Four Year Retention and Degree Completion Improvement Plan (Summary)
Eastern Michigan University
2013-2014

The Eastern Michigan University (EMU) Degree Completion and Retention (DCR) Plan has been developed to address both retention and graduation rates in a comprehensive and coordinated manner. At just under 40%, EMU’s reported six-year “first time in any college” (FTIAC) student graduation rate is the second lowest among higher education institutions in the state of Michigan. The DCR plan focuses on five areas of practice, process, and policy that both scholarly and practitioner research find have great impact on degree completion and retention. The five areas are: Academic & Student Preparedness, Enrollment Policies, Financial Aid Policies and Incentives, Advising & Student Support and Curriculum Structure & Delivery. In addition, the plan includes targeted initiatives aimed at two demographic segments of the student population: Men of Color and Single Parents.

The targeted initiatives for the two demographic segments, Men of Color and Single Parents, are targeted for three main reasons. First, Eastern’s, as well as national, statistics indicate that these two segments experience six-year degree completion rates in the 11-17% range, significantly lower than the general population. Second, research has shown that targeted programmatic efforts addressing the unique circumstances/attributes of these two segments can realize extraordinary results. Lastly, many on EMU’s campus already have a strong interest/commitment to the two segments and continue to champion university efforts aimed at enhancing their success. We want to build on those efforts. Other groups may be targeted over time for focused programming as the plan is implemented and evaluated.

The final plan results from a two semester long process involving a number of drafts and dialogues. Initial draft proposals were prepared by 7 teams staffed primarily of university staff and administrators working in student service and support areas. Those initial proposals were circulated to campus for review and enhancement. Feedback was received from focus groups comprised of students, faculty, staff and administrators. Additional open forums were held to widen participation opportunities. Drafts were updated and integrated into a single plan based on that feedback. This second draft plan was provided to Faculty Senate who provided input to the Provost’s Office about suggested improvements and enhancements to the plan. It was also discussed with Student Government and the Student Leadership Group. The draft plan was also brought to administrative and staff groups for their feedback.

Each of the following sections includes a brief introduction to one of seven areas of the plan, followed by key strategies the University will pursue going forward. These strategies are not intended to be an all-inclusive long term strategic vision – they are instead key ‘next steps’ that Eastern Michigan University will undertake in an effort to increase retention and graduation rates in support of the university’s overall strategic vision and plan.

Factor 1: Academic and Student Preparedness
Students who successfully navigate the transition from high school to college tend to be those who are prepared academically and socially for the new environment. They adopt successful strategies of self-assessment and behaviors that support success and satisfaction. Examples include finding ways to add structure to their day-to-day life. This may be in the form of an on-campus job or participation in intramurals in addition to their full-time course load. They learn to budget their time carefully. Going from high school where much of the day was utilized for classes, extracurricular activities or homework and into college where they have only 15-16 hours/week clearly defined classroom time can be a difficult transition for many students. Failure to successfully navigate this transition can result in a significant increase in time to graduation, academic probation, or even drop out. Institutions can provide academic support programs to assess and support academic preparedness as well as curricular and/or co-curricular experiences for their first-year students focused on assisting them with this transition.

**Recommended Key Actions:**

1. *Create a comprehensive faculty mentor program.* Key goals of the mentorship program include:
   a. Fostering vital mentoring connections between faculty and students. These relationships have been shown to impact academic transition, success and degree completion, particularly among students at the highest levels of risk in these areas.
   b. Promoting student persistence and academic success by demonstrating the level of commitment from key members of the university community.
   c. Helping students develop attitudes, behaviors, support strategies correlated with academic success and satisfaction.
   d. Identifying core group of faculty and staff willing to serve as key role models, mentors in a variety of areas of need.
   e. Build a clearing house of faculty member resources available to students.

2. *Conduct a comprehensive assessment of ‘first year’ courses offered at EMU as well as courses frequented at high rates by first year students in the past.* Project would be designed with the goal of identifying successful models of instruction, structuring and scheduling and other best practices in support of student retention at EMU. Long term goals include enhancing existing courses, broadening the scope of effective practices and composing a plan for broader implementation across student groups.

3. *Support Student Development of Four Year Graduation and Career Readiness Plans with appropriate staff and systems support.* This includes creation of orientation, advising and career development programs that promote and support these plans. It also includes acquisition of systems and software tools that support the creation, implementation and monitoring of the plans, both at the student level and across relevant campus departments and offices.
4. **Evaluate the cost and benefits of creating co-curricular transcripts.** Evaluation team should include members from all parts of the university that might provide programming that would be noted on these transcripts.

5. **Conduct review of existing developmental math, reading and writing programs (both curricular and support).** Evaluate these programs against national benchmarks and best practices.

6. **Adopt consistent university-wide messages around attracting and orienting new students for success.** Messages should support and be consistent with messaging around student success

**Factor 2: Enrollment Policies**

Enrollment policies play a critical role in retention and degree completion as they set the tone in how easy or difficult the student will find navigating the system in working toward their degree. Communication about policies and key graduation requirements is absolutely essential for students to seamlessly progress toward graduation. In addition, who we recruit and how we support those students also play critical roles in retention and degree completion. It is essential we have policies which maintain standards, yet don’t unnecessarily burden students in order to positively impact our retention and degree completion rates.

**Recommended Key Actions:**

1. **Evaluate Current Recruiting Strategies:** The committee recommends doing an evaluation of current recruiting practices. Review should include:
   - Possible increases in the recruitment/enrollment of international students as they tend to have higher (and more timely) graduation rates, and also tend to live on campus.
   - Consider removing the second year requirement from this campus residency policy and keeping only the first year requirement. This is a policy which hasn’t been enforced for many years and may be deterring the interest of potential students/parents.
   - Increasing services for students with transfer credit as they apply/enroll at EMU, possibly through creation of a transfer center. Have Transfer Center take the lead on providing clear information about transfer equivalencies (including those scheduled to occur) and ensure we clearly identify those transfer courses which meet general education requirements or are direct equivalents to EMU courses. In addition, this center could assist with the consolidation of international and domestic tabulation of credit.
   - Explore ways to enhance relationships with key community colleges by allowing shared access to online portals to expedite the admission and advising processes.
2. Develop a comprehensive institutional approach to advising students returning to EMU after dismissals.
   - Currently students may return an unlimited number of times (by policy). EMU should study the possibility of placing a limit on the number of returns students may make following dismissal for academic reasons.
   - Develop a range of plans students must follow if they reach academic probation status in order to return to good standing.

3. Conduct a comprehensive review of advising policies with specific consideration given to implementation of additional policies consistent with best practices.
   - Full time student earns less than 24 hours in a year.
   - Student is on academic probation (before registering for the next semester).
   - Students who have earned more than 150 credits do not have a degree (before registering for the next semester)
   - Students who change their major two or more times in a single semester (either with an academic advisor or career coach – before the change of major form is processed)

4. Clarifying graduation clearance process for students with goal of encouraging increased contact with advisors. Students should only receive graduation clearance from Records and Registration after registering for their last course(s). Clearance/audit processes are not substitutes for advising which is more focused on individual needs and problem solving.

5. Require students declare a major by the beginning of junior year. EMU should evaluate the adoption of a policy requiring students to declare a major by the beginning of their third year of full time attendance (or equivalent credit hour total). Advising and other support services are most effective when targeted more precisely in this regard.

6. Conduct a curricular review to ensure that all programs are offered in a way that allows for 4-year graduation.

**Factor 3: Financial Aid Policies and Incentives**

Students routinely cite financial issues and related demands as reasons they leave EMU. National data also supports a lack of financial resources as one of the primary reasons students depart from college or do not perform at their highest academic levels. A substantial proportion of EMU students are eligible for Pell Grants (a needs-based form of financial aid) and other incentives.

**Recommended Key Actions:**

1. Conduct a strategic assessment of student enrollment patterns and attitudes with the goal of better understanding why students stop-out and depart from EMU.
Students often point to financial reasons for departing school. The university needs a comprehensive data driven understanding of why students stay at EMU and why students leave temporary or permanently. Aid packages will only be successful to the degree they are tailored to the real needs of students, especially those most at risk. It is critical that this be reviewed with Faculty Senate and their recommendations sought for how to address the data gathered.

2. **Restructure Gift Aid to Scholarships in order to incentivize academic success and progress to degree.** Awards would still have a need based element to them, but students would also be expected to meet academic criteria to maintain or earn back aid eligibility.

3. **Evaluate, streamline and improve the aid appeal process - Communication planning, analysis and possible expansion of “earn back” opportunities.**

4. **Investigate Graduation and Academic Incentives:** EMU should investigate and evaluate the effectiveness of programs that provide students financial incentives to finish their degrees in a timely and academically challenging fashion. These programs should include block tuition models (rather than straight per credit hour charges for tuition and fees), differential program tuition based on cost and market demand for program, reward payments for timely degree completion, unique study abroad support models and institutional loan or savings programs that allow parents and students to pre-pay or re-structure payments over differing time periods.

5. **Expand and publicize the CAP Program:** EMU should consider expanding this program that allows students to work at the University in exchange for free room and board.

6. **Enhance facilities and technology in order to deliver information and services to students in an effective and accessible manner:** Many offices on campus currently provide a good deal of material online for student review and use including forms, explanatory materials and video clips and contact information. These resources need to be enhanced to allow for a new, more comprehensive and individualized level of service to students. These enhancements should include the ability to easily target communications to particular groups of students at times and through means most likely to communicate messages effectively. They should include easy access to social media tools and recognize the evolving nature of modern technology and preferred modes of student communication (e.g. texting, mobile devices, real time video chats, etc.).

**Factor 4: Advising and Student Support Services**

Current students and alumni have cited the need for improved academic advising and support services throughout the institution as needed enhancements. These services improve student matriculation towards graduation in a timely manner. There is also a
greater need in the state of Michigan for higher education institutions to graduate more students prepared for the workforce.

**Recommended Key Actions:**

1. *Create a University College to support and serve students who have not made a final program selection at the University.* Eastern Michigan University needs to put in place proactive and comprehensive strategies to ensure undecided students are supported throughout the major selection process. The University College provides a structure and home to students without a major in order to ensure that they are:
   a. Linked with the faculty mentoring program cited earlier in the plan.
   b. Have the same access to information and resources as declared majors.
   c. Be encouraged to focus on tools designed to identify aptitudes, interests and potential careers and their related majors.
   d. Provide ways to engage undeclared students in academic and outside the classroom activities. These foster persistence and completion.
   e. Assigned an academic advisor as well as a career coach, both familiar with best practices for supporting student decision making and progression to degree.
   f. Provided advice, referral and access to tutors, study tables, mentors and job shadowing opportunities.

2. *Fully Implement Online Degree Tracking and Audit System including transfer and planning modules.* EMU currently has implemented the first of three modules of a fully online degree tracking and audit system (Red Lantern). That module allows students to track their progress against a self selected program of study. The two remaining modules would allow the import of electronic transfer equivalency information directly into the system without course level tabulation process and import course scheduling data and plans in order to allow students to compose semester by semester completion plans.

3. *Conduct a project to enhance advising quality through the development and use of appropriate metrics.* The University has selected this area as its Quality Improvement (QI project) for its institutional accreditation process. It focuses on selecting and testing appropriate measures of advising quality and developing a process for monitoring and effectively using the collection of data via these metrics over time.

4. *Undertake a strategic assessment of ways in which to enhance communications with students and provide consistent messages about the need for advising support and career preparation.* Focus would be on the timing and content of messages students should receive throughout their academic program about inside and outside the classroom issues related to their success and matriculation.

**Factor 5: Curriculum Structure and Delivery**
Availability and delivery of courses as well as structure of our curriculum are major factors influencing the time required for EMU students to complete their degrees. Students often have difficulty scheduling needed courses (particularly prerequisites for higher-level courses) thus making it challenging to sustain progress and momentum toward their intended degree. The structure of our curriculum also plays a role in terms of how much flexibility we allow in providing alternative courses to satisfy degree requirements as well as in course sequences. A lack of flexibility in either area can cause unintended delays in students attaining their degrees.

**Recommended Key Actions:**

1. **Create a General Studies completion degree:** In fall 2012, nearly 22% of undergraduates were 'intent' majors for 2nd admit programs. Of these students (3,814), 45% were juniors and seniors (completed more than 60 credit hours) who may not have gained admission into their program of choice and are now in a position of having many credits and no clear career path. Some students may need alternative routes to graduation, but this should be studied carefully and delineated from traditional bachelors degrees in some fashion.

2. **Conduct a targeted review of programs with the goal of streamlining curriculum and/or effectively scheduling courses in support of timely graduation.** In the past ten years the average number of years it takes a student, who started EMU as a freshman (FTIAC), to complete their degree has increased by two semesters. In 2003 the average time to degree was 4.77 years while in 2012 that number had grown (consistently) to 5.25 years. This may be related in part to the structure of curricular offerings. No conclusion can be confidently reached without a review and understanding of these issues. This is a needed first step before developing plans of study.

3. **Maximize student enrollment in courses that employ “High Impact Educational Practices” (HIPs) by supporting the development and implementation of these practices by interested faculty members.** Examples of HIPs include first-year seminars, learning communities, writing intensive courses, common intellectual experiences, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, community-based learning, internships and capstone courses and projects. Overall goal would be to offer more of these opportunities to students, support faculty development efforts around these practices and increase the total number of courses from these models included in every student’s program of study.

4. **Create a professional development institute for students with the goal of more comprehensively preparing students for transition to the work force.** The institute would be linked to the University’s multi-tiered advising system with information and expertise provided at the university, college and departmental levels. Offerings should be balanced as appropriate by discipline. This approach builds upon the critical link between multi-layered advising and career development and is focused on the critical
relationship on the need students express for a clear path to degree completion linked to career goals.

5. Undertake an evaluation of ways in which EMU can streamline the Math Placement Process. Reconcile options available to transfer and FTIAC entering students.

Factor 6: Men of Color

Eastern Michigan University is recognized as one of the most culturally diverse institutions in the Midwest. In the past 20 years, the cultural demographics of our student population have changed dramatically, especially among Black and Latino students. From 1992 to 2012, the number of Hispanic/Latino students increased almost 126% from 320 to 723. Black/African-American students have increased almost 159% from 1,822 to 4,717. Unfortunately, despite this increase, we have not learned how to ensure that these students earn degrees at the same rate as their White/Caucasian counterparts. In fact, our retention and graduation rates provide evidence that disparities still persist across student groups.

On average, males of color persist and complete college at much lower rates than the national average. At EMU, first year retention rates for all students have decreased from 76.46% to 75.27% since Fall 2009. During that time, retention rates for White/Caucasian students overall and White males specifically have increased slightly from 76.66% to 77.94% and from 75.37% to 76.73% respectively. On the contrary, first year retention rates tell a different story for students of color at EMU. By far, first year retention rates are the lowest for Native American students, but since their cohort numbers are so low, this report will focus primarily on Hispanic/Latino and Black/African-American students. Hispanic/Latino students have an overall first year retention rate of 72.1% since Fall 2009. Although rates for Hispanic/Latino males increased by 13% (56% to 69%), they remain too low. Rates for all Black/African-American students have decreased by 6% from 77% to 71% since 2009. Likewise, Black male first year retention has decreased by 4% from 74% to 70% during the same period. The concern is magnified by the steadily increasing proportion of Black freshmen among incoming students.

According to Cuyjet (2006), Harper (2006a) and Strayhorn (2010), Black male completion rates are the lowest among both sexes and all racial and ethnic groups in U.S. higher education at 33.3% in 6 years. Based on EMU IRIM data for the incoming classes of Fall 2004 - 2006, the 6-year graduation rate for Black males is even lower (average 18.65%). In comparison, average rates for all males and White males over that period of time are 33.23% and 38.16% respectively.

Recommended Key Actions:
1. Appoint a person to lead the assessment of academic, personal development, and social needs of students of color. The person should also lead efforts to address these needs both through the identification of internal resources and obtaining outside contributions and support. This person would also spur efforts to more effectively collect, examine
and utilize data to drive program creation, implementation and maximization of resources (disaggregate data).

2. **Attention should be given (but not limited to) the following services designed to support men of color: Summer Transition Programs, New Student Orientation sessions, Freshman Seminar Course, Living Learning Residential Community, Block Courses and Curriculums, Early Alert Warning System and Referral Service, Academic Support Services, Tiered mentoring program, Graduation Ceremony, developmental and mentoring program for males of color.**

3. **Explore ways to connect and possibly grow current programs across the university that serve this population of students.** Current programs encompass a wide variety of classroom based efforts from faculty, Student Affairs and departmental programming, student groups, and other efforts. EMU should find a way to list and advertise these programs in a coordinated fashion and expand into areas where new programs might succeed.

4. **Conduct a comprehensive needs analysis for programs and support services for men of color on campus.** The analysis would evaluate the current programmatic focus of the Center for Multicultural Affairs, evaluate opportunities to expand current efforts for transfer students who are males of color, provide more on-campus work opportunities for males of color, assess the effectiveness of current programs and services in helping males of color persist and graduate and graduating males of color, examine the staffing and resources of current offices and programs that serve males of color, gather data from males of color about their perception of the university and its campus climate.

5. **Construct an academic profile of men of color who succeed and do not succeed in completing their education at EMU.** The profile would include an analysis of the point at which males of color tend to leave and identifying any early indicators of when males of color begin to disengage from the academic challenge.

**Factor 7: Parent Support Services**

An inclusive campus enhances the educational experiences of all members of the EMU community. To that end, EMU recognizes that becoming a Michigan school of choice for non-traditional students, particularly for ethnically diverse low-income single parents who struggle to pursue postsecondary education, is a commitment worth pursuing. EMU understands that becoming a successful college student can be a stressful and difficult transition. The transition for single parents is even more difficult. They are a special population of students who need to be supported differently from traditional students to insure timely progress to degree completion. Too many single parent students have been forced to limit course loads, drop classes, miss classes or assignments, and leave school before completion due to issues directly related to being a single parent.

In May 2012, the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (IWPR) published these findings:
• Twelve percent of students enrolled in post-secondary academic programs are single parents (with one or more children depending on their income for survival). These parents have less money to pay for their own educational development, have greater needs to meet when financial aid does not cover the cost of living, and they accumulate more debt than students without children.
• Single parents have ten times more debt after graduating than their childless classmates.

The 2012 U.S. Census Bureau statistics indicated that 84.1% of single parent families included mother only with child(ren) under 18 and 15.9% represented father only with child(ren) under 18. Additionally, the Single Mother Guide statistics showed that single mothers often spend over half of their income on housing expenses and a third on child care, leaving them with less money for educational expenses. Nearly two-thirds (62%) have an expected family contribution (EFC) of zero compared to 20% of postsecondary students without children and 18% of married student parents.

Eastern Michigan University has a high proportion of non-traditional students, many of whom are single parents raising children alone. While Eastern has not formally collected data to determine the number of students who are parents, especially single parents, two surveys conducted in 2002 provided some insight into the status of single parent students. In a phone registration survey conducted in winter 2002, over one-third of the 7,000 respondents had children, with 1225 having children under 5 years of age. In the EMU Child Care Needs Survey (February 2002), findings from the 479 respondents pointed to child care as a major barrier:

• 55% were hindered from completing their degrees
• 18% were forced to drop out of school for periods of time
• 15% had failed at least one class

Many of these students cited cost of child care to be their largest hurdle, an understandable fact when one considers that 43% of the respondents had monthly incomes of under $1,100.

Challenges Single Parents Face in Pursuit of Education

In general, nontraditional students are more likely to have at-risk factors that make their path to graduation more complicated. To invest in the retention of this diverse, predominantly female, non-traditional student constituency, EMU must address the barriers/challenges to academic progress and degree completion. These challenges can be broken down into three major areas: financial constraints (especially child care expenses), time management, and social pressures.

Recommended Key Actions:
Student support and services need to be focused and specifically geared toward the single parent student, not folded into what is already provided to our traditional student. To that end, there are four key actions recommended:

1. **Child Care Grants and Financial Assistance Programs**
   a. Study best practices for how to establish child care grants funded by EMU with maximum annual amounts or hours of care. The study should also include consideration for an incentivized program grant renewal and subsidies to families.
   b. Investigate a school-age drop-in program for after-school and early evening support (as unique from services provided by the current Children’s Institute located on campus).
   c. Explore how the University might provide single parent on-campus housing opportunity with possible sliding scale rate structure.
   d. Collaborate with the EMU Foundation on a campaign to establish a single student parent child care scholarship.

2. **Wrap Around Support Services (academic and personal)**
   a. *Create a Family Resource Center (FRC) on the EMU campus.* Ideally, the University would also locate a space for the FRC that could accommodate a meeting room, activity room and child care/play space. The Center will focus on helping students engage in effective problem solving, ensuring proper access to care, academic assistance and other mechanisms of support. Studies have shown that student retention typically increases if there are more support resources for student parents in place on the campus.
   
   b. *Create a coordinator position to lead and foster support programs for student parents.* The coordinator might potentially oversee the FRC as well as assist students overcome obstacles they encounter as single parents on campus. *Special Academic Advising and Course Registration Assistance - Academic advisors play a critical role in helping single parent students manage school in addition to their other responsibilities. Training advisors to understand and support the unique needs of single parents is essential. Advisors should recognize diversity within the single-parent group. Some of these differences include degree of family emotional support, degree of financial support from outside sources, the age of the student’s children, the student’s age, and whether the student has been married or divorced. Encouraging students to develop relationships with faculty, as well as making students aware of appropriate campus resources are important ways for academic advisors to support single parents, along with asking students what services may be lacking for single student parents and then advocating for those services.*
c. Have the FRC and EMU Children’s Institute collaborate to offer workshops provided by campus and community leaders with focus on family development, life skills training and academic success strategies.

d. Link a Single Parent Student Organization to the FRC. Leadership from the Family Resource Center and EMU Children’s Institute could assist in the development of a parenting organization and website that will focus on advocacy and program development for student parents.

3. Mentoring/Coaching/Peer Support Program. The University will create comprehensive support program that includes mentoring, coaching and peer support elements. The program should explore the use of possible sponsors from the community and partnering with academic departments, such as Social Work, to create internships through the Family Resource Center and provide interested students with a ‘success’ coach. Framed on the Keys to Degrees coach concept, coaches would be available to aid and motivate single parents in their quest to balance school, work, child-rearing, and personal growth.