ANALYSIS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF LOUISIANA AT MONROE FIRST TIME FULL TIME FRESHMEN MINORITY STUDENT ATTRITION, 2010-2011 COHORT

February 2012
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FORWARD

The University of Louisiana at Monroe Taskforce on Minority Retention and Graduation was formed as a result of the *Granting Resources and Autonomy for Diplomas Act*, LA-GRAD Act. Retention and graduation are primary benchmarks used under the LA-GRAD Act to improve student retention and success in Louisiana’s higher education institutions. In Fall 2011 Eric Pani, Ph.D., Interim Vice President for Academic Affairs presented data on retention rates to the faculty and staff at ULM. His presentation on retention data for first-time full-time freshmen at ULM revealed a decline in the minority student population at ULM and it became evident that this problem needed to be addressed. Consequently, a taskforce was structured to present recommendations to the Administration.
Introduction

In 2009, the State of Louisiana responded by passing the *Granting Resources and Autonomy for Diplomas ACT*, commonly referred to as *LA-GRAD Act*. A primary component of this sweeping legislation tied colleges and universities performance to retention and graduation. As a result of this significant legislation, the University of Louisiana Monroe decided to take a closer look at the retention and graduation of first time full time freshmen minority students who enrolled in fall 2010, but did not return the in fall 2011. The intent of the study was to gain an understanding into the attrition problem of this group of students and seek viable solutions.

To address this problem, a committee of students, faculty, and staff was formed to study the issue of minority freshmen retention. Given the exhaustive nature of the scope of the study, the taskforce immediately decided to form two sub-committees. Sub-committee 1 was charged with developing outcome data of the minority student who enrolled in fall 2010 but did not return. Subcommittee 2 was asked to identify “best practices” and retention strategies to address the persistent gaps that need to be addressed to retain a greater number of minorities. The taskforce envisioned that the findings from the study could be used to improve retention rates for all students at ULM.

During fall 2011 the taskforce deliberated strategies and procedures to ascertain why many minority students admitted in fall 2010 did not return one year later. Operating under time constraints, the taskforce agreed to conduct a qualitative study using the available database from Institutional Planning which identified 122 non-returning minority students for the specified time period.

Methodology

In response to the hypothesis of minority student population loss, a qualitative study was conducted to ascertain additional insight into the probable cause(s) of the population loss. Dr. Wayne Brumfield, ULM Vice President of Student Affairs assembled an inter-disciplinary taskforce of faculty, staff, and students. All 2010 entering minority freshmen who did not return for the Fall 2011 semester were identified as the target population. It was determine that the study would include five (5) open-ended questions to give the students an opportunity to fully disclose the issues affecting their departure from the University. They were as follows:

- Can you tell me why you left college?
- What are you doing now?
- What could ULM have done better to keep you enrolled?
- Do you plan to continue your college education?
- Is there anything you would like to add?

Of the 122 freshmen minorities who did not return in fall 2011, thirty-five (35) agreed to participate in the study. Approximately 32.4% of fall 2010 entering minority freshmen did not return one year later, or in the fall 2011 semester.
Respondent’s answers were recorded along with any ancillary information that was provided. Telephone interviews were conducted to gather information from the respondents to better understand why they did not enroll one year later. The following chart(s) summarizes the responses of those who participated in the survey. It is imperative that one be cautious in drawing significant conclusion(s) on the data at this point as the number of respondents was slightly less than 30 percent. Every effort was made to obtain clarity regarding the answer(s) given by the respondent(s).

**Question 1: Can you tell me why you left college?**

The majority of respondents most often reported two primary reasons for leaving school. Poor grades were the reason provided by 34% of the respondents and 32% of respondents said that they left because they were homesick or for personal reasons. Another 17% of respondents reported that they left ULM to transfer to another school. Fourteen percent stated that financial aid was the issue that caused them to leave. Three percent indicated that they left the University to go to work. See Figure 1: Frequency of Reasons Minority Freshman Left College

**Figure 1: Frequency of Reasons Minority Students Left College between Fall 2010 and Fall 2011**
Question 2: What are you doing now?

Responses of the students indicated that they did not abandon their aspirations for higher education. The majority of the fall 2010 entering minority freshmen who withdrew from the University have enrolled in post-secondary education elsewhere. Almost 69% of them transferred to other universities. The other categories that describe the current situations of the responding students that did not return are “Working” (22.8%) and “Personal” (8.6%). See Figure 2: What Are You Doing Now?

Figure 2: What are you doing now?
Question 3: What could ULM have done to keep you enrolled?

From the responses provided by the students, nothing significant was identified that might have helped them remain enrolled at ULM. When asked “What ULM could have done to keep you enrolled?” 77% of the respondents indicated that there was nothing that ULM could have done to aid in their retention one year later. Respondents cited a combination of other factors which included “Financial Aid,” “Instructor Issues” and “Classes Too Hard.” Approximately 3% of the respondents cited “Out of State Costs” as a reason for leaving. See Figure 3: What Could Have ULM Done to Keep You Enrolled?

Figure 3: What could have ULM done to keep you enrolled?
Question 4: Do you plan to continue your college education?

Clearly the students planned to continue their pursuit of higher education. 94% of the students planned to return to college. Only 3% of the students said that they did not plan to return to college. The other 3% were not certain of their plans to re-enroll in any higher education institution. See Figure 4: Do You Plan to Continue Your College Education?

Figure 4: Do You Plan to Continue Your College Education?

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<th>Continue</th>
<th>Do Not Plan</th>
<th>Uncertain</th>
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<td>94%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
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Question 5: Is there anything that you would like to add?

Little substantive information was provided by the respondents. Only six responses were documented. They are as follows:

- **EVERYTHING WAS FINE (N=2)**
- **REQUESTED DAY CARE (N=1)**
- **CLASSES TOO LARGE (N=1)**
- **OUT OF STATE FEES AN ISSUE (N=1)**
- **ISSUE WITH ULM BEING A WHITE UNIVERSITY (N=1)**
Summary

Generally, the most frequent reasons for leaving college were grades (34%), followed by homesick/personal reasons (32%), financial aid (17%), transferred (14%), and work (3%). When asked the question, “What are you doing now?” 68.6% of the respondents reported they enrolled at other institutions. Of that number, 34.3% are in 4 year colleges, 28.5% enrolled in 2 year institutions, and 2.9% enrolled in proprietary/vocational training programs. Approximately twenty-three percent reported they went to work while 8.6% reported personal issues (pregnancy, marriage, financial, etc.) as a primary reason for leaving ULM.

When asked “What could ULM have done to keep you enrolled?” more than three out of four respondents or 77.1% reported that there was nothing ULM could have done to help keep them enrolled. Ninety-four percent reported they plan to continue their college at some time in the future. The responses given provided a consistent set of themes which emerged from analysis of the survey. They are as follows:

- Financial Needs—which includes family and personal financial issues;
- Academic Preparation—how to succeed in college level work;
- Connectedness—getting connected to the fabric of university life;
- Work—on and off campus; provide student with advantages and disadvantages of each;
- Transfer Issues—provide information on transfer options between academic programs.

Recommendations

Recognizing that there is no one set of solutions that will apply to this group is imperative to adequately addressing the loss of many college ready minorities. Therefore, the following recommendations are being proposed by the taskforce:

- More In Your Face conversations at freshmen orientation regarding academic preparation, successful study skills, and time on task for studying;
- Create a freshman institute or junior division to address academic success in college.
- Implement a near-peer mentoring program which utilizing the 1+5 buddy system connecting FTF with upperclassmen. Implementation of this plan will entail fostering partnerships with academically successful on-campus groups (i.e. fraternities, sororities, and related club/organizations, professionals in the field, and community and business leaders.
At the initial onset of the study, the sample was categorized by primarily by grade point average (GPA). However, in retrospect the taskforce recognized that GPA is but one attribute necessary for student success. Therefore, a better classification of categories of the sample would be students who are:

- **Comprehensively-At-Risk**—students who are experience poverty, low academic achievement and family instability;
- **Academically-At-Risk**—students who have above average test scores but are not performing at the same level;
- **Generally-At-Risk**—students who are from high schools where only a small percentage of students go to college and those from multitude of cultural, familial, and/or social issues that seek to derail college attainment aspirations.

Additional recommendations indicate the need for a longitudinal study to further explore the phenomena of student retention. The taskforce recognizes the urgency to understand and identify why many seemingly well-prepared minority students are not retained. Minority retention is a serious issue that must be addressed if the institution expects to improve retention and graduation goals set forth in LA GRAD benchmarks.