The Graduation Project—Meeting the Needs of Adult Nontraditional Students Online

Undergraduate students stop out of their degree programs for a wide variety of reasons. Often times work commitments, family commitments, financial strains, and life-direction changes force students to temporarily give up their quest for an advanced degree. The Graduation Project (GP) represents an innovative program to find new ways to help former students complete their baccalaureate-level studies. The fundamental sense of the program is the commitment to “take our students from where they are” to help them move toward the completion of their degrees.

In the fall of 2005, the State Board of Regents initiated its Committee on Baccalaureate Expansion (COBE). Universities within the System competed for COBE grants to fund innovative programs in order to increase the number of undergraduate degree holders in the state. The Graduation Project at the University of XXXX is one successful example. Since the beginning of this program, over 2,000 students have been contacted and over 50 students have now completed their baccalaureate degrees. Multiple sources of funding have been used to pay for these efforts.

Staffing

The Graduation Project is housed in the Adult Nontraditional Student Resource (ANSR) office. From this office, the GP has a half-time program director, full-time recruitment specialist, a part-time program assistant, and two student mentors. The ANSR office reports to the Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs. Numerous other offices are integrally involved in this project. The offices most involved include: the Office of the Registrar, Academic Advising, Admissions, and the Center for New Learning (which supports the program with a quarter-time advisor).

To Qualify

To qualify for the Graduation Project, students must have stopped out of the University for at least one semester and have achieved senior standing. In addition, they must have earned a 2.0 cumulative grade point average, or better, and they must complete at least 15 of their last 30 credits at the University. More and more of these courses are being taught wholly online or in a hybrid format.

Funding

Funding for the program comes from three primary sources. First, the University itself has leveraged internal funding to support staffing, office space, and office equipment. In addition, COBE funding has provided $75,000 each of the first two years to support staffing, equipment, and marketing efforts. Likewise, the System President contributed an additional $100,000 for each of the following two years to continue and enhance these efforts. An alumnus of the University has provided funding for GP student textbooks and several scholarships.

Courses

Students identified for the Graduation Project are not given any policy waivers or special conditions. They are permitted to take any courses that traditional students take. However, like many nontraditional students, classes scheduled during the day are in conflict with their work schedules. Because of this concern, we have used funding from the State System to pay for both the development and implementation of online and hybrid courses. A number of seats are always available for GP students, but all students registered at the University are permitted to sign up for these courses. This helps to build good-will across the academic colleges and build publicity for the Graduation Project with the faculty. The courses that we have selected for online and hybrid development are based on data indicating those courses which are in highest demand.
All courses offered must be approved and staffed by both the deans and department chairs of the respective colleges.

**Conclusion**

We have been very pleased at the success of the Graduation Project. In fact, at the time of preparing this paper our Chancellor announced to his executive committee that support for the GP will be added to the university base budget. We now have a long-term commitment, and this is based upon the results.

Graduation Projects students are not your typical undergraduates. They have stopped out of their degree pursuits because of various difficult circumstances. Getting them back to finish their degrees is equally difficult. They need a great deal of support, motivation, and mentoring. Such efforts cannot be successful without a committed and patient group of support staff. While we have already seen over 50 success stories, there are approximately another 150 in the pipeline. With continued efforts and support, we will be pleased to see many new graduates in the next few years.

To learn more about the University Graduation Project, please visit our website at: www.XXXX