One College’s Path to Student Success
How Wayne State raised its graduation rate
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How Wayne State raised its graduation rate

For years, Wayne State University, in Detroit, unhappily wore the label of having the lowest graduation rate of any public university in Michigan. In 2012, the six-year rate was only 28 percent.

The poor performance hurt the institution’s image, with local and national news media focusing on the undergraduate woes, particularly for African-American students. “Wayne State is located in America’s largest black-majority city, yet is one of the nation’s worst at getting degrees into the hands of African-Americans,” noted a 2012 article on MLive, a Michigan news site.
'Our graduation rate had been sliding for many years, and by 2011 there was very much a sense of a deepening crisis and dread,’ says Monica Brockmeyer, associate provost for student success. ‘Our enrollment was falling, our reputation was falling.’

Before 2011, Wayne State tried to attack the problem in numerous ways and developed multiple plans, Brockmeyer says, but ‘they were inadequate to the challenge.’ And financial problems hampered any efforts, as the state reduced its investment in higher education. (In the early 2000s, about 66 percent of Wayne State’s budget came from Michigan. Today it is about 20 percent.)

‘We were becoming increasingly tuition dependent, and the urgency of the falling graduation rate became more salient,’ she says, both because prospective students might be reluctant to enroll and because losing a high number of students before graduation also meant losing much-needed tuition.

So, in 2011, the board passed a plan to increase the university’s retention and graduation rates and hired Brockmeyer, an associate professor of computer science at Wayne State, to oversee it. ‘It was not a perfect plan,’ she says, ‘but noteworthy for being comprehensive and attacking the issue from multiple perspectives.’

Seven years and more than $10 million later, the graduation rate is at 47 percent, and the college has made gains in helping those groups of undergraduates who often have trouble progressing. For Pell Grant recipients, 37 percent graduated in 2018, compared with 18 percent in 2012. And the rate for African-American students rose from 9 percent to 22 percent in that time.

**Advising Overhaul**

The first step was to expand and revamp the academic-advising department. Previously, Wayne State had relied on faculty members to advise students on majors while nonfaculty advisers navigated discussions about general-education requirements. ‘The consequences were that students had a very bifurcated advising experience,’ Brockmeyer says. ‘There was no coherence.’

Today, the work is handled only by professionally trained advisers, who sit both in departments and in a central location to serve students who don’t fit easily into an academic unit or who have different needs, like veterans and adult learners.

The college also hired 45 new advisers, almost doubling the size of the staff and decreasing the average caseload to about 280 students, and created an adviser academy, which provides in-house certifications. The training includes lessons about working effectively with at-risk students, understanding the technology and tools
used in advising, and developing a mentor relationship with another adviser on campus to gain additional expertise. Those who complete two courses are awarded $250 to pay for additional professional development, says Cheryl Kollin, senior director of the University Advising Center.

An academic-advising council, with representatives from a variety of schools and colleges on campus, also meets monthly, and advisers can join a book club that gathers once a semester.

“Advisers are more collaborative, and there is more a sense of community,” Kollin says. “They have adviser lunch-and-learns, meet-ups, and a sense of relying on each other for support and advice. That was not true previously.”

The shift in the advising department was only one part of the plan, but because the benefits could be seen so immediately, it created a great deal of optimism and motivation campuswide, Brockmeyer says.

“Advisers enabled us to move from a transactional campus to a relational one,” she adds. “Students for the first time had a person they knew was in their corner.”

Wayne State also invested in technology that helped staff members have more access to information about students. Brockmeyer likens it to a coordinated health-care model, with a shared notes system and other tools to observe students’ grades, class attendance, and other activities. It allowed advisers to be proactive rather than reactive.

“We’re still hoping to make it better and bring more parts of the student experience, such as housing, on board,” she says.

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Gen-Ed Reform

Another major undertaking was revamping the university’s general-education curriculum, which had become a barrier to some students’ ability to graduate. “It hadn’t been revised since it came into being more than 30 years ago,” Brockmeyer says. “It had too many credits, it had become bloated, and we thought, ‘If we want to start with students at the center, how would we design it for them?’”

The university conducted some 20 focus groups with students, staff, alumni, and faculty, as well as surveys of a broad swath of campus constituents. Now fewer general-education courses are required to complete a degree, and students have more courses to choose from that can satisfy the requirement.
An initial plan, which would have created a thematic connection between three courses in the first year, was perhaps too ambitious, Brockmeyer says. Scheduling the courses was challenging, she says, and “we didn’t have large number of faculty who were experienced in that kind of integration across multiple courses, so we would have needed faculty development, as well.”

The plan still might happen in the future, she says, noting that the general-education system is no longer seen as static but “as a dynamic part of our curriculum that we can review and revise over time.”

Wayne State’s push for student success has faced additional obstacles. Although supported in part by foundation grants, the effort also required cuts in department budgets to pay for it, Brockmeyer says. And Wayne State’s graduation rate is still below the average for Michigan public universities, which is almost 55 percent.

Nonetheless, its work has won accolades. Last year the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities awarded Wayne State an award for degree completion. Travis York, the association’s assistant vice president for academic and student affairs, says that what made the university stand out was its ability to show “steady increase of degree completion over time.”

York says the university’s focus on the racial and income-related achievement gaps was particularly important; it has shifted much of its aid from merit to need-based, and more than one-third of its freshmen don’t pay tuition. A program started in 2017 to support incoming students with low test scores or from disadvantaged high schools has shown signs of initial success. African-American students who enrolled in it had about the same retention rates and GPAs as white students overall.

Of course, not every effort has worked out, and Brockmeyer says sometimes administrators learned what wasn’t functioning well when trying to fix something else. For example, efforts to reach out to students who were close to graduation but hadn’t completed their general-education credits proved extremely complicated, “because we had a home-grown audit system that didn’t update regularly and was sometimes incorrect,” she says.

So the university bought a new system that students can use themselves, when before they had to go to their advisers to find out where they were on their road to graduation.

For York, of APLU, one of the things that stood out about Wayne State was that it learned from its failures: “They do a really nice job of trying to model for their students — if this initiative we’ve started hasn’t gone well, it’s an opportunity to learn to do things better.”
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