

November 16, 2009

Jim Borsig, Ph.D.  
Assistant Commissioner for Government Relations  
Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning  
3825 Ridgewood Road  
Jackson, MS 39211

*Delivered Electronically*

Dear Jim:

It was good talking with you on October 30<sup>th</sup> about next steps in the work of the Graduation Rate Task Force (GRTF). It sounds like you are making excellent progress, and I am pleased the data and preliminary recommendations that Noel-Levitz generated have been helpful as you begin drafting the GRTF report. Please feel free to forward drafts to me for review and commentary over the next several months.

At the conclusion of our conversation, you asked me to provide some written commentary about how the GRTF should approach implementation of the recommendations stemming from our work in support of the task force. This letter contains some initial thoughts on that topic.

## Establishing Retention and Graduation Rate Goals

As noted in my presentation (copy attached), I believe the GRTF report should outline a two-step process for establishing retention and graduation rate goals.

1. Collect additional data on retention and graduation rate trends in the state including the following items.
  - Compile 3-5 years of data on **full-time transfer student** persistence and graduation rates in the four-year sector (I don't believe this will be available for the two-year sector). This should be done at the institutional level and then compiled according to admissions selectivity (i.e., open/liberal admission schools versus traditional and selective admission schools).
  - Compile 3-5 years of data on **part-time students** and those that **entered via other means** in the four-year sector (I don't believe this will be available for the two-year sector). This should be done at the institutional level and then compiled according to admissions selectivity (i.e., open/liberal admission schools versus traditional and selective admission schools).
  - Build a peer data set for each institution using data from [collegeresults.org](http://collegeresults.org). Use the Web site itself and input from the schools to identify an appropriate peer group for each institution.
  - Build a data set on the movement of students between two-year and four-year schools and their eventual success rates (i.e., How many students transfer from two-

### Strategic enrollment planning

Student recruitment and marketing

Student success and retention

Market research and communications

### Innovative tools and technologies

Financial aid strategy

Predictive modeling

Web strategy and e-communications

Student satisfaction assessment

Early-alert retention programs

### Higher education research and learning venues

Trend studies

Conferences and workshops

Webinars on academic advising

Online courses in enrollment management and quality service

#### Colorado office

6300 South Syracuse Way  
Suite 645  
Centennial, CO 80111 7307  
303 694-3930  
Fax 303 741-5620

#### Iowa office

2350 Oakdale Boulevard  
Coralville, IA 52241-9702  
319 626-8380  
Fax 319 626-8388

[www.noellevitz.com](http://www.noellevitz.com)

year to four-year schools each year and what percentage eventually graduate after four additional years of study or sooner?).

2. Use the preceding data to establish persistence and completion goals for each institution and sector. I envision a process wherein the schools are asked to submit goals (based on the data) and a sub-committee of the task force would then negotiate with the institutions if they feel their goals are either too modest or too aggressive (unrealistic). Ultimately the GRTF would be charged with establishing statewide goals by institution and sector. I believe goals should be established in the following categories:
  - 1<sup>st</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> year retention = for first-time, full-time students (all sectors)
  - Completion within a 150% time for first-time, full-time students (all sectors)
  - 1<sup>st</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> year retention for transfer students (all sectors)
  - Transfer student completion within three years in the two-year sector and six years in the four-year sector
  - 1<sup>st</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> year retention of part-time students (all sectors)
  - Part-time student completion within four years in the two-year sector and eight years in the four-year sector
  - Percentage of students that two-year schools send to four-year schools each year
  - Percentage of students that four-year schools attract from two-year schools each year
  - Graduation percentage of students who transfer from a two-year to a four-year school within four years of transferring

You should be able to complete this goal-setting process in the first quarter of 2010.

### Developing Institutional Plans to Support the GRTF Goals

Once the goals are established, the institutions should be charged with developing or updating their retention plans in support of the statewide and institutional goals. I believe your institutions will achieve a better end product if you utilize some sort of external support and/or evaluation process as the plans are developed. For example, you could develop three person planning support teams for each campus consisting of an outside specialist (e.g., consultant), a GRTF representative, and an individual from a peer institution. These teams would conduct an initial audit of the institution's current retention and completion strategies and then return to campus two or three additional times as the plans are developed. Ultimately, these teams would endorse the institutional plans, ensuring that they contain adequate metrics and proven student success strategies. These teams could also be utilized to monitor implementation over the next several years to make certain that schools are fully implementing their plans. I believe you could complete the initial planning process by August of 2010 so that you begin to see impact during the 2010-11 academic year.

## Identifying Statewide Strategies to Increase Completion Rates

In addition to the institutional planning process outlined above, I recommend that you charge the GRTF with drafting a statewide plan that addresses issues that impact students at all schools. This might include further analysis and strategy development in the following areas:

- Developing strategies to monitor institutional performance and report on progress towards statewide goals
- The role and impact college costs and financial aid are having on completion rates in Mississippi
- The ease with which students can move between institutions and any impact that it is having on persistence and completion rates (e.g., articulation policies particularly within specific academic programs)
- Ways that K-12 and higher education can cooperate to achieve improved persistence and completion rates
- Strategies for improving developmental education success rates
- Ways that the higher education system can improve cooperation in support of improved persistence and completion rates
- Developing incentives for improved institutional performance
- Identifying statewide training programs to support the institutional change process


This plan could be completed within the same timeframe as the institutional plans (by August 2010).

## A Final Word

Although the data we compiled for the task force identified numerous strategies for improving completion rates in Mississippi, changing institutional and student behavior will require a very intentional process that is well supported and monitored over the next several years. I hope the preceding thoughts are helpful as you consider ways to activate meaningful change in the state.

As always, let me know if I can be of further assistance in supporting your efforts.

Sincerely,



Kevin Crockett  
President/CEO and Principal

KC/mcs