

***U.S. News* Task Force on Student Selectivity**

Final Report—May 2003

Membership. The *U.S. News* Task Force on Student Selectivity is composed of ten members.

- Robert Barkley—Admissions
- Marvin Carmichael—Financial Aid
- Bonnie Page—Academic Support Center
- Byron Wiley—Access and Equity
- Debra Sparacino—Registrar
- Joy Smith—Student Affairs
- Dave Fleming—Data support
- Bobby McCormick—Sabbatical research on factors behind student success
- John Warner—Retention expert for Department of Defense
- Debbie Jackson—Representing President Barker to monitor progress
- Thornton Kirby—Board of Trustees and the President

Our Charge. Our task force conducted our work based on the following charge:

- *U.S. News* is not the ultimate goal—quality is.
- Nevertheless, we need to understand the *U.S. News* criteria and optimize our performance on the criteria when they are not inconsistent with our goals.
- Task forces represent “off-line” brainstorming.
- Our deliverable: innovative ideas that could help us advance faster than we might otherwise.

The Criteria for Which We Were Responsible. We were assigned the *U.S. News* criteria relating to student selectivity.

- Retention
 - 6 Year Graduation Rate
 - Freshman Retention
- Student Selectivity
 - SAT or ACT scores
 - Proportion of freshmen who graduate in top 10% of high school class
 - Acceptance Rate
 - Yield Rate
- Graduation Rate Performance

Our Approach. We spent considerable time understanding the above criteria, and we formulated a number of recommendations. We have organized them into two groups—those designed to increase retention and/or graduation, and those designed to increase

student selectivity. We recommend these for additional study, not necessarily for adoption.

Our Recommendations for Retention and Graduation. Retention and graduation rates are heavily weighted in the overall *U.S. News* rankings. They are so heavily weighted, in fact, that only academic reputation is worth more. Whereas academic reputation is worth 25% of the overall score, retention and graduation rates are worth 20% of the score. When graduation rate performance is added, the combined package is worth 25%—the equivalent of academic reputation. The importance of this weighting cannot be overstated. **While we commonly focus on academic reputation as the major driver of our *U.S. News* ranking, graduation rates (which reflect retention rates) are worth just as much to our ranking.** A compelling argument can be made that we have more control over retention and graduation rates than we do academic reputation. Whether or not this is true, graduation and retention rates deserve the same focused attention as academic reputation since they are worth the same to our ranking.

1. The best way to increase freshman retention rates and 6-year graduation rates would be to determine with absolute certainty which students are not likely to persist until graduation and begin working with them at the beginning of their freshman year. Since this is not possible, we recommend the next best step—study historical data and identify common characteristics of students who leave Clemson prior to graduation. If patterns emerge (such as graduation from certain high schools, participation in fraternities or sororities, lack of financial aid, participation in athletics, high SAT with low class rank, etc.), then we can use this to intervene early with students who share those characteristics.

Bobby McCormick and John Warner of the John Walker Department of Economics have agreed to conduct a study of the causes of attrition among Clemson students over time. Cathy Sams and Debbie Jackson have agreed to conduct a targeted survey of students who have left based on the results of the McCormick/Warner study. And finally, the Office of Assessment will conduct the National Student Engagement (NSE) Survey this year. The NSE survey will shed a great deal of light on student preferences and concerns, some of which is likely to illuminate retention issues.

2. The task force identified several academic “choke points,” or common obstacles to success in the freshman year. Two such choke points are Math 106 and Math 108, both of which result in a high number of D’s, F’s, and W’s. Several recommendations were directed at these academic choke points.
 - Continue using placement exams to ensure students are ready for challenging courses;
 - Focus more attention on learning styles, and try to match teaching styles to learning styles in the most challenging courses;

- Identify “master teachers” and assign them to teach the most difficult courses; and
 - Continue supplemental instruction in challenging courses.
3. Reduce the number of credit hours required to graduate by restructuring curricula. This would have an immediate and positive effect on four-year graduation rates.
 4. Examine ways to better match students to majors and intervene earlier if possible. We currently involve freshmen in the Proact program during their second semester if they earn less than a 2.0 after the fall semester. Could we identify these students earlier? Earlier action here could improve retention rates and ultimately graduation rates.
 5. Advertise and make available to all new freshmen CU 101, University Success Skills. Involve student-oriented faculty in teaching CU 101. This course is a proven retention tool for freshmen.
 6. Follow up with students who do not return to school after the freshman year to determine why. For example, Furman University interviews the roommate of students who do not return to find out why. The interview is done by an R.A. as soon as possible after the student leaves or doesn't return for the next semester. Knowing exactly why students are leaving is the only way to pinpoint any changes that could be made to increase the retention rate.
 7. Focus on freshman retention rates in specific majors, such as Engineering, and design new efforts to prevent attrition. The following recommendations are directed specifically at improving the retention rate for Engineering majors.
 - A strengthened summer program for 10th graders interested in engineering that is project oriented.
 - An interview by Clemson engineering alumnus after student is accepted into the Engineering program.
 - Expand supplemental instruction to include more courses such as Physics.
 - Better educate students who choose Engineering as to what is involved. Perhaps develop a web site that explicitly and realistically describes what is involved in the courses required for an engineering major, what each discipline is and what they do. Include a hands-on project in each discipline very early in the curriculum.

8. Study the impact of participation in fraternities and sororities on freshman retention and 6-year graduation rates.
9. Focus more attention on whether every freshman admitted to Clemson has a plan for funding the four years of college. (This would help avoid foreseeable financial crises.)

Our Recommendations for Student Selectivity. Student selectivity is measured by four criteria worth 15% of the total *U.S. News* ranking. The four criteria are: SAT scores of entering freshmen (worth 6%); the percentage of freshman who were ranked in the top ten percent of their high school class (worth 5.25%); acceptance rate (worth 2.25%); and yield rate (worth 1.5%).

1. Revise the admission process from a rolling system to a single acceptance date system. This will allow the Director of Admissions to achieve the greatest possible score on selectivity measures while also addressing diversity of the class.
2. Budget tuition waivers and maximize their utility in recruiting top applicants.
3. Increase unrestricted funds available for recruiting scholarships (merit-based as well as need-based).