polly Beals, Susan Cusato, Theresa Marchant-Shapiro, Sharon Misasi, Diane Morgenthaler, and Troy Paddock. In addition to email correspondence, the committee convened eight times during this past year. The deliberation and discussions were mainly devoted to examining data gathered by Office of Institutional Research, reviewing program credit load requirements, and current policies and methods of policy dissemination to students as compared to other comparable institutions. Our discussions were also enriched by special insights brought forth by committee members. Such first-hand experience included direct feedback on program and course registration processes, advisement, transfer credit alignments from Monica as Associate Registrar, from Winnie, Troy, Susan, Sharon in their capacity as current and previous department chairs, from Sharon who spearheaded special projects on curricular and rotation plans, from Susan special insights as previous Faculty Senate President, from Polly on Liberal Education Program and transfer articulations, from Tess and Diane’s unique skills in data analyses, and collectively many decades of classroom and advisement experience.

Our finding summary is organized into 2 sections: (1) Policy Concerns and Recommendations, and (2) Program Concerns and Recommendations. Each section outlines problematic issues noted under the current policies and program guidelines and identified by the committee based on institutional data. The Policy Recommendations are described in concrete details such that they can be acted upon as short-term objectives. The Program Recommendations encompass program-wide, and in some cases, university-wide improvements which will likely need a longer time to implement.

Policy Concerns and Recommendations
The Academic Policies & Programs work group reviewed multiple university policies that could affect student retention and graduation. Some of these policies are outdated, cumbersome, not clearly documented and do not assist students as they pursue their degree program and career development. The committee identified four policies that, with revision, can have a positive impact on a student success.
A. Grade Replacement Policy

The current Grade Replacement Policy allows students who fill out the appropriate paperwork to retake up to 15 credits and to have the original course grade(s) removed from their SCSU GPA. The current policy is not student friendly, does not account for lab courses, and cannot be used by education majors. The recommendation of the committee is to revise the existing Grade Replacement Policy to facilitate student success by:

i. Changing the “15” credit maximum to 5 courses to accommodate 4-credit courses.
ii. Remove the original grade from the transcript so that students pursuing state certification are not penalized.
iii. Create an automated system for students to select grade replacement at the time of registration.

B. Grade Appeal Policy

The Grade Appeal Process outlines the procedure a student must follow to appeal a grade received. The current procedure, located in the Student Handbook, can take up to 4 months to process and does not take into consideration requests from graduating seniors, faculty work schedule, and potential complication of a grade appeal involving Academic Misconduct Policy. The recommendation of the committee is to revise the existing policy and clearly document it in the Undergraduate Catalog. Specific recommendations to facilitate student graduation and expedite the process are:

i. Establish a separate accelerated process for graduating seniors.
ii. Allow students to submit their appeal electronically from their SCSU email accounts.
iii. Modify the policy to reference the Academic Misconduct Policy in order to protect student and university rights for those instances where the two policies overlap.

C. Fresh Start Policy

The Fresh Start policy allows students with fewer than 60 credits to re-matriculate after having proven themselves academically sound since leaving Southern. The current policy does not take into consideration students who since leaving have earned an Associate or other degree. The work group recommends amending the policy to allow more students who had a rough academic start to re-enroll and graduate from SCSU.

- Current policy reads “have not reached junior status (60 credits), including the 9-12 credits referred to above”. The committee recommends amending the wording to read “have not reached junior status (60 credits) at SCSU”
D. University Withdrawal Policy

In order to improve student success, retention and timely graduation we need to have a University Withdrawal Policy that takes into consideration extenuating circumstances but also requires student accountability. The current policy allows students to withdraw from an entire semester with no academic consequences. This is a potential problem for progress towards graduation, course sequencing, acceptance into programs, and student and residential life. The committee proposes to align the University Withdrawal process with the course withdrawal process to provide consistency and accountability.

i. Change the deadline for withdrawing from the university to coincide with the last day for course withdrawals (10th week)

ii. Withdrawals after the 10th week must be due to extenuating circumstances and approved by a university representative.

Program Concerns and Recommendations

A. Programs Requirements

There are academic programs with heavy credit load that typically require students longer than four years to complete. To make matters worse, when the heavy credit requirement is combined with developmental and prerequisite courses, this prolonged course of study often implies a higher chance of student attrition. Supported by the report titled “Average Earned Credit by Degree Major and Student Type – AY 10-13” from the Office of Management Information and Research, there are twelve (12) academic programs on campus whose majors that are also first-time college students took over 140 credits to complete (Appendix, Table 1). It is advisable for academic programs with such heavy credit load to review and to streamline the program requirement. Reviewing the general student readiness upon entering the program might also be helpful to improve student success.

All academic programs should clearly communicate any GPA, acceptance, or program requirements to students. Sharon Misasi, as special assistant to the Provost, has been collecting 4-year curricular maps from academic programs in the university. As evident by the Curricular Map Availability table (Appendix, Table 2) many programs still need to develop such documents, which would be very valuable for advisement both within and beyond the major department.

The recommendation to address this concern is to make program requirements more transparent by requesting departments to:

i. Develop curricular map to show feasibility to program completion in four years

ii. Clearly communicate GPA requirements at the program and university level
iii. Reduce the required credits to the minimum 120 or as close to 120. When feasible and reasonable, to eliminate unnecessary courses that render the total credits required for a degree not possible to complete in four (4) years.

- Determine if a second major or a concentration is required for state certification in Elementary Education, Early Childhood Education and Special Education Collaborative.

B. Major-specific LEP requirements

The LEP has a considerable number of major-specific requirements for certain programs. These are courses stipulated by a major department that meet certain LEP learning goals. This practice could create a hardship situation for students who, upon changing major, end up with completed LEP credits which could no longer apply within their new major.

The recommendation here is to conduct university wide review of LEP as a common core. The intent is to make the LEP flexible within reason in order to minimize transfer or major change credit loss.

C. Academic advisement and guidance to career placement

There needs to be more comprehensive advisement and career placement guidance for students, and this is particularly crucial for students enrolled in heavy credit programs. In-time and sound advisement from course selection to choosing the right major will minimize credit loss and can go a long way towards student success. For transfer students, alignment of transfer articulation agreements in area schools is another very important program concern.

The recommendation is to develop policies to facilitate transfer of credits and to set up tools to support comprehensive advisement:

- Transfers with associate degree to be waived from LEP requirements
- Articulate transfer credits based on comparability instead of equivalency
- Develop and digitize workflow tools and supportive services to facilitate comprehensive advisement and career counseling

In closing, the Academic Programs and Policies Committee deeply appreciates the opportunity to identify critical issues facing retention and graduation and to make suggestions to ameliorate these problems as they relate to current programs and policies. We strongly believe that the recommendations set forth in this report will have a positive impact on improving student success at Southern.