

## ADMINISTRATION

# How a University Fights to Keep Students' Demographics From Becoming Their Destiny

By Audrey Williams June | MARCH 05, 2017

✓ PREMIUM

GREENSBORO, N.C.



Lissa Gotwals for The Chronicle

At the U. of North Carolina at Greensboro's School of Health and Human Sciences, students who are uncertain about what to major in can take a special class called "Redesign a Life You'll Love." Once they've made their own decisions about what they want to do, says Bill Johnson, the course's creator, "they're willing to stay on track."

Students' demographic markers often offer some of the strongest clues about whether they ultimately succeed or fail in college.

First-generation and low-income students, for example, are more likely to be academically unprepared and have spotty family support and limited financial resources — all obstacles on the path to earning a degree. About half of low-income students, as measured by those who received Pell Grants, graduate in six years, compared with a graduation rate of 65 percent for students who don't get that federal aid. And some minority students struggle with feelings of isolation at colleges where their numbers are few, which is one reason that the black-white achievement gap persists: About 22 percentage points separate the six-year graduation rates of black and white students who entered a four-year college in 2007, according to federal data.

As class disparities in the broader society have worsened and as increasing numbers of minority and first-generation students come to campus, the task of helping students from these vulnerable groups get to and through college has become central to the future of higher education. These demographic changes are already happening here at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, which has become one of the most diverse institutions in the state. Nearly 45 percent of Greensboro's undergraduate students are members of a minority group; roughly one out of every four students is African-American. The share of Greensboro students who are Pell Grant recipients has risen to 44 percent, from 32 percent a decade ago. And one-third of this year's freshman class are the first in their families to go to college.

The university has come a long way from its beginnings as a tiny women's college focused on "domestic science," business, and teaching, and one that accepted its first black students — two women — when forced to by a court order in the 1950s. Today Greensboro has 19,653 students (about 3,300 of them in graduate school) and has transformed itself into a doctoral university with a Carnegie classification of "higher research activity." It has also attracted notice from the U.S. Department of Education for its work with low-income students and from the Education Trust for being a "standout institution" that has achieved marked success in erasing the black-white achievement gap.

Officials at Greensboro credit a strategy of combining hard-core data analysis with an emphasis on the human touch. This approach hasn't fixed everything; in fact, some of Greensboro's goals have remained elusive as metrics have barely budged. Inevitably, some students will fail to make it through to graduation, says Franklin D. Gilliam Jr., who became Greensboro's chancellor in 2015. But the institution is adamant that students' demographics should not dictate their destiny.

"We have to be vigilant," says Mr. Gilliam. "There can't be a pattern in who doesn't make it."

t started with a period of self-analysis. In 2009, Greensboro formed a campuswide committee to come up with a plan to increase first-to-second-year retention, which had hovered around 76 percent for the previous five years, and to boost four- and six-year graduation rates, which were at 32.2 percent and 56 percent respectively.

The group spent months poring over several years of student data to try to identify the factors that affected student retention. Administrators, faculty, staff, and students looked at retention rates by ethnicity and gender and among other groups, like first-generation and honors-college students, as well as for freshmen with undeclared majors and students with unmet financial needs. They also analyzed the reasons students withdrew, to check for patterns there.

Greensboro identified four groups of students who were at particularly high risk, says Kimberly Sousa-Peoples, director of new-student transitions and first-year experience. They were students who were academically unprepared, who weren't taking enough classes to keep their financial aid, who were in some form of distress — such as those battling mental illness or grappling with family issues, or those who wanted to study nursing, one of Greensboro's most popular and competitive majors.

Later Greensboro turned to analyzing a host of specific markers to better determine whether a student was at risk of dropping out. Some of the variables are obvious indicators of academic preparation, like an incoming student's GPA, standardized-test scores, or where he or she went to high school.

Other variables reflect students' academic habits, like the number of college credits they bring with them to Greensboro, how many classes they miss during the first few weeks of the semester, and whether those who need tutoring have actually signed up for it.

Some data points are more subtle, like a student's distance from home — more than 150 miles can serve as a heads up that homesickness may derail his or her studies. Meal cards that are rarely swiped at breakfast could signal that a student is skipping early classes.

These data points — 80 in all — feed into the predictive modeling software Greensboro bought. First used in 2014, it assigns students to deciles based on how likely they are to stay enrolled. This classification allows Greensboro to focus on the students in the lowest deciles who are most at risk during their first year and beyond, says Bryan Terry, vice chancellor for enrollment management. Mr. Terry says during certain points in the academic year, his office reruns its predictive models weekly as new information about students comes in, all the while keeping an eye out for red flags. A request for a transcript or a failure to reapply for financial aid, for example, might call for some staff intervention.

"We're careful not to box people in. It's predictive modeling, not your destiny," Mr. Terry says. "But it works well enough for us to use it to go after the ones who really need help and may not ask or even know they can ask."

From the committee meetings came a new Students First Office, which serves as a first responder of sorts to any academic, social, or financial challenges a student may have. For instance, students who aren't taking enough credits to keep their financial aid are guided to the office, where staff members help them figure out how many courses they should take each semester to stay on track financially and graduate. The office, created in 2011, also provides academic advising and is the main resource for students who haven't selected a major.

The committee's work also resulted in new student-success software, which lets the faculty and staff flag students whose academic performance or general welfare raises concerns. The flags alert student-success staff members so they can follow up. In its first year of universitywide use, in 2011-12, about 15,000 flags were raised.

Hands-on student-success work is labor intensive, and so with limited resources at its disposal, Ms. Sousa-Peoples says Greensboro has made student success everyone's job. "Retention," she says, "isn't just one office's problem."

That help for students, triggered by the numbers, is all about the human touch, which Greensboro counts on faculty and staff members to provide. The university offers a two-hour voluntary training called "UNCG Cares," where faculty and staff members learn about the types of distress that affect students, how to recognize the signs, and how to guide students to the campus resources that can help them.

Participants get a "UNCG Cares" sticker to display in their offices — a clear signal that they're willing to help students in trouble. Since 2007, more than 1,200 people (about one-third of Greensboro's employees) have completed the training.

"That culture of care really separates us from the rest," Mr. Terry says. "We're much more *in loco parentis* than other places. We're intrusive and unapologetic about it."

During their training, faculty and staff members learn to look beyond data, and to pay attention to students' visual cues and body language. Justin Golding, a career coach in the Career Services Center, says the training has made him more attuned to students' signals of stress, like avoiding eye contact and giving curt answers to questions.

"Sometimes it's just good for them to talk with another person because that can help normalize the experience they're having," Mr. Golding says. "They'll find out they're not the only one feeling that way."

For Rod Wyatt, Greensboro's senior director of college-completion initiatives, staying abreast of potential roadblocks to graduation can be as simple as walking around campus "with your eyes and ears wide open," he says. Students have mentioned to him that they're struggling in a course or worried about a family situation back home. "You step in when you have to," says Mr. Wyatt, who has worked at Greensboro since 1987 in various positions.

The intrusiveness behind Greensboro's retention and persistence efforts takes many forms. One of the most common is regular and, at times, repeated outreach to students by phone or email.

Student-success staff check in with students at critical junctures. They reach out to freshmen to help them figure out the best way to earn the 30 credits needed to become sophomores the following year, including suggesting summer courses to catch up. When students hit 60 credits, staff members ask if the students have picked a major. "And if not," says Mr. Terry, "we counsel them through that." For students with 90 credits, staff members check in with deans to make sure the courses those students need to graduate will be offered.

Students who are slow to register for classes are gently prodded by staff, via email, to offer help or more information.

The assistance even extends to students who withdraw from the university. Student-success staff members counsel them on how to position themselves to return and graduate from Greensboro. "We had one student with 109 credits whose car broke down so she couldn't get to school," Mr. Terry says. "So we talked to her about some online classes she could take so she could stay on track."



Lissa Gotwals for The Chronicle

As Greensboro learned from its data analysis, a key indicator of the need for help is when students are undecided about a major. That's where people like Bill Johnson, student-success navigator for the School of Health and Human Sciences, come in. Mr. Johnson created two courses for



Lissa Gotwals for The Chronicle

A lot of students "just pick a major because they don't know what they want to do," says Bill Johnson, an instructor at the U. of North Carolina at Greensboro. In his classes students develop more intentional life plans.

students who are undecided or who have chosen a major but remain unsure about it. He calls himself the "Dream Dean." His course, "What Could I Do With My Life?," pushes students to think beyond just picking a major and to focus instead on their larger purpose in life. In a follow-up course he helps students figure out the path they can take to live out that purpose. These courses are particularly pertinent for students interested in nursing, many of whom decide to transfer elsewhere if they don't get admitted to the program. The goal is to provide them with other options at Greensboro.

One student who explored her options was Jasmine Kendrick. Before she enrolled at Greensboro, she had wanted to become a pediatrician, but she abandoned that plan.

"When I came here, I had no clue what I wanted to do," says Ms. Kendrick, a native of Fayetteville, N.C. She settled on kinesiology,

at the suggestion of her mother, a physical-therapy technician. But she wasn't sure that was right for her either.

Then, as a freshman, she heard Mr. Johnson describe his courses' effectiveness at a student orientation for students with health and human-sciences majors. She signed up for his first course; it seemed like a way to determine if kinesiology was really right for her.

The first semester brought cathartic classroom discussions about the angst surrounding choosing a major. She completed projects that forced her to outline her dreams for various areas of her life. Ms. Kendrick enrolled in Mr. Johnson's follow-up course, "Redesign a Life You'll Love," though she admits she was skeptical for much of her freshman year that either course would actually deliver the promised results.

Eventually, Ms. Kendrick began to embrace the idea that college offered a chance for her to pursue her own interests, not just those dictated to her by others. She admitted to herself that taking all the science courses required for health-focused majors would make her miserable. And she even began to see entrepreneurship as a possibility.

In the end, Ms. Kendrick says, she considered seven different majors before finding what she's stuck with: psychology and African-American and African-diaspora studies.

The exploration that Mr. Johnson fostered has worked in Ms. Kendrick's favor, and others'. The retention rate for students who have taken Mr. Johnson's first course has typically been higher than that for Greensboro students over all. About 85 percent of students in the course in the fall of 2014 returned in the fall of 2015, according to data supplied by Mr. Johnson. That beats the 78-percent retention rate for first-year students overall. The retention rate for students who have taken both of his one-credit courses during their first year of college, is 90.6 percent.

Students who took his first course, dating back to 2008, had a five-year graduation rate that was the same or above the university's six-year graduation rate, Mr. Johnson says.

"A lot of students just grind their way through high school and then just pick a major because they don't know what they want to do," says Mr. Johnson. "Once they get clear on that and pick something they want to do, they're willing to stay on track."

**G**reensboro has received widespread praise for its efforts. Black students there have graduated at a similar rate or higher than white students for more than a decade. Last year the U.S. Department of Education identified the university, in a study, as one of the small number of four-year public institutions that excel in enrolling and graduating Pell Grant students. About half of the Pell Grant recipients at Greensboro graduate in six years, just three percentage points below the graduation rate of its non-Pell students, the study said.

These successes are central to Greensboro's sense of itself. Its job ads and website emphasize the diversity of its student body and faculty and its commitment to student success.

But Greensboro's plans to improve retention have yet to produce clear victories. In 2009, the year that its committee started deliberating, the retention rate was 76 percent. For the most part, it has remained right around that level. The business of increasing retention rates is complicated, especially at institutions that see sharp changes in the number of minority, low-income, and first-generation students on campus.

Even when an institution commits to reaching out to struggling students individually, says Mr. Terry, sometimes "nothing you do makes a difference, and that's hard to take."

The university's newly created Office of Retention Initiatives set a five-year goal of a 78 percent or higher retention rate for students who entered in 2016. The plan is to increase the rate by at least one percentage point each year after until it reaches 80 percent, four percentage points up from where it is now. The institution expects to reach a six-year graduation rate of 60 percent by 2027. Its most recent six-year graduation rate, for students who entered in 2011, was 50 percent.

The reasons for its success in closing the achievement gap are also difficult to parse. Its student-success programs are probably helping. But Mr. Gilliam, the chancellor, also believes that the makeup of the university's student body is an additional tool that helps with student persistence.

"When you're black and walking around campus, you see other black students here," says Mr. Gilliam, who was formerly dean of the Luskin School of Public Affairs at the University of California at Los Angeles. "I think the critical mass we have contributes to a sense of well-being among the African-American students."

The institution is looking forward. It needs to find money to expand its student-success efforts, and it hopes to join the ranks of colleges that get federal funding for a program that prepares first-generation college students or underrepresented minorities to pursue a Ph.D. However, the needs of Greensboro's students — and the methods used to try to meet them — are likely to keep changing.

"The work is never done, and it's a moving target, especially as your student population changes," says Ms. Sousa-Peoples, who was a member of the 2009 committee. "There's no silver bullet."

*Audrey Williams June is a senior reporter who writes about the academic workplace, faculty pay, and work-life balance in academe. Contact her at [audrey.june@chronicle.com](mailto:audrey.june@chronicle.com), or follow her on Twitter @chronaudrey.*

*A version of this article appeared in the February 10, 2017 issue.*

Copyright © 2017 The Chronicle of Higher Education