Savannah State University

INSTITUTIONAL MISSION AND STUDENT BODY PROFILE

Mission

Savannah State University, the oldest public historically black university in the State of Georgia, develops productive members of a global society through high quality instruction, scholarship, research, service, and community involvement. The University fosters engaged learning and personal growth in a student-centered environment that celebrates the African American legacy while nurturing a diverse student body. Savannah State University offers graduate and undergraduate studies including nationally accredited programs in the liberal arts, the sciences and the professions.

As a pioneering institution in the system of higher education in the State of Georgia, Savannah State University (SSU) continues to educate and develop students who become global citizens and leaders of communities, regionally, nationally and internationally. As it continues to serve students with capabilities that span the spectrum of academic achievement, from those who were admitted needing one or more learning support courses to those who were admitted into the Honors Program, the university provides educational experiences grounded in high quality instruction and practical experience within the disciplines; through research, scholarship and service to the wider community.

The university has stayed the course in its long history of service to students who are not college ready. In 2014, nearly 300 students benefitted from developmental education in their first year of college matriculation. SSU also currently educates an increasingly diverse student body in a wide range of disciplines at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The student body, however, continues to consist of a significant proportion of first generation learners and of students with great financial need. The overwhelming majority, more than 90%, of students at SSU receive some form of financial aid. For the previous academic year, 80.4% of the entering class was PELL eligible.

Students Registered in Learning Support Courses

2012	2013	2014
95	273	298

Students on Financial Aid as % of Fall Undergrads

•	2012		2013		2014	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Undergrads	4393	100%	4765	100%	4845	100%
Pell	3624	82.5%	3905	82.0%	3897	80.4%
Hope	780	17.8%	929	19.5%	987	20.4%
Federal Loans	4322	98.4%	4625	97.1%	4509	93.1%

The 6-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time Savannah State students has declined over recent years. Focus is now given to reclamation of students who started at SSU between 2008 and 2012 who did not earn a degree and are eligible to return but have not.

Six-Year Graduation Rates: within SSU and within USG

	SSU Specific	System Wide
6-Year Rate for the 2006 Freshman Cohort	32.1%	38.25%
6-Year Rate for the 2007 Freshman Cohort	28.8%	40.2%
6-Year Rate for the 2008 Freshman Cohort	27.5%	38.9%

As an access institution, SSU is authorized to admit individuals requiring learning support to transition towards completion of a four-year degree program. These students are those who have not satisfied our SAT/ACT entrance requirements and have not achieved threshold scores on the COMPASS test. Such students take learning support courses prior to engaging in college level study. In Fall 2014, these underprepared students comprised 20.9% of the entering class, a percentage that has remained relatively constant over the past 5 years.

The larger portion of the student body consists of students who are indeed ready for college study. As shown in the tables below, it remains a cause of concern that students requiring learning support are retained at a lower rate than the overall cohort. Also, a lower percentage of these Learning Support students are in good academic standing at the end of each semester. The number of students not in good academic standing has a direct impact on the rate of progression and completion as students who are not in good standing are more likely to repeat courses.

Fall entering class Retention
by Academic Status

Cohorts:	Sp13	Fa13	Sp14	Fa 14	Sp15
2012 All Frosh	92.2%	70.7	62.4	48.3	45.5
2012 Univ. College	86.0	67.0	54.0	38.0	35.0
2013 All Frosh			91.2	65.7	58.6
2013 Univ. College			94.1	70.1	62.5
2014 All Frosh					89.7
2014 Univ. College					92.4

	SP13	FA13	SP14	Fa 14	Sp15
All Frosh	78.1%	83.9%	84.9%	83.7	84.2
University College	54.7%	53.7%	66.7%	52.6	54.3

["Academic standing" is based on a calculation of GPA at completion of term.]

It should be noted, however, that SSU continues to produce high-achieving students who, once they complete their degree, go into the workforce, graduate school, law school, medical school and beyond. Graduation exit survey results from Spring 2015 indicate that 55% of graduates were entering the workforce in either the public or private sector upon graduation. An additional 9% are pursuing full-time graduate study.

In the meantime, the university still faces numerous challenges as we advance our completion goals. The lack of sustainable need-based aid has proven to be a critical factor impacting student retention, progression and completion. More than 30% of SSU students work at least one job while enrolled in each semester. Providing additional financial assistance to our students, so they do not experience pressures of having to work a job external to the campus while enrolled full-time, is a key dimension of our CCG effort. Also, improving outcomes for students in Learning Support is another key component. Strategies to help improve outcomes include transforming remediation of students requiring learning support classes. Stimulation of our capable students in classrooms and laboratories also continues to be an urgent priority. Strategies to improve student outcomes across all disciplines includes launch of a campus-wide mentoring program, launch of an Honors Program, launch of initiatives to target adult learners and veterans, and more access to online classes.

Intrusive academic advising remains a key dimension and top priority as we seek to empower all students and enable them to clearly and successfully follow their tracks to degree completion. The hiring and training of professional advisors has helped us to keep students on guided pathways that minimize opportunities for students to take unnecessary courses that either do not lead to the degree or extend the time period in which

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degree completion is achieved. We also continue to evaluate, with the faculty, our major programs requiring more than 120 credit hours, with respect to requisite courses. Plans are being implemented to reduce excess courses in the coming months. We have also reviewed policies and practices and adjusted in departments where unintended barriers tend to hinder student progression.

We are increasing our efforts at early identification of students in academic difficulty. The *Grades First* early alert system, used by faculty to identify students who are struggling in their courses, is in its third year. Utilization has increased significantly since its first year at 26% to 61% this year. Our work with the Educational Advisory Board and their Student Success Collaborative will provide an additional technology tool to identify and assist students not traditionally classified as "at-risk" but whose course completion pattern suggests may be in jeopardy of failure to complete a credential.

In the following section, strategies and tactics that advance our CCG goals are discussed more thoroughly.

SUMMARY OF GOALS, HIGH IMPACT STRATEGIES, AND ACTIVITIES

The identified goals for this year were modified in response to guidance from the USG. We have implemented the high impact strategies and tactics listed below with the ultimate goal of increasing both the actual number of graduates in an academic year and the overall graduation rate. As we assess our systems, we continue to identify processes that hinder student success and ultimately prevent students from earning degrees or other credentials. The following approaches will lead to increases in matriculation, progression and completion by SSU students.
1. Increase the total number of students applying for graduation each academic year when eligible.
2. Increase the number of students are able to re-direct a high number of credits in varying subject areas to a four-year degree
3. Decrease the number of students who are unable to complete their degree due to financial difficulties in their final year.
4. Increase first- and second-year retention through high-touch academic advising and mentoring.
5. Increase the number of alternatives to earning a Four-Year degree

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Goal One	**Increase the total number of students applying for graduation each academic year when eligible.**
High Impact Strategy/Tactic	Intrusive advising and graduation coaching for students with 90 or more earned credit hours.
Summary of Activities	Academic Departments implemented the strategy of more intentional tracking of students with 90 or more credit hours. Departments verified the conduct of strategic meetings between students and faculty advisors to ensure that students eligible to graduate submitted applications for graduation and resolved any missing requirements.
Interim Measures of Progress	Increase in number of students who participated in strategic advising sessions after earning 90 credit hours or more in a degree program and increase in the number of applications for graduation that result from targeted meetings between students and faculty advisors
Measures of Success	Increase in number of students who are degree complete at the end of the academic year.

Baseline Data		AY 13-14	AY 14-15
	Undergraduate	453	498

Goal Two: **Increase the number of students are able to re-direct a high number of credits in varying subject areas to a four-year degree**

High Impact Strategy/Tactic — Launch of an Interdisciplinary Studies Degree Program

Summary of Activities — Created an interdisciplinary degree that allows students who have earned a high number of credits from multiple disciplines to apply those credits to one degree program. Intrusively advise students whose profile aligns well with this degree program.

Interim Measures of Progress — Increase in number of students who have a reduced time to degree completion after switching majors to the interdisciplinary degree program.

Measures of Success — Increase in number of students who graduate with an Interdisciplinary Degree.

Baseline Data

	AY 13-14	AY 14-15
Number of students whose time to degree completion is reduced as a result of switch	11	31
Number of IDS degrees awarded	0	2

Goal Three **Decrease the number of students who are unable to complete their degree due to financial difficulties in their final year.**

High Impact Strategy/Tactic — Launch of a "Closing the Gap" (CTG) and other initiatives to provide need-based assistance to seniors who might otherwise not be able to afford the cost of matriculation in their last year.

Summary of Activities — Provide small scholarships of $1,500 or less in each semester of their final year to students who do not otherwise have sufficient funds to enroll and complete their degree

Interim Measures of Progress — Number of students who receive CTG or other need-based funds.

Measures of Success — Increased number of students who were awarded funds who complete a degree program.

Baseline Data

	AY 13-14	AY 14-15
Number of Seniors who received CTG funds	16	10
% of Recipients who graduated	**100%**	**100%**
Awarded Funds	$18,270	$11,394

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Goal Four	**Increase first- and second-year retention rates through high-touch academic advising and mentoring**
High Impact Strategy/Tactic	Assign all students who have earned under 60 credit hours or less to professional advisors in the Center for Academic Success (CAS).
Summary of Activities	All students under 60 earned credit hours are now assigned to professional advisors in the Center for Academic Success (CAS). These advisors mentor students, assist with major and course selection, and provide outreach to connect students with resources that support their success, with the anticipated outcome of increased retention. Student support services are also offered through the Center for Academic Success, including free tutorial services, which are utilized to assist all students in completion of their coursework on the first attempt. Additional advising staff were hired last year to reduce caseloads and increase opportunities for each student to receive more intrusive guidance and support. Plans are in progress to equip the advising team with new technologies to support their work (predictive analytics tool).
Interim Measures of Progress	Retention rates for first- and second-year students who participate in advising.
Measures of Success	Increased student retention at end of first year and second year.
Baseline Data	Note: 71% of students advised in AY 2013-2014 returned for AY 2014-2015.

Overall Retention Rate	Cohort Fall 2013	Cohort Fall 2014
First Year	65.7%	62%
Second Year	47.1%	

Goal Five	**Increase the number of alternatives to earning a Four-Year degree**
High Impact Strategy/Tactic	Offer certificate programs and Associate Degrees
Summary of Activities	Created a new post-baccalaureate certificate in Non-Profit Leadership and an Associate degree in the Core Curriculum to allow students to earn credentials in less than a four-year period. Several more certificate programs are under development and will launch in this academic year.
Interim Measures of Progress	Number of students who enroll in the new credential opportunities.
Measures of Success	Number of students who graduate from certificate and/or Associate Degree program.
Baseline Data	

Students Enrolled	AY 13-14	AY 14-15
Post-Bac Certificate	1	3
Associate Degree	23	40

Degrees Awarded	AY 13-14	AY 14-15
Post-Bac Certificate	0	1
Associate Degree	5	6

OBSERVATIONS

Targeted interventions have led to a number of improvements. For example, as suggested by the data associated with Goal 1, the total number of students declared eligible to and subsequently graduating in an individual academic year reached an all-time high in 2014-2015. This is despite the fact that the 6-year graduation rate declined for another consecutive year. We attribute this improvement to the targeted efforts of departments to proactively communicate with seniors to ensure completion of meetings with faculty advisors.

The introduction of an Interdisciplinary Studies degree program has proven to be very fruitful. Not only have we put students on a new guided pathway that reduces the total time to degree completion, we have found that such students are now able to graduate in one or two additional semesters rather than four to six, as had been the case on their prior paths. The early results, as presented in the data associated with Goal 2, indicate a positive trend in the coming year.

As mentioned previously, financial aid continues to be a rate-limiting factor for a high percentage of our students. As we apply targeted efforts related to Goal 3, we are finding that hundreds of students (freshmen to seniors) who begin the semester enrolled in classes are dropped for non-payment due to lack of available financial resources to cover the cost of matriculation. We are working to identify alternate sources of need-based aid to assist students who are in good academic standing but lack personal financial support to sustain matriculation. In the last two consecutive semesters, we have helped more than 80 students with awards totaling over $120,000.   This has been tremendously beneficial to the recipients. However, we are, unfortunately, not able to assist all deserving students in need. Moreover, there are several hundred more continuing students, including some Hope Scholarship recipients, who regularly seek additional financial assistance since the Hope Scholarship does not cover the total cost of tuition and fees, room & board and living expenses.   With regard to the students who received Closing the Gap funds, **100%** of students who received awards in the last two consecutive academic years went on to complete the four year degree at an investment of just under $30,000. We expect to continue this trend of completion.

The results to date in Goal 4 have not met all of our expectations. We suspect that the large caseloads (more than 500/advisor) may be one additional reason (beyond financial barriers) that may explain the decline in first and second year retention.   We have reduced the caseload per advisor to no more than 300. The drop to less than 50% causes us to revise our assessment strategies of advising by professionals as well as academic advisors. We have also hired two new Academic Coaches to routinely work with hundreds students whose academic standing indicates risk (either Academic Warning or Academic Probation).   The positive outcomes associated with this goal includes the higher retention rate of those students who participate in academic advising and the increase in use of the Grades First alert system by faculty. The alerts are issued to the respective academic advisor who will then communicate with the student to resolve the issues impacting their academic performance.   We expect the use of the system and the reduction in caseloads, coupled with additional financial assistance, to improve retention rates in the coming years.

While we work on improvements in functional areas, we are also exploring methods by which we can reach new audiences, such as adult learners, military personnel and other non-traditional students. Goal 5 is our first effort that has produced measurable results related to completion.   Early data indicate a positive trend that we expect to increase in the next semesters and years.

As we monitor our progress related to the stated goals, we are placing significant emphasis in this academic year on ensuring that students are following guided pathways, that courses are offered in response to demand rather than by scripted schedules that do not align with real-time student progression patterns, and that alert and warning systems are utilized to their greatest extent to help drive early interventions.   We are also restructuring our conversations with students regarding the role they play in their success, including being more aggressive in completion of course requirements in the first attempt to avoid having to repeat classes, since repeating leads to additional cost of education and delayed graduation.

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Finally, in parallel with the strategies and improvements mentioned above, we are implementing a number of additional changes in practices and strategies to support continuous improvement in functional areas as well as improvements in student progression, retention and completion rates. Some steps taken that may be included in future reports are listed below:

- Use of predictive analytics to
- Implementation of co-requisite learning co-requisite learning support courses
- Increase in completed Articulation agreements with Community and Technical Colleges
- Outreach to Adult Learners and increased online course delivery
- Launch of a campus-wide Mentoring Program
- Launch of eCore courses through official eCore Affiliation
- Launch of the online Bachelor of Business Administration
- Launch of Instructional Webinar Training for SSU Faculty to ensure that all online courses are Section 508 Compliant
- Launch of SSU Mobile Phone Apps for Military and Adult Learners
- Launch of dedicated eLearning web portal for the Office of Online Education
- Launch of dedicated web portal for SSU's Adult and Military Learners
- Hired a dedicated LMS operator and instructional designer in the Office of Online Education
- Continued adoption of open source texts to reduce instructional costs, in support of Affordable Learning Georgia
- Shortening time to degree to as close to 120 credit hours as possible, by reducing number of credit hours needed to complete a credential

Early outcomes of these efforts indicate that the interventions are having the desired impact. The challenge is to continue to strengthen in areas that we know will remove the greatest barriers to student achievement as quickly as possible but also using methods that are sustainable.