
Undergraduate Student 4-year Graduation Rate Plan



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Florida Gulf Coast University has created a comprehensive 4-year graduation rate plan in response to the “Florida Excellence in Higher Education Act of 2018” that was passed during the 2018 legislative session. This plan is strategic as it identifies a series of action items that are aligned within broader-based objectives that will focus on Academic, Curricular, Financial, and Policy areas that, collectively, will make a positive impact on improving our 4-year graduation rate. Specifically, the following objectives have been established:

Academic:

- *Promote and increase timely graduation and persistence by focusing on well-established high impact and related practices.*
- *Refine existing programs and implement new innovative programs through the Center for Academic Achievement (CAA) to assist students with adjusting to college and with the rigors of college coursework.*
- *Expand degree completion opportunities for students.*
- *Implement, increase, and improve the use of technology/software that will contribute to students’ academic success and degree progression.*
- *Establish new comprehensive university-wide academic advising services to improve advising practices for students.*
- *Formalize and expand faculty engagement in enhancing student success.*

Curricular:

- *Develop a first-year experience program that provides a common set of experiences for all FTIC students, while providing opportunities to form deeper connections to the university.*

Financial:

- *Realign and expand our scholarship and financial aid programs to provide a positive impact on recruiting best-fit students, first-year retention rates, sophomore persistence, and 4-year graduation rates.*
- *Expansion of scholarship and financial aid programs to significantly expand students enrolling in summer courses.*
- *Commitment to containing the cost of degree to the student.*

Policy:

- *Create institutional-wide policy focusing on graduating students in a timely-manner (e.g. 4-years).*
- *Improve operations involving the application process, document management, file review and course articulation to provide a more student friendly and efficient process for incoming undergraduate students.*
- *Continue to improve and expand the communications and interactions between the enrollment services offices and incoming students by providing a more student-friendly/student-first environment.*

- *Enhance our marketing and recruitment plans to attract best-fit students and students with the highest probability to succeed, including examining policies that are hindering students rather than enticing them to enroll.*
- *Re-evaluate the current university-wide course scheduling and course enrollment management process to maximize course offerings that allow for timely graduation.*

Our 4-year graduation rate plan identifies short-term action items that Florida Gulf Coast University is either currently doing, or looking to improve as well as other action items that are close to being implemented or planned in the near future. The structural and functional framework currently being created for Student Success & Enrollment Management initiative has begun to be implemented. This framework will be critical to laying a firm foundation for which **Student Success** (e.g. 4-year graduation rate) will be built upon. This 4-year graduation rate plan has been specifically designed to align precisely within the new framework which will optimize all efficiencies and maximize all involved resources at Florida Gulf Coast University.

PREFACE

Contained herein is Florida Gulf Coast University's plan to improve our 4-year graduation rate as defined in CS/SB 4: "Florida Excellence in Higher Education Act of 2018." As such, Florida Gulf Coast University's plan identifies the academic, financial, policy, and curricular incentives and disincentives for timely graduation. Our plan also outlines the implementation of a proactive financial aid program to enable full-time students with financial need to take at least 15 credit hours in the Fall and Spring semesters while also providing incentives for students to take classes in the Summer term to ensure they are successfully competing 30 credit hours a year. Lastly, Florida Gulf Coast University assures that we will not increase costs to our students in pursuit of their education.

INTRODUCTION

Upon his arrival in July 2018, President Michael V. Martin immediately began to set the course and foundation for Florida Gulf Coast University's next 20 years and beyond. This was achieved by refining FGCU's Strategic Plan where **Student Success** was identified as our most critical pillar to achieve. To begin FGCU's renewed emphasis in achieving greater student success, a Presidential Task Force was convened in October 2017 and charged with considering, assessing, and recommending innovative and bold initiatives for continued improvement in **Student Success** with the specific focus on improving our 4-year graduation rate. As such, we as a University have challenged ourselves to undergo the process of organizational change, creating new approaches, and establishing accountability measures ensuring the underlying factors that directly and indirectly affect positive change in students' retention, persistence, and 4-year graduation rates will occur. The work of the task force was also guided tremendously by an external consultant who is widely considered an expert in student success and enrollment management as evidenced by her ability to transform regional comprehensive universities very similar to Florida Gulf Coast University in size and scope in this manner. Through FGCU's proactive efforts, a newly established **Student Success & Enrollment Management Initiative** has been created where the conceptual framework is now currently going through the implementation stage. Our new framework will first and foremost create a new culture where **Student Success** and 4-year graduation rate are front and center of every employee at FGCU. Through our implementation stage, we will:

1. Align programs, services, and units that directly impact students' experience in a positive manner leading to timely graduation in 4 years, and employment within their chosen profession with a competitive salary.
2. Identify offices (or establish new ones) that are optimally aligned based on common functions so that opportunities and synergies for collaboration are enhanced in 3 main areas: Academic Engagement, Student Engagement, and Enrollment Management.
3. Seamlessly and synergistically integrate the mission, vision, and focus of Student Success & Enrollment Management with all of the other divisions within our institution to confirm that the necessary resources will be efficiently and effectively aligned to ensure **Student Success**.

Under President Martin's leadership, a new culture has been established where the entire FGCU community understands that every employee is accountable for **Student Success**. Provided below is Florida Gulf Coast University's comprehensive plan to improve our 4-year graduation rate. We present our primary objectives along with their associated action items. Each action item is highlighted

indicating the current progress of each where **green** represents we are currently doing, **teal** represents the item is in progress, and **yellow** indicates the item is being planned. Moreover, various incentives and disincentives for students are described within each area. Florida Gulf Coast University has initially identified \$1.3M dollars in new funding received as a result of the 2017-2018 legislative session to support many of the new initiatives defined in this plan and our Student Success & Enrollment Management initiative, at-large. Specifically, this funding would be directed towards: adding new personnel, adjusting compensation for existing personnel, adding and refining existing technology, and increasing general operating Educational & General (E&G) funds. It is recognized that this plan will be continuously adapted and evolve as progress is made in achieving these objectives and sustaining these outcomes over time.

ACADEMIC

Within the context of our 4-year graduation rate plan, the focus of **Academic** endeavors is to augment and enrich student learning experiences both within and beyond the classroom. In this manner, we will provide academic opportunities for students to become involved in high impact practices that lead to transformational learning, such as: internships, tutoring, mentoring, supplemental instruction, service learning, and study abroad. Moreover, we will refine and expand university-wide academic advising services to create a more central and cohesive advising philosophy and culture for the campus to embrace. The deep intellectual involvement that arises from these collaborative and other academic experiences equips students to excel by acting as thoughtful, engaged, and knowledgeable contributors to the university's academic culture, the SW Florida region, and the greater society.

Objectives:

1. *Promote and increase timely graduation and persistence by focusing on well-established high impact and related practices.*

Action Items:

- Increase the scope and the number of students participating in Living-Learning Communities programs.
- Increase the number of offerings for all FGCU internships and co-operative learning programs, including internationally, and align them with employment gaps.
- Increase the number and impact of academic peer mentoring programs where students are empowered to assist other students to succeed.
- Increase the number and type of study abroad/away, diversity programs, and global learning programs.
- Create non-residential learning communities to strengthen student academic engagement, critical thinking, and application of learning.

- Reduce the transfer-out rate through such initiatives as the expanded Honors College, intentional financial aid, making FGCU a first-choice for all enrolled students, and adding selected high-demand degree programs.
2. *Refine existing programs and implement new innovative programs through the Center for Academic Achievement (CAA) to assist students with adjusting to college and with the rigors of college coursework.*

Action Items:

- Expand resources for CAA to increase tutoring and Supplemental Instruction for courses with high instances of D and F grades along with withdrawals (W) - including in summer.
- Create a “drop back” program for students struggling in courses with high instances of D and F grades along with Ws.
- Work with the academic colleges to reduce section sizes in courses with high instances of D and F grades along with Ws.
- Increase academic coaching services for students at the specific point when they need it.
- Revamp both Effective Learning and University Transition courses to focus more specifically on academic habits of mind.
- Expand availability for both Effective Learning and University Transition courses.
- Develop a process for effectively handling transfer and early transition FTIC students (those earning 24 or more credits while in HS) who want to change their majors at orientation.
- Increase resources and program capacity for summer bridge programs such as Step Ahead and similar programs for minimally qualified and at-risk students.
- Enhance the Common Read program to create an experience in which all FTIC students participate.
- Create compensated, competitive FGCU Student Ambassador Program for students to assist with recruitment, academic engagement activities, etc.
- Provide advising and/or online resources for students to help them understand their readiness and likelihood of success in a particular major.
- Publicize degree maps so students understand more readily the courses they need to take during their first semester.

- Implement a sophomore-year experience program to increase involvement with the major and related faculty, service learning, and undergraduate student research funded by work study funds.

3. *Expand Degree Completion Opportunities for Students*

Action Items:

- Expand BA in Integrated Studies degree program to allow greater flexibility for students to complete a major in limited time.
- Develop competency-based, self-paced online courses to complement high demand face-to-face courses as well as courses that have high rates of Ds, Fs, and Ws so that students can stay on track for timely graduation.

4. *Implement, increase, and improve the use of technology/software that will contribute to students' academic success and degree progression.*

Action Items:

- Optimize and maximize existing technologies utilized for advising students, tracking student progression, reporting attendance and grades, and verification of degree completion.
- Create "success guidelines" in Canvas for courses with high rates of Ds, Fs, and Ws.
- Create a centralized unit to coordinate the development and delivery of high quality online courses.
- Implement technology that will automatically trigger early warning emails to students and advisors when students earn two consecutive low grades (C-, D, F, a numeric grade below 70) and/or miss three consecutive classes.
- Develop a real-time intervention strategy using customized and personalized text messages to effectively and timely notify students of key academic issues.
- Integrate existing systems/software with the University ID card system in order better track students' co-curricular and academic engagement activities (See Curricular section).

5. *Establish new comprehensive university-wide academic advising services to improve advising practices for students.*

Action Items:

- Develop a single, comprehensive plan and philosophy for all advising throughout a student's academic experiences at FGCU.

- Formally create a hub and spoke advising model with a centralized office for first year advisors, exploratory studies / alternatives advising, and undergraduate studies advisors (the hub) that will collaborate more with content specific advisors in their respective colleges (the spokes).
- Create an executive position to oversee all centralized academic advising across campus where all advisors and Directors of Advising (if the position exists) would report to.
- Establish a team of case managers to triage individual student progression issues and track their resolution.
- Expand the use of predictive and prescriptive analytics to identify and address issues to reduce attrition of first-year students.
- Use learning management system (Canvas) analytics to identify and work closely with at-risk students to facilitate them graduating in four years.
- Use of analytics to focus extensively on identifying students who may transfer-out or not return.
- Improve the university overall student-to-advisor ratio so that moves closer to meeting the standard set by the National Academic Advising Association.

6. Formalize and Expand Faculty Engagement in Enhancing Student Success

Action Items:

- Expand and enhance faculty mentoring programs to focus on student retention, persistence through their major, and 4-year graduation rate.
- Develop incentive programs for faculty to help directly impact improving 4-year graduation rates above and beyond what is expected in the classroom.
- Establish a Faculty-in-Residence program for South Village Residential Housing.
- Expand professional development opportunities for faculty to help recognize the need to make referrals to the Counseling and Psychological Services center on campus based on behavioral issues that negatively affect student academic performance.

CURRICULAR

Within the context of our 4-year graduation rate plan, the focus of our **Curricular** efforts will be to implement a number of extra-curricular and co-curricular items, activities, and programs that are complementary to the students' specific program of study – regardless of his/her major. Additionally, these activities are items that are, or will be infused throughout the students' academic program from

the onset of their first semester freshman term to the term that they graduate in. Greater emphasis will be placed on strengthening the first time in college (FTIC) students' first year experience.

Objective:

1. *Develop a first-year experience program that provides a common set of experiences for all FTIC students, while providing opportunities to form deeper connections to the university.*

Action Items:

- Program would be led by a new Office of First Year Experience. This office would create a set of learning outcomes and deliver programs and activities to achieve these outcomes. The activities would include academic, co-curricular and extra-curricular components.
- Require certain co-curricular activities (e.g., Service Learning, Career Center events, Civic Literacy) during the students' first two semesters.
- Implement an involvement requirement for all First Time in College (FTIC) students (e.g. the Pick One Program).
- Work collaboratively with Academic Engagement in the preparation and delivery of first-year transitional (SLS) courses.
- Implement a pre-semester "immersion" program for FTIC students that further introduces students to the academic, social, and cultural expectations of FGCU.
- Expand academic offerings in South Village residence halls (e.g. classes offered, faculty participation) with the intention of creating experiences beyond the classroom with faculty and staff for every FTIC resident in South Village.
- Expand the number of living and learning communities available in South Village.
- Engage students in more connected service learning by embedding projects and required hours into more courses.
- Engage faculty in developing more cross-disciplinary and collaborative assignments and projects in freshman courses.
- Provide academic advisors and appropriate staff with access to data that would provide a holistic view of student activity to include academic, co-curricular, and extra-curricular components.

FINANCIAL

Within the context of our 4-year graduation rate plan, the focus of our **Financial** endeavors is to assist students in a variety of ways that will promote persistence to graduation in a timely fashion for all

undergraduate students through their programs. This will be actuated through the broadening of the university's financial aid packaging and awarding strategies to recruit and retain students. There are many incentives for students to maximize their financial aid and scholarship opportunities; particularly, via the recent expansion and increase funding of the Florida Bright Futures Scholarship program and the expansion of the federal Pell program for summer. In addition, FGCU continues to proactively pursue and increase funding for our merit scholarships as well as our Foundation need-based and merit scholarships. The expansion of student financial services on campus will continue to be extremely vital to help students understand their financial position and eliminate any barriers to matriculation and graduation. We are evaluating these ideas relative to cost/benefit and thus these ideas may change or be modified. Provided below are a number of objectives with specific action items that outlines the implementation of a proactive financial aid plan to enable full-time students with financial need to take 15 credits in the Fall and Spring semesters as well as support for taking courses in the Summer term.

Objectives:

1. *Realign and expand our scholarship and financial aid programs to provide a positive impact on recruiting best-fit students, first-year retention rates, sophomore persistence, and 4-year graduation rates.*

Action Items:

- Emphasize the benefits of SOAR in 4 to incentivize students to complete their degrees within 4 years.
 - Expand our partnerships with Collegiate High schools to offer scholarships to AA graduates.
 - Offer scholarships to Collegiate School Associate in Arts degree graduates (similar to our ACE graduates) to help improve our four-year graduation and retention rates.
 - Provide financial management education to undergraduate students with loans to inform them how to manage loan debt and make progress toward their degree.
 - FGCU has implemented a policy where merit scholarship programs require students to complete 30 credit hours each academic year and maintain a 3.0 GPA. Scholarship funding ends after 4 years thereby creating an incentive for students to graduate in 4 years.
2. *Expansion of scholarship and financial aid programs to significantly expand students enrolling in summer courses.*

Action Items:

- Starting with the Summer 2018 term, need-based students will be eligible for a second Pell award.

- For Summer 2018 only, Florida Bright Futures Academic recipients will be eligible for funding. Students must be enrolled in 6 credit hours and the award covers 100% of the tuition and fees (funded by state of Florida).
- For Summer 2018 only, Florida Bright Futures Academic Medallion recipients will be eligible for funding. Students must be enrolled in 6 credit hours and the award covers \$77.00 per credit which would be funded by FGCU. The approximate cost would be \$250,000.
- Continue funding and awarding of Summer term grants for need-based students. The approximate cost would be \$300,000.
- Implementation of a 6 credit hour of tuition and fees scholarship for students enrolled in our Summer Bridge program (Step Ahead) as students in our summer bridge program demonstrate higher retention rates.

3. *Commitment to containing the cost of degree to the student.*

Action Items:

- Establish tuition payment plans in order to allow students to pay tuition in installments, thereby reducing large tuition balances, reducing student loan borrowing, the number of students cancelled for non-payment, and the number of financial holds preventing student progression.
- Investigate the creation of incentive and retention scholarships for need-based students who complete 30 credits and maintain Satisfactory Academic Progress after each academic year at FGCU.
- Continue to promote our current SOAR in 4 tuition rebate program.
- Explore options for multi-year financial aid and scholarship packages in order to maintain affordability during the student's 4 years.
- Creation of a gap fund to support tuition costs to help prevent students from dropping out between their sophomore and junior year.
- Creation of a gap fund to support tuition costs to help prevent students from dropping out their senior year right before graduation.
- Make better use of workforce development grant opportunities for students.
- Expand student financial services by increasing the amount of financial counseling, expanding financial knowledge of academic advisors, and increasing the amount of financial aid workshops and materials.

POLICY

Within the context of our 4-year graduation rate plan, the focus of our Policy endeavors is to refine existing university policies and procedures as well as create new ones that will facilitate all our of students graduating in the amount of time that their degree program defines. Particularly, the items described below focus exclusively on the matriculating undergraduate student.

Objectives:

1. *Create institutional-wide policy focusing on graduating students in a timely-manner (e.g. 4-years)*

Action Item:

- Policy will guide students, faculty, and staff to further recognize the importance of all students graduating from respective degree programs in the expected amount of time. Greater emphasis will be placed on undergraduate students completing their degrees in 4 years.
2. *Improve operations involving the application process, document management, file review and course articulation to provide a more student friendly and efficient process for incoming undergraduate students.*

Action Items:

- Continue to improve application processing efficiencies to reduce response time and remain competitive with other SUS institutions to attract and enroll students with the highest probabilities for graduation.
 - Examine direct admission of students into college majors for limited access programs at the FTIC level and for other selective programs at the transfer level. This process would also include re-examining admission criteria into the limited access and selective programs).
3. *Continue to improve and expand the communications and interactions between the enrollment services offices and incoming students by providing a more student-friendly/student-first environment.*

Action Item:

- Develop and implement timely and innovative admissions and a financial aid communication strategy in order to notify students of admission decisions and financial aid and scholarship offers at time of admission.

- Develop up-to-date communication plans in order to efficiently contact students beyond email addresses, greatly expand the use of social media.
 - Continue to expand our communication plans with prospective and admitted students to improve enrollment yields.
 - Create better and more efficient physical locations for enrollment management offices.
4. *Enhance our marketing and recruitment plans to attract best-fit students and students with the highest probability to succeed, including examining policies that are hindering students rather than enticing them to enroll.*

Action Items:

- Investigate the cost/benefit of lowering the out-of-state tuition rate so that FGCU is at least at the state SUS average, thereby improving the enrollment yield for top out-of-state students.
 - Continue to expand the use predictive data analytics to optimize prospective student recruitment, emphasizing the values of FGCU to attract more students who want to finish at FGCU rather than transfer out.
 - Collaborate with the Honors College to optimize methods used to recruit the highest quality students.
 - Increase dual enrollment of outstanding high school students.
 - Increase the size of the prospective student inquiry pool by enhancing our contract with a third-party search vendor.
5. *Re-evaluate the current university-wide course scheduling and course enrollment management process to maximize course offerings that allow for timely graduation.*

Action Items:

- Evaluate semester credit hour (SCH) demand in each program through a data-driven analysis of applicants/admits/matriculation by program, placement into math/science courses, and the academic progress of enrolled students.
- Evaluate financial and human resources needed to meet the SCH demand in each program.
- Re-evaluate the planning cycle and the timeline for posting the course schedule for each term.

- Implement alternative course delivery and schedule options to maximize availability to students and promote degree progression (e.g. online, mini-semesters, inter-semester, hybrid terms, weekends).
- Continuously monitor the need to add sections of high-needs courses.
- Expand summer term offerings of high demand courses to help improve program matriculation.

INCENTIVES & DISINCENTIVES

Florida Gulf Coast University's 4-year graduation rate plan contains many action items that provide key incentives for students as they matriculate through their academic program of study in four years. Additionally, we have also established or implemented a number of action items or policies that will serve as key disincentives for students. It is believed that a combination of incentives and disincentives will be effective in helping students graduate from Florida Gulf Coast University in four years. Provided below is a list of major incentives and disincentives that are aligned with the academic, financial, curricular and policy areas within our four-year graduation rate plan.

Incentives:

- Expansion of high impact practices that will engage students outside the classroom that enables students to develop their leadership skills and broaden their professional networks for gaining employment.
- Expand admittance into the Honors College.
- SOAR in 4 plan for first-year students to stay on track to a 4-year degree and secure employment.
- Expansion of financial aid that is targeted to students willing to commit FGCU as their first choice.
- Implementation of a policy whereby merit scholarship program funding ends after 4 years with recipients required to complete a minimum of 30 credit hours each academic year while maintaining a 3.0 GPA.
- Expansion of all scholarship and financial aid programs to significantly expand students enrolling in summer courses.
- Creation of a gap fund to support tuition costs to help prevent students from dropping out between their sophomore and junior year.
- Creation of a gap fund to support tuition costs to help prevent students from dropping out their senior year right before graduation.

- Implementation of new institutional policies that will alleviate common bottle neck areas in course and space scheduling.
- Establish a new office that focuses specifically on creating greater flexibility for students to take online courses and complete their degrees faster.
- Expand the number of adjunct faculty to deliver more courses during the Summer term.
- SOAR in 4 plan for first-year students to stay on track to a 4-year degree and secure employment.
- Implement and improve the technology used by students so that it enhances and facilitates their use which will improve their time to degree progression.

Disincentives:

- Students who are currently receiving scholarships or financial aid are at risk for losing their funding (and not remaining in school) if they don't maintain academic requirements and maintain enough credit hours.
- Not meeting academic program milestones (e.g. earning certain grades in critical courses along their progression) will result in a student being removed from their major of choice.
- Implementation of the "3/2 Withdrawal Rule" where students are limited to withdraw from 3 lower level courses and 2 upper level courses without financial penalty.
- Creation and implementation of FGCU Timely Graduation of Undergraduate Students Policy to encourage students to graduate in 4 years and not accrue excess hours resulting in a surcharge.

SUMMARY

Florida Gulf Coast University has established a comprehensive plan that contains innovative and bold initiatives and action that are critical in affecting change to many variables and factors that are key to improving student retention and our 4-year graduation rate. This plan identifies a fundamental paradigm shift in how we will create a comprehensive, holistic environment for our students to be more successful at FGCU. Achieving the specific actions items will provide evidence that our objectives are being met which will translate into improving our 4-year graduation rate. The framework for our **Student Success** continuum has begun to be established where we will focus on admitting the highest quality students who want to attend Florida Gulf Coast University who will then immerse in a first-year experience where they will connect very quickly to our university in a meaningful way. Students will then achieve greater success in matriculating into their major where great attention and focus will be placed in ensuring students stay on track in their program of study and graduate in four years with a job in their chosen profession that pays a competitive wage.