

*Graduation  
Improvement Plan*  
*College of Liberal and Fine Arts*

*June 2008*



This document prepared by Jinny Case of the UTSA Graduation Initiative in collaboration with the College of Liberal and Fine Arts.

# Table of Contents

---

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Introduction.....  | 4  |
| Environment for Change.....                                  | 5  |
| Understanding Graduation Rates .....                         | 7  |
| Enrollment Profile.....                                      | 9  |
| Overcoming Barriers.....                                     | 10 |
| Barrier 1: Inconsistency in Advising .....                   | 10 |
| Undergraduate Advisor of Record (UGAR).....                  | 10 |
| Communication between Advisors and Academic Departments..... | 11 |
| Barrier 2: Meeting Program Needs .....                       | 12 |
| Expanded Course Offerings .....                              | 13 |
| Development of Alternative Modes of Delivery .....           | 13 |
| Barrier 3: College Knowledge .....                           | 14 |
| Freshman Orientation.....                                    | 15 |
| Freshman Seminar Instructors .....                           | 15 |
| Conclusions.....   | 17 |
| References.....  | 18 |

## Introduction

---

In the research conducted for this document, including discussions and reviews with the college's administration, we have sought to identify what helps and hinders undergraduates in the pursuit of their degrees.

In recent years the college has established and supported many activities, programs, and policies to insure the fundamental goal of student graduation. The bulk of our efforts in this report, however, have been focused on identifying and analyzing remaining barriers to undergraduate success – gaining an understanding of what gets in the way of student progress. From our analyses, we sought to identify actions for overcoming those barriers. These actions form the core of the Graduation Improvement Plan.

The remainder of this document consists of the following sections:

- **Environment for Change**  
Overview of recent political events pushing for improved graduation rates.
- **Understanding Graduation Rates**  
How undergraduate graduation rates are calculated for the state, along with past and targeted rates for both the college and the institution.
- **Enrollment Profile**  
Enrollment statistics for both the college and the institution.
- **Overcoming Barriers**  
Actions for reducing or eliminating barriers to graduation – the core of the Graduation Improvement Plan.
- **References**  
Sources cited within this document.

We understand that improving graduation rates involves many variables in a multi-faceted and complex environment. With that in mind, this document aims to address a number of those variables, barriers that, if overcome, will allow more students to reach their goal of an undergraduate degree.

## Environment for Change

---

“We have to improve graduation rates.” Everyone in higher education has heard this repeatedly. We know the rates are important, that they affect the prestige of the university and the public perception of our performance as an institution. We know the benefits our students receive from achieving a baccalaureate degree include such things as an improved quality of life, greater earnings potential, and better health. We may not, however, have considered the current political forces that drive the need for improving graduation rates. In Texas, the impetus is economic necessity.

Texas needs skilled, well-educated citizens to sustain itself economically. If the state cannot produce more college graduates, the poverty rate will increase and average household income will drop. This cycle places an increasing burden on public support services, while at the same time reducing the tax base used to support such services (Murdock, 2002).

In 2000, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) launched *Closing the Gaps: The Texas Higher Education Plan* aimed at closing educational gaps within Texas, as well as between Texas and other states. The plan outlined four primary goals: participation, success, excellence, and research. All institutions of higher education in Texas were required to set targets for these goals and report annually on their progress. Further, the THECB recommended that the state, “fund colleges and universities to reward increases in retention and graduation while sustaining quality programs” (THECB, 2000).

Recognizing the importance of improving graduation rates, several recent legislative acts and executive orders have established higher education reporting and performance expectations. In 2003, the legislature passed HB 3015, essentially deregulating tuition for state institutions of higher education. In addition to allowing institutions to set their own tuition amounts, they were charged with improving their graduation rates and other measures of performance (HB 3015, 2003).

The following year, Governor Rick Perry reinforced the focus on graduation rates by issuing an executive order requiring comprehensive accountability reporting for public institutions of higher education. The order links this accountability, which includes graduation and persistence rates, to state funding, stating that “systems and institutions of higher education must be able to clearly define the need for additional state-funding in a manner which will justify the public’s continued investment of resources” (Executive Order No. RP31, 2004).

These governmental efforts put pressure on universities to improve graduation rates with the clear implication that not doing so could result in reductions of state funding. Related legislative efforts have applied pressure to students as well. Two recent bills have focused on timely graduation. In addition to its requirements for increased academic counseling, implementing online degree progress systems, and changes to TEXAS grant program funding, HB 1172, effective in 2005, places a cap on the number of courses a student can take in excess of those required to attain a degree. At 30 credit hours beyond that required for the student's degree, state funding for classes ceases (HB 1172, 2005). At UTSA, the net result is that students wind up having to pay an additional \$121 per semester credit hour for every class taken beyond the 30-credit hour cap. In a related effort to encourage timely graduation, SB 1231 limits to six the number of courses a student may drop during the student's entire undergraduate higher education career (SB 1231, 2007).

Each of these changes in the laws governing higher education places additional reporting requirements on universities. As a result, documentation of compliance with the laws comprise required sections in such documents as, *The University of Texas System Graduation Rates Initiative Progress Report*, *University of Texas System Board of Regents Accountability and Performance Report*, university compacts with the UT System, and institutional strategic plans. It is within this environment of increased governmental scrutiny of graduation rates that we find ourselves. The action items in this plan are aimed at overcoming barriers to graduation and helping students reach their goal of a baccalaureate degree.

## Understanding Graduation Rates

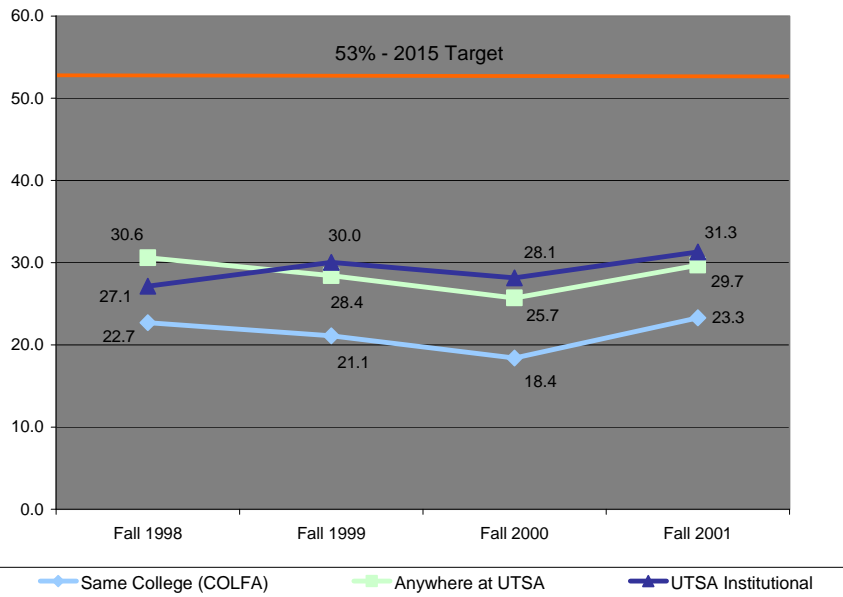
---

To focus on improving something, we must first develop an understanding of current performance. Since our purpose is to improve baccalaureate six-year graduation rates, it follows that we should identify current and targeted graduation rates. Additionally, it is important to understand the methodology used in calculating graduation rates, as these rates do not take into account all students within the university who are seeking a bachelor's degree.

We focus here on the undergraduate graduation rate reported to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB). In calculating this rate, UTSA uses a cohort of students representing a subset of all students who achieve a baccalaureate degree within six-years. This cohort consists of individuals who enter the institution as full-time students during the fall semester and who have not previously attended another college or university. Additionally, these are students who intend to pursue a degree offered by UTSA. The calculation of graduation rates does not include the following students: (1) those entering in the spring semester (some summer entering students may be included), (2) part-time students, (3) students transferring from other institutions, such as community colleges. Further, UTSA gets no credit for students who start here and finish somewhere else; and, students who complete their baccalaureate degree under UT Austin's Coordinated Admission Program (CAP) are unaccounted for by the Coordinating Board.

As reported by the Office of Institutional Research (OIR), UTSA's most recent six-year graduation rate for freshmen entering the institution in the 2001 fall semester was 31.3-percent. President Ricardo Romo has committed to raising UTSA's six-year graduation rate to 40-percent by the year 2010 and to 53-percent by the year 2015. Applying the same methodology for calculating the institutional graduation rates, the OIR calculated six-year graduation rates for individual colleges within the institution. As a component of UTSA, the College of Liberal and Fine Arts can be viewed as having both its own graduation rate, as well as contributing to the overall institutional rate. Therefore, we look at two distinct graduation rates for the college: (1) those students who started with and remained with the College of Liberal and Fine Arts and (2) those students who started with the College of Liberal and Fine Arts and graduated from the College of Liberal and Fine Arts or anywhere else within the university. These rates, *Same College (COLFA)* and *Anywhere at UTSA* respectively, are illustrated in Figure 1, along with the *UTSA Institutional* rate for comparison.

**Figure 1: College of Liberal and Fine Arts and UTSA Six-year Graduation Rates  
By Entry Year of Respective THECB Student Cohorts**



Data included here originally obtained from the UTSA Office of Institutional

## Enrollment Profile

---

With 5,570 undergraduate students in fall 2007, COLFA is the largest college at UTSA. In 2007, nearly one quarter of all undergraduate students at UTSA were pursuing majors in COLFA. (UTSA Fact book, 2007) The College of Liberal and Fine Arts houses majors in eleven departments spanning the Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences. Students graduating from COLFA may choose from twenty undergraduate majors (About COLFA, 2008). In addition, students can obtain any of several graduate degrees within the college, including doctoral degrees in English and Anthropology.

Critical to the overall success of students at UTSA, COLFA generates more semester credit hours than any other college and administers more than sixty percent of the core curriculum that all undergraduates must complete to earn a baccalaureate degree at UTSA (UTSA fact book, 2007). The success of any UTSA student in classes that COLFA administers determines a significant part of their overall academic success and potential for degree completion

More than 37 percent of COLFA active undergraduate student are seniors and slightly less than twenty percent (18.9) are freshmen. (UTSA, 2008) Additionally, about sixty percent of COLFA majors are female. Most students enrolled in COLFA students are either white (43.6%) or Latino (42.4%). Nearly three-quarters attend college full-time, meaning that they are enrolled for twelve credit hours or more per semester (UTSA fact book, 2007). By the numbers, the typical College of Liberal and Fine Arts student is a female, undergraduate senior and either white or Latino. Approximately 35% of her junior and senior classes are taught by non-tenure-track faculty. Additionally, more than two-thirds of her lower division courses taken in COLFA were taught by non-tenure-track faculty (68.7%) (UTSA, 2008).

The two largest majors within COLFA are Psychology and Communication. It is likely that these majors and other COLFA majors will only increase in size as other colleges at UTSA enact exclusionary standards for admission such as already exist in the College of Business and are planned for the College of Engineering and the Department of Biology. Because these standards are tightening faster than general admission standards, pre-business, pre-biology and pre-engineering majors who do not meet the standards of their chosen major will be forced to either select a new program of study or transfer out of UTSA altogether. This presages larger enrollment in COLFA in the near future than projections based solely on overall institutional or college growth in enrollment.

## Overcoming Barriers

---

While the College of Liberal and Fine Arts offers many affordances for student success, barriers to success do exist. This section, the core of the Graduation Improvement Plan, identifies actions for reducing or overcoming these barriers. Barriers fall into the following thematic areas:

1. Inconsistency in advising
2. Meeting program needs
3. Academic preparation and college knowledge

In addition to specific actions for addressing these barriers, the following sections identify ownership to ensure completion, suggest resources, and enumerate a list of high-level tasks.

### **Barrier 1: Inconsistency in Advising**

Both students and academic department chairs mentioned inconsistency in advising as a frequent barrier for students. Some students reported feeling less comfortable with the knowledge of the advisor and their relationship with the advisor when the advisor for that major changes too often. Lack of availability of advising is also frequently mentioned by students. Along with the frequent turnover of advisors, limited time availability could result in a student seeking advising less often, thus impacting the progress of the student to graduation.

Since the primary problems are number of advisors and advisor turnover, the principle remedy will be to add more advisors and improve advisor retention through better compensation. To the extent that additional direct departmental advising will enhance student knowledge and comfort levels, some programs may find it useful to employ undergraduate advisors of record.

### ***Undergraduate Advisor of Record (UGAR)***

At departmental discretion and in consultation with the Dean's Office, departments may appoint a faculty undergraduate advisor of record (UGAR) responsible for providing career and field of study advice. The functions of the UGAR will not overlap with those of academic advisors. The UGAR will also act as departmental liaison to the COLFA Advising Center

- Primary Responsibility* Department Chairs
- Resources Required* Designated faculty, advising, departmental administrative staff, course release
- Anticipated Outcomes*
- Students will persist from year to year at higher rates than in years before implementing a faculty undergraduate advising model that is complementary to academic advising.
- Anticipated Measures*
- Year to year undergraduate student persistence rates will be compared against persistence rates for previous entering freshman cohorts.
  - Faculty will be surveyed to determine if the presence of the UGAR has been helpful to their student interaction.
  - UGARs will track the types and numbers of student or advisor contact.

|   | <b>Activity</b>  | <b>Owner</b> | <b>Due</b> |
|---|--|--------------|------------|
| 1 | Determine which departments will participate in the program.   |              |            |
| 2 | Determine who the assigned UGAR will be for participating departments or how the assignments will be made. |              |            |
| 3 | Establish a list of the UGAR duties.   |              |            |
| 4 | Provide list of expectations and method of tracking student/UGAR contacts to designated UGAR.              |              |            |
| 5 | Inform students about their faculty UGAR.  |              |            |
| 6 | Evaluate program effectiveness.  |              |            |

### ***Communication between Advisors and Academic Departments***

Expectation for academic advisors to meet with their respective faculty or department chairs at least once per month.

- Primary Responsibility* Advising Director, UGAR, and Department Chairs
- Resources Required* Academic advisors, Advising Director, Department Chairs, and faculty UGAR
- Anticipated Outcomes*
- Students will persist from year to year at higher rates.
  - Advisor attrition will decrease.

- Relations between faculty and advisors will improve.

*Anticipated Measures*

- Year to year undergraduate student persistence rates will be compared against persistence rates for previous entering freshman cohorts.
- Academic advisor turnover rates will be compared against previous years.
- Faculty will be surveyed to determine their satisfaction with the academic advisor for their discipline and advising center.

|   | <b>Activity</b>   | <b>Owner</b> | <b>Due</b> |
|---|---|--------------|------------|
| 1 | Identify appropriate academic advisor for assignment to specific disciplines  |              |            |
| 2 | Notify Department Chairs about the academic advisor(s) assigned to their area.  |              |            |
| 3 | Department Chair and Advising Center Director schedule meetings and set protocol for advisors contacting faculty perhaps through designated office hours. |              |            |
| 4 | Initiate contact between advisor and department chair or advisor and UGAR/other faculty.  |              |            |
| 5 | Meetings begin.   |              |            |
| 6 | Evaluate the effectiveness of ongoing contact between academic advisor and faculty.   |              |            |

**Barrier 2: Meeting Program Needs**

About 6% more of COLFA students are seniors than should be proportionally expected (31% versus 25%). It is possible that many of these students are “swirling seniors,” spending more than one year in senior status but not graduating or taking longer to graduate. Among other things, this may reflect lack of availability for upper division courses. Most student complaints about the lack of available courses are related to upper division courses.

This perception probably derives not so much from the actual number of upper division courses but from their scheduling in relation to student preference. The usual time slots, however, do not allow much scheduling flexibility or expansion of upper division offerings owing to space constraints. Therefore, one approach will be to expand offerings

during early mornings, evenings, and weekends. Expansion of course offerings will require additional faculty.

**Expanded Course Offerings**

Action item: Expand course offerings into early morning, evening and weekend classes to make use of underutilized time and space.

*Primary Responsibility*      Department Chairs, Associate Dean

*Resources Required*      Faculty, students, Registrar’s office

- Anticipated Outcomes*
- Students will report higher satisfaction with class availability.
  - Time to graduation will be reduced.

- Anticipated Measures*
- Average semesters to graduation by major and department will be compared with previous years.
  - Satisfaction of students enrolled in weekend or evening courses compared with students not in those courses will be evaluated using a class survey.

|   | Activity   | Owner | Due |
|---|--|-------|-----|
| 1 | Determine which courses might benefit students through alternative scheduling.                             |       |     |
| 3 | Pilot a select group of courses by offering them on alternative scheduled days.                            |       |     |
| 3 | Evaluate the success of students in those courses, compared with courses held at the usual times and days. |       |     |

**Development of Alternative Modes of Delivery**

Encourage and support willing faculty to develop hybrid or online course sections for those courses in which an online mode of delivery will complement the subject matter. Since not all students are able to benefit from online courses, that mode should not be the only alternative we look to in creatively seeking solutions to time and space issues at UTSA.

*Primary Responsibility*

*Resources Required*

Faculty peer technology and course development consultants, time of participating faculty member, possible course release

*Anticipated Outcomes*

- Students will report higher satisfaction with class availability.
- Time to graduation will be reduced.

*Anticipated Measures*

- Grade distribution will be compared with those in traditional course delivery sections.
- Average semesters to graduation by major and department will be compared with previous years.
- Satisfaction of students enrolled in hybrid or online courses compared with students not in those courses will be evaluated using a class survey.

|   | Activity   | Owner | Due |
|---|--|-------|-----|
| 1 | Determine which faculty would be well suited and interested in the development of online course materials. |       |     |
| 2 | Determine which courses would lend themselves well to a hybrid or online format.                           |       |     |
| 3 | Faculty member works with academic technology through the development process.                             |       |     |
| 4 | Schedule room with appropriate technology.   |       |     |
| 5 | Conduct a pilot online or hybrid course.   |       |     |
| 6 | Evaluate the success of students in the pilot course.  |       |     |

**Barrier 3: College Knowledge**

A recurring theme in the interviewing research of the Graduation Initiative suggests that students are admitted to UTSA overly confident of their own skills, with unrealistic expectations, and generally unprepared for successful progression through college. Several faculty members wondered about the guidance given to students by high school counselors concerning what to expect in a university setting. Some specific student deficits mentioned were in study skills, note taking skills, writing, math, self-discipline and time management.

## **Freshman Orientation**

Action item: Enhance the Meeting of the Colleges during Freshmen Orientation by leading breakout sessions by major, for those departments that choose to participate. Departments with large numbers of majors should be especially encouraged to participate.

*Primary Responsibility*      Department chairs of large departments

*Resources Required*      Dean's office, department faculty, Office of Orientation and Transition Services

*Anticipated Outcomes*      ○ Freshmen will persist from their first year to their second year at a higher rate, compared with previous years.

*Anticipated Measures*      ○ The first year retention rate for the beginning freshman cohort will be compared with the rates of previous cohorts.

|   | <b>Activity</b>   | <b>Owner</b>         | <b>Due</b> |
|---|---|----------------------|------------|
| 1 | Encourage larger departments to participate in the Meeting of the Colleges.   | Dean, Associate Dean |            |
| 2 | Assign a faculty member from the participating department to speak with students in the major during the summer Meetings of the Colleges for COLFA. The responsibility for the presentation can be shared by more than one faculty member over the course of the summer orientations. |                      |            |
| 3 | Determine topics to be covered during the meeting with new students during the Meeting of the Colleges.   |                      |            |
| 4 | At the end of the breakout session, measure student satisfaction and solicit other topics they would have liked to hear about.  |                      |            |
| 5 | Evaluate outcomes for student participants.   |                      |            |

## **Freshman Seminar Instructors**

Encourage doctoral level students within the College of Liberal and Fine Arts to teach in Freshman Seminars and other freshman courses and supplemental instruction. These students will function as another connection to UTSA for freshmen and will also gain teaching experience.

- Primary Responsibility* Graduate Advisor of Record (GAR) for departments
- Resources Required* Associate Director of Learning Communities, TEAM Center, Office of the Provost
- Anticipated Outcomes*
  - Freshmen will persist from their first year to their second year at a higher rate compared with previous years.
- Anticipated Measures*
  - The first year retention rate for freshmen in Freshman Seminars will be compared with the rates of non-participants.

|   | <b>Activity</b>   | <b>Owner</b>               | <b>Due</b> |
|---|---|----------------------------|------------|
| 1 | Dean asks for participation of doctoral students.   | Dean                       |            |
| 2 | GAR will engage in dialogue with prospective doctoral students in COLFA to determine who may be interested in teaching Freshman Orientation sections. | Graduate Advisor of Record |            |
| 3 | Prospective instructors meet with the TRC Associate Director of Learning Communities.   |                            |            |
| 4 | Necessary arrangements for college reimbursement will be made between Learning Communities, academic department, and Provost's Office.                |                            |            |
| 5 | Evaluate first year retention rate of students participating in these Freshman Seminar classes.   |                            |            |

## Conclusions

---

The action items detailed in this document are meant to ease barriers to timely graduation, not only for students in the College of Liberal and Fine Arts, but also for students within the entirety of UTSA who must take the bulk of their core curriculum through COLFA. Although the focus of the Graduation Initiative is on improving the graduation rate as it is currently measured, we recognize the imperfect nature of the current measurement in excluding transfer and part-time students. The action items presented here were designed to improve the academic success of *all* students at UTSA, regardless of their status at the start of their studies here.

Effective implementation will take the commitment of all faculty, staff, and students in COLFA. The Graduation Initiative looks forward to ongoing collaboration with the College of Liberal and Fine Arts to implement and evaluate these actions and their impact on retention and graduation.

## References

---

- About COLFA*. (n.d.) Retrieved April 1, 2008 from UTSA College of Liberal and Fine Arts Web site: <http://colfa.utsa.edu/colfa/aboutCOLFA.htm>
- Adelman, C. (1999). *Short web-based version of answers in the tool box: Academic intensity, attendance patterns, and bachelor's degree attainment*. Retrieved November 26, 2007, from <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/Toolbox/toolbox.html>
- Exec. Order No. RP31, retrieved March 20, 2008 from <http://www.governor.state.tx.us/divisions/press/exorders/rp31>
- House Bill 1172, Legislative Session 79(R) (2005) (enacted). Retrieved March 21, 2008 from <http://www.legis.state.tx.us/BillLookup/text.aspx?LegSess=79R&Bill=HB1172#>
- House Bill 3015, Legislative Session 78(R) (2003) (enacted). Retrieved March 20, 2008 from <http://www.legis.state.tx.us/BillLookup/text.aspx?LegSess=78R&Bill=HB3015#>
- Murdock, S., White, S., Hoque, M., Pecotte, B., You, X., and Balkan, J. (2002). *A summary of the Texas challenge in the twenty-first century: Implications of population change for Texas*. Retrieved March 20, 2008, from <http://txsdc.utsa.edu/download/pdf/TxChall2002Summary.pdf>
- Senate Bill 1231, Legislative Session 80(R) (2007) (enacted). Retrieved March 21, 2008 from <http://www.legis.state.tx.us/BillLookup/text.aspx?LegSess=80R&Bill=SB1231#>
- Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. (2000). *Closing the Gaps: The Texas Higher Education Plan*. Retrieved March 20, 2008 from <http://www.thecb.state.tx.us/reports/PDF/0379.PDF>
- National Academic Advising Association Consultant Bureau. (2006) *Report on academic advising and the Academic Advising Centers at the University of Texas at San Antonio for the NACADA Consultant Bureau*. Manhattan, KS: Thomas Grites, Nancy King, and Michael McCauley.
- UTSA. (2007). *The University of Texas at San Antonio fact book for fall 2007*. Retrieved March 6, 2008 from <http://www.utsa.edu/ir/factbook/index.html>
- UTSA. (2008). *UTSA fall 2007 semester credit hours by course level and faculty tenure*. University of Texas at San Antonio, Office of Institutional Research



June 19, 2008

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** Jinny Case  
Office of Undergraduate Studies

**FROM:** Daniel J. Gelo  
Dean

**RE:** COLFA Graduation Improvement Plan Draft of May 2008

We appreciate the work that has gone into this plan and acknowledge the value of suggestions coming out of your process.

As you will see from the attached, Chris and I have spent a lot of time with the latest draft. The attached revision makes a few changes that better reflect the intent of our prior conversations and assessments of the problems and solutions. There are also a number of typographic edits and a few recommendations for organization and transition.

It is important to note, as mentioned in our discussions, that we continue to harbor reservations about the sampling and validity of some of the data that was generated to support specific characterizations of college practices and outcomes.

Please make sure to include this memo with any transmission of the final plan revision to other offices to affirm that the college, while cautious about some of the guiding assumptions, looks forward to using your document constructively in efforts to address retention issues and graduation rate improvement.

Thank you for your efforts on behalf of COLFA.