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Strategy Precedes Operational Effectiveness: Aligning High Graduation Rankings With Competitive Graduation Grade Point Averages

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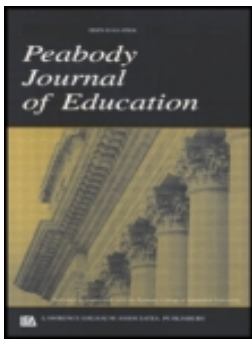


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Strategy Precedes Operational Effectiveness: Aligning High Graduation Rankings With Competitive Graduation Grade Point Averages

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Two pivotal and interconnected claims are addressed in this article. First, strategy precedes program effectiveness. Second, graduation rates and rankings are insufficient in any account of academic progress for African American students. In this article, graduation is regarded as the floor and not the ceiling, as it were. The ideal situation in the promotion of strategy is the alignment of high graduation rates or rankings with high graduation cumulative grade point averages. This strategic alignment is precisely what needs to be formulated in the first instance before making judgments about program development and/or operational effectiveness. The work of the Office of African American Affairs of the University of Virginia provides the context for observing trends in academic performance that illustrate the optimal alignment between high graduation rankings and correspondingly high grade point averages.

INTRODUCTION

The *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education (JBHE)* has for the past 20 years tracked graduation rates for African American students in U.S. colleges and universities. The University of Virginia has consistently had the highest graduation rate for African Americans in the country among its peer flagship state universities.

This article takes the view that it is not sufficient to have high graduation rates. Rather, high graduation rates must be aligned with correspondingly high graduation grade point averages (GPAs) so that graduates will have more opportunities to enter graduate and professional schools as well as competitive workplaces. It also asserts that management strategy behind academic support units in a university must precede accounts of operational effectiveness of programs. Strategy, then, must be privileged in shaping the institutional positioning that strives to advance the progress of students in higher education.

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PRIVILEGING STRATEGY

Michael E. Porter, a management strategist, asked a poignant question that has hitherto been considered a game changer. His question—“What is strategy?”—addressed in a paper by the same title, offers a snapshot of his three influential books, *Competitive Strategy* (1980), *Competitive Advantage* (1985), and *Competitive Advantage of Nations* (1990). In his 1996 paper, Porter (1996/2011) argued that companies and institutions in general need to distinguish between operational effectiveness and strategy. For Porter, both effectiveness and strategy are essential to superior performance but they work in different ways. How does he distinguish their modus operandi? “Operational effectiveness,” he explained, “means performing similar activities better than rivals perform them. . . . In contrast, strategic positioning means performing different activities from rivals’ or performing similar activities in different ways” (Porter, 1996/2011, p. 62).

Although Porter acknowledges the importance of both program effectiveness and strategy, he privileges the latter in order to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. Such strategic positioning includes six guidelines: (a) there must be a unique competitive position for the institution/company; (b) specific activities must be tailored to strategy; (c) clear trade-offs and choices must be made vis-à-vis competitors; (d) competitive advantage must arise from fit across activities; (e) sustainability must come from the activity system, not the parts; and (f) when all five indices above obtain, operational effectiveness is a given (Porter, 1996/2011). There is another vital aspect of Porter’s concept of strategic positioning: It must have a horizon of a decade or more and not a single planning cycle. This idea of a horizon allows an institution or company to observe trends and accommodate rapid responses and changes in the market as opposed to obsessively benchmarking activities of the component parts of the system and losing sight of the bigger picture and trajectory.

By focusing on how convergent parts of the system create a cumulative, high impact, the following sequence is privileged in this article: (a) identification of a strategic vision, (b) the articulation of the strategic positioning from the larger vision, (c) a strategic praxis, (d) a strategic implementation, (e) strategic consistency, and most important, (f) a strategic alignment. The following sections of this article elaborate on each of these six directions with regard to the Office of African-American Affairs of the University of Virginia (OAAA). Before turning to that task, however, let us briefly consider the historical context that made the creation of the OAAA necessary.

FROM LEGAL SEGREGATION TO A HISTORY OF HIGH GRADUATION RATES

There was a time in our history when legal segregation prevented African Americans from attending the University of Virginia. Until the mid-1950s, competitive in-state African American applicants who were qualified to matriculate at UVa were funded to study elsewhere by the state of Virginia. When the ban on the matriculation of African American students at the university and other southern institutions was lifted, the university created the OAAA to assist academic and non-academic units in meeting the challenges of delivering service to African American students.

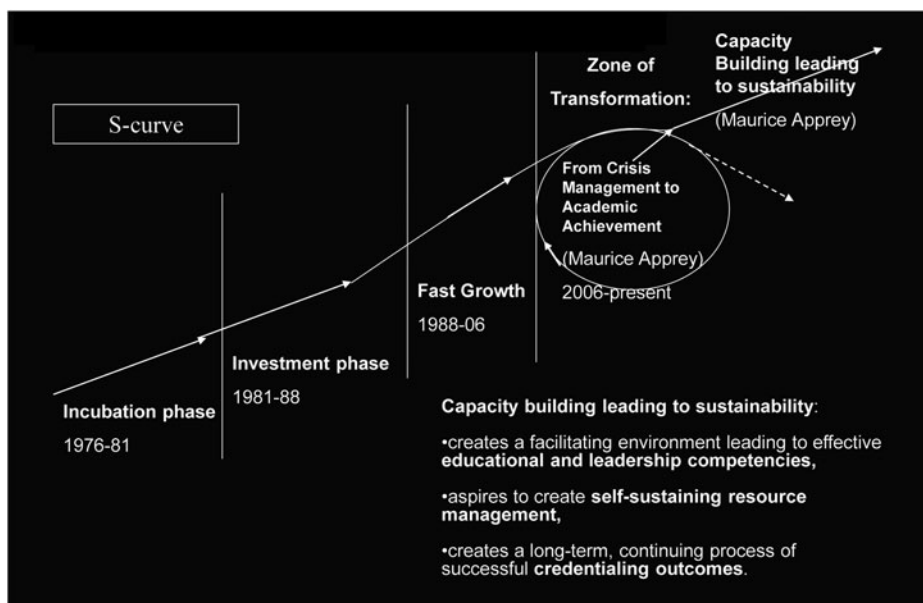


FIGURE 1 Capacity building at the Office of African-American Affairs, 2007–2012.

FROM CRISIS TO ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

With this historical backdrop noted, Figure 1 charts the progress of the OAAA from its inception in 1976 to its new focus on capacity building leading to sustainability.

By capacity building we are referring, inter alia, to three key aspects of sustainability that focus on creating educational and leadership competencies for students in a culturally sensitive environment. Along with these educational and leadership competencies, we want to create a long-term, continuing process of successful credentialing outcomes. These sustained investments are resource intensive. Therefore, there must also be development efforts that create self-sustaining resource management. In Figure 1, these three aspects of sustainability are inscribed into the zone of transformation where we move from residual sedimentations of legal segregation into academic achievement. We can see how the current work builds upon the pioneering work of previous administrators before we advance into the current period of sustained progression with capacity building leading to sustainability. In the S-curve there is the zone of transformation where we could and did advance and sustain the academic achievements reported in this article. Alternatively, there could have been strategic moves on the part of the university that could conceivably have resulted in retrogressive steps back into historically driven crises.

The zone of transformation from 2006 to the present is the specific context that locates the current set of strategic directions that fostered and continue to foster academic achievement and, most important, the alignment of high ranking with high performance.

TABLE 1
Journal of Blacks in Higher Education 6-Year Graduation Rates in Percentages

	White	Black
<i>University of Virginia</i>	94	85
<i>University of North Carolina</i>	87	76
<i>University of Georgia</i>	80	75

Source: Six-Year Graduation Rates in Percentages. (2011, December 8). *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*. Adapted with permission of *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder.

LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS

By focusing on the Office of Academic Affairs, we are self-consciously limiting our observations. The limitations of these observations mean that this study cannot answer how groups other than African American students are performing, and it cannot answer how African American students compare with other students. The delimitation—that is, the brackets or the scope within which we are observing African American student performance—allow us to address, very specifically, how we can get more African American students to enter into graduate and professional schools and competitive workplaces. For example, data from the American Association of Medical Schools indicate that the percentage of African American physicians in the United States has been below 5% over the last 40 years. Similarly the percentage of African American faculty has only moved 1 percentage point over the last 30 years to 4.1%. Our contributions at the OAAA will ultimately impact these numbers.

In this article we take the conventional view that in any systematic observation study, the clearer the limitation and the more defined the brackets, the more powerful the outcome measures will be, or the account of trends, as discussed herein.

We return now to the six directions within strategic positioning just outlined, with reference to Porter’s discussion. For the purposes of this article, the strategic vision (a) is the effort of the

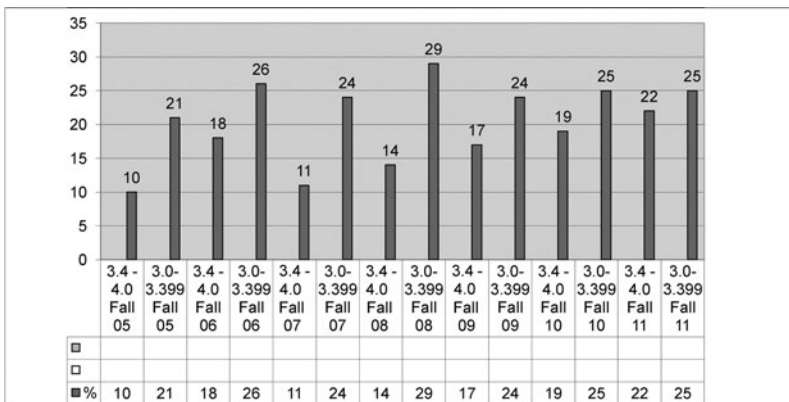


FIGURE 2 Juxtaposition of raw scores and percentages (honors and high honors).

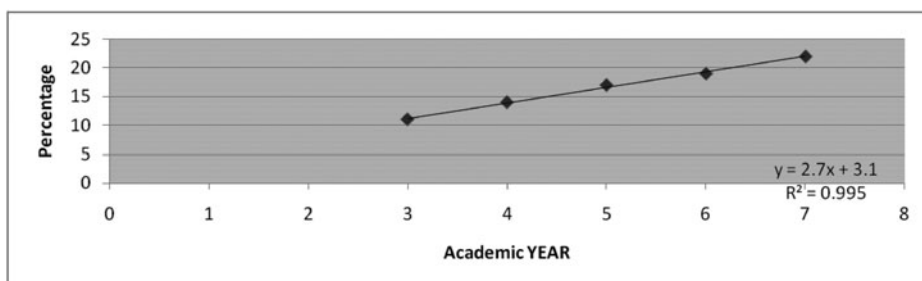


FIGURE 3 High honors students (3.4–4.0 grade point averages), Fall 2007 to Fall 2011.

OAAA to increase the number of undergraduate students in graduate and professional schools as well as in competitive workplaces upon graduation. These graduates would be in an excellent position to become future leaders. The strategic positioning (b) is the University of Virginia’s vision to maintain its high graduation rate for African Americans and its number one ranking in this regard among peer flagship state universities. In thinking about the strategic praxis (c), recall the Attic Greek meaning of “praxis” as a “turning point.” We locate this turning point early, ensuring that students start their first two semesters with strong cumulative GPAs. “The end,” as it were, “depends upon the beginning” (Manilius, 1977, Bk. IV, line 16). A strategic implementation (d) includes an informal curriculum, which addresses better decision making in course selection, tutoring, study groups, academic advising, and mentoring in a culturally sensitive environment. A key element in this cluster of strategic directions is strategic consistency (e) where the work of the OAAA is cooperative and coherent with the work of other units within the Division of Student Affairs and across the university as a whole. Finally, and most important, we must have strategic alignment (f) between high graduation rates and correspondingly high GPAs. This alignment is essential because it turns the laudable goal of high graduation rates on its head, suggesting that graduation is not the ceiling but the floor. After all, one may graduate with a GPA of, let us say, 2.2 and still not be able to enter graduate and professional schools or competitive workplaces.

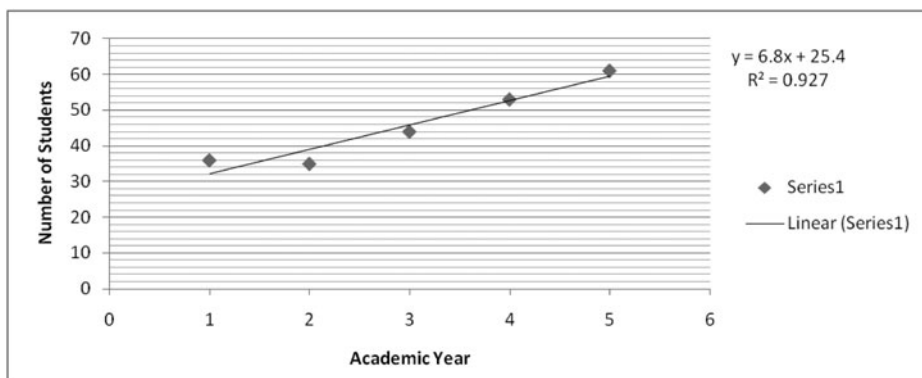


FIGURE 4 Number of students with high honors.

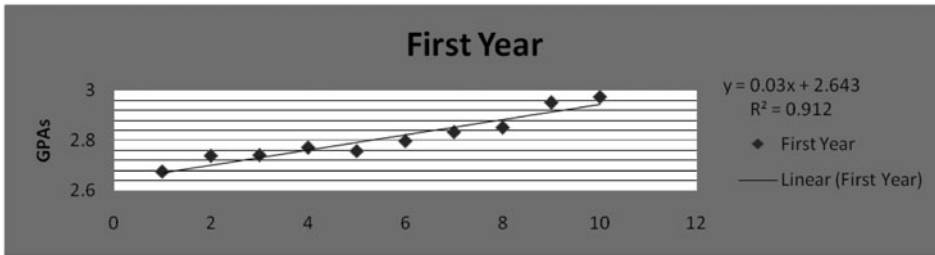


FIGURE 5 Grade point averages of first-year students.

The ethic of responsibility behind this strategic alignment at the level of policy making is that an institution must decisively position itself in ways that sustain both high graduation rates and high GPAs upon graduation. This is the strategic alignment that sustains a competitive advance in student progress within higher education.

ALIGNING GRADUATION RANKING WITH HIGH GPAs BY STARTING WITH STRONG 1ST-YEAR ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

We began with the assumption that strategy precedes any account of program effectiveness because the former drives the latter. We similarly want to align high graduation rates (84–87%) with correspondingly high graduation GPAs (3.4–4.0) because we want African American students to be both part of an institution’s excellent reputation and successful as individuals. As a result of their individual success they would attain the effective credentialing to enter graduate and professional schools and competitive workplaces.

With this noted, let us begin with an authoritative source about rankings: Every year since *JBHE* has tracked graduation rates for black students (more than 20 years), the University of Virginia has had the highest graduation rate for African Americans. This year is no exception. The Black student graduation rate of 85% at the University of Virginia is the highest of any of the nation’s flagship state universities. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is second, with a Black student graduation rate of 76%. The University of Georgia has a Black student graduation rate of 75% (“Six-Year Graduation Rates,” 2011; see Table 1).

TABLE 2
Upward Trend for 3.4 to 4.0 Groups From 2007 to 2011

	Entering Class	GPA Honors	Freq1	Year	%
3.4–4.0 Fall 07	321	36	0.11	3	11
3.4–4.0 Fall 08	248	35	0.14	4	14
3.4–4.0 Fall 09	258	44	0.17	5	17
3.4–4.0 Fall 10	275	53	0.19	6	19
3.4–4.0 Fall 11	278	61	0.22	7	22

Note. GPA = grade point average.

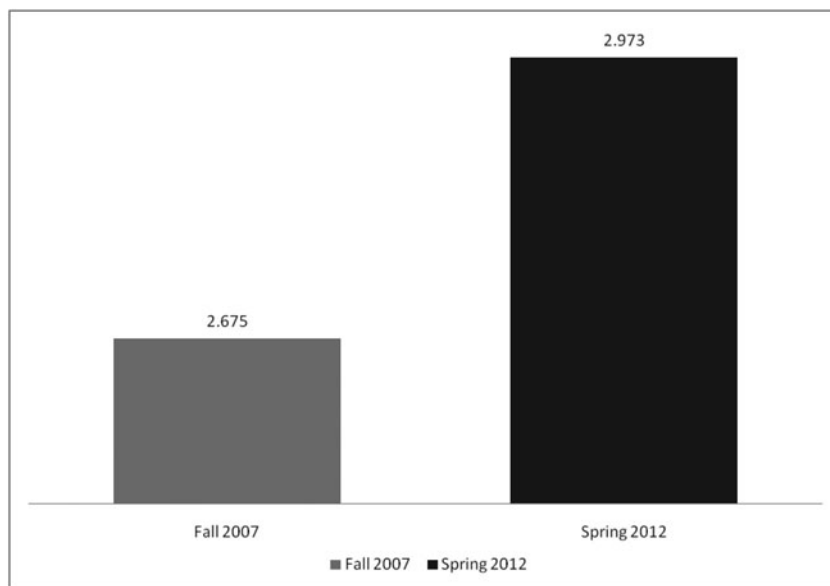


FIGURE 6 First-year students comparison cumulative grade point averages between Fall 2007 and Spring 2012.

Morimur Nascentes Finisque ab Origine Pendet: From the Moment of Our Birth We Begin to Die, and the End Depends Upon the Beginning (Manilius, 1977, IV.16)

This precept from Manilius speaks to the critical importance of a strong start on any purposeful journey. We echo this powerful statement to anchor the strategic import of early beginnings as decisive. We proceed with the strategic praxis that *the end depends upon a strong beginning*.

Figure 2 demonstrates the advancement in academic achievement of African American students with a strong GPA in two categories: 3.0–3.399 (honors) and 3.4–4.0 (high honors) from 2005 to 2011.

TABLE 3
Graduating Class of 2014

Graduating Class of 2014	No. of Semesters	Graduating Class of
2010 [Entering Class of 2010] (2.85 GPA)	After 2 = After 6	2012 [Entering Class of 2008] (2.85 GPA)
2010 [Entering Class of 2010] (2.851 GPA)	After 2 > After 7	2011 [Entering Class of 2007] (2.808 GPA)
2010 [Entering Class of 2010] (2.951 GPA)	After 2 > After 7	2010 [Entering Class of 2006] (2.802 GPA)
2010 [Entering Class of 2010] (2.851 GPA)	After 2 > After 8	2009 [Entering Class of 2005] (2.808 GPA)
2010 [Entering Class of 2010] (2.851 GPA)	After 2 > After 8	2008 [Entering Class of 2004] (2.767 GPA)
2010 [Entering Class of 2010] (2.851 GPA)	After 2 > After 8	2007 [Entering Class of 2003] (2.804 GPA)
2010 [Entering Class of 2010] (2.851 GPA)	After 2 > After 8	2006 [Entering Class of 2002] (2.833 GPA)

Note. GPA = grade point average.

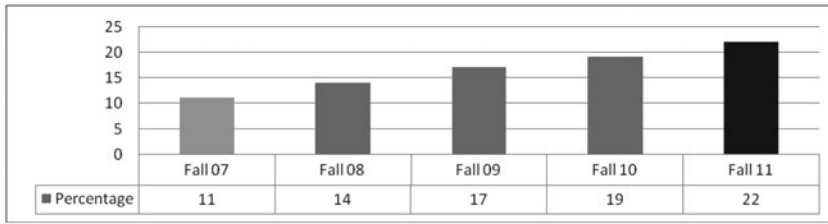


FIGURE 7 Percentage of students with grade point averages between 3.4 and 4.0 after one semester.

Because we want to increase the size of the group with a GPA above 3.4, we have separated that group from those with a GPA of 3.0 to 3.399. This separation of the two groups shows that we have the strongest indication of a linear, upward trend for the 3.4 to 4.0 groups from 2007 to 2011 (see Table 2 and Figure 3). Figure 4 shows that six to seven new students in the 3.4 to 4.0 range were added each year from 2007 to 2011.

As the size of the 3.4 to 4.0 group increases, they lift up the rest of the class toward a GPA of 3.0. Figure 5 demonstrates the upward advance for each of the beginning 1st-year classes.

Lifting Each Class Toward 3.0 as a Potential Goal Between 2005 to 2012

The R^2 indicates that the progression is linear from 2007 to 2012. Two data points compared for emphasis (see Figure 6).

MOMENTUM BUILDS

Graduating Class of 2014 as a Case Study

The Graduating Class of 2014 accomplished in two semesters what the Graduating Classes of 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2009 did in eight semesters; the Graduating Classes of 2010 and 2011 did in seven semesters; and the Graduating Class of 2012 did in six semesters (see Table 3).

TABLE 4
Graduating Class of 2015

Graduating Class of 2015	No. of Semesters	Graduating Class of
2011 [Entering Class of 2011] (2.951 GPA)	After 1 > After 6	2012 [Entering Class of 2008] (2.855 GPA)
2011 [Entering Class of 2011] (2.951 GPA)	After 1 > After 7	2011 [Entering Class of 2007] (2.808 GPA)
2011 [Entering Class of 2011] (2.951 GPA)	After 1 > After 7	2010 [Entering Class of 2006] (2.802 GPA)
2011 [Entering Class of 2011] (2.951 GPA)	After 1 > After 8	2009 [Entering Class of 2005] (2.808 GPA)
2011 [Entering Class of 2011] (2.951 GPA)	After 1 > After 8	2008 [Entering Class of 2004] (2.767 GPA)
2011 [Entering Class of 2011] (2.951 GPA)	After 1 > After 8	2007 [Entering Class of 2003] (2.804 GPA)
2011 [Entering Class of 2011] (2.951 GPA)	After 1 > After 8	2006 [Entering Class of 2002] (2.833 GPA)

Note. GPA = grade point average.



FIGURE 8 Percentage of graduating students with grade point averages between 3.4 and 4.0 after 4 years.

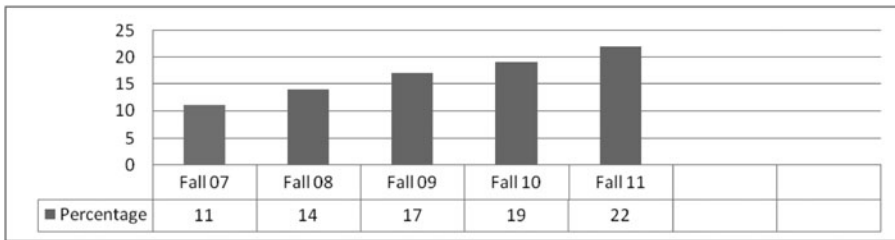


FIGURE 9 Percentage of students with grade point averages between 3.4 and 4.0 after one semester.

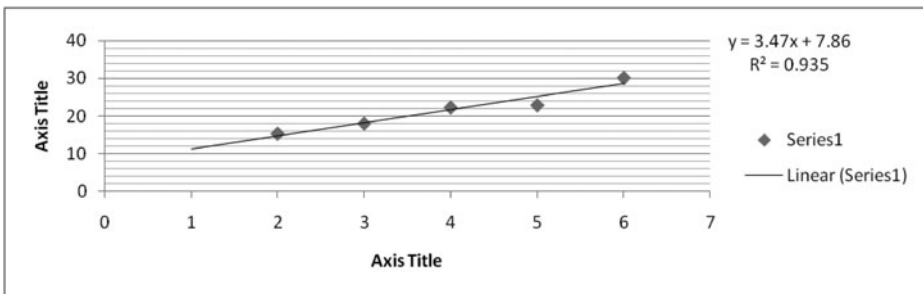


FIGURE 10 Linear representation of last five graduating 4th-year students after 4 years (showing a strategic advance toward 4.0).

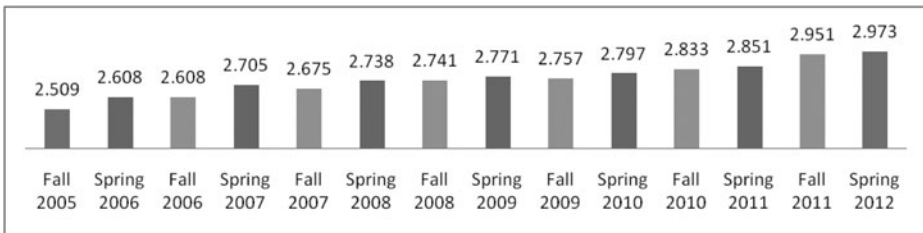


FIGURE 11 First-year students comparisons cumulative grade point averages from Fall 2005 to Spring 2012.

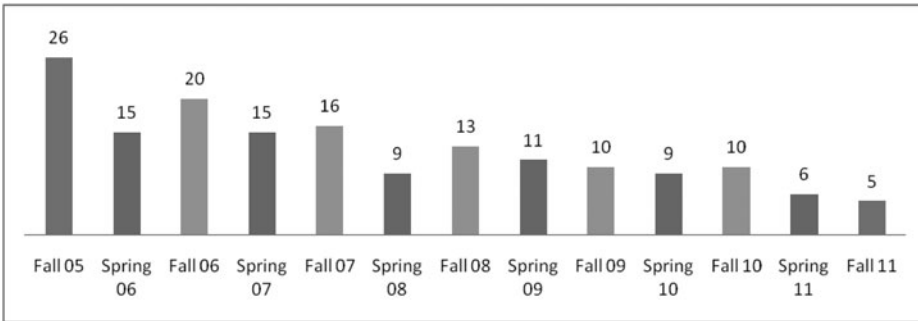


FIGURE 12 Percentage of students below 2.0 grade point average.

Graduating Class of 2015 as a Case Study

In one semester the Graduating Class of 2015 has exceeded the accomplishments of all graduating classes from 2005 to 2014 (see Table 4).

STRATEGIC IMPLEMENTATION

What did we do to accomplish these high academic results? First, we provided a *safety net* in the OAAA. This culturally sensitive environment is also resource intensive. Deans with wide-ranging backgrounds that include psychoanalysis and social-change management, higher education, chemistry, mathematics, education, and engineering staff it. The deans offer cognitive and noncognitive support to students.

Second, we provided an *informal curriculum* that addresses better decision making in course selections, use of tutoring, study groups, mentoring, and advising. For instance, before taking economics, students are advised to have a grasp of the mathematics of change (calculus) and the mathematics of chance (statistics and probability) in order to be prepared for the mathematics of

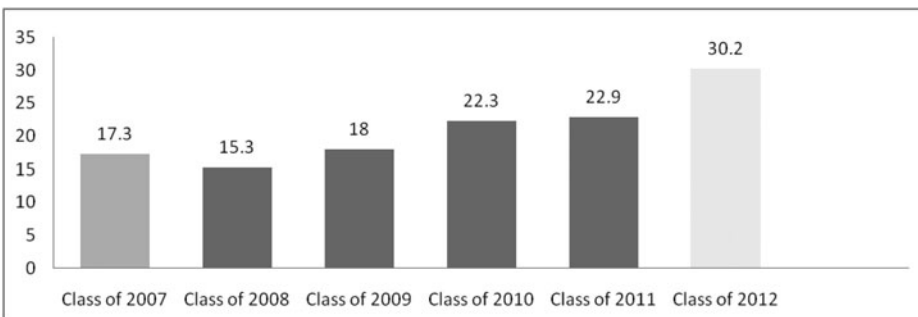


FIGURE 13 Percentage of graduating students with grade point averages 3.4 to 4.0 after 4 years.

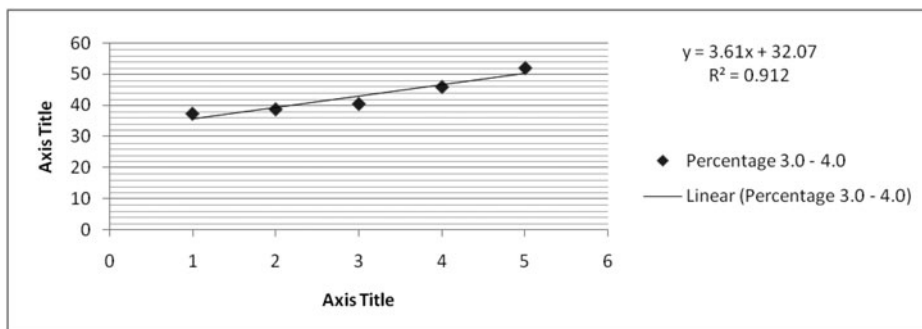


FIGURE 14 Degree recipients (grade point averages 3.0–4.0), bachelor degrees from May 2008 to May 2012.

prediction (which is key to this field of study). A number of these sequences were emphasized over and over again. These proactive steps were made at least five times before students started their 1st-year classes. As a result, some students changed course selections they had made at orientation before they matriculated. Others made adjustments after they discovered the need to make changes that they had resisted earlier. The details of the components of these support structures are described in Apprey, Preston-Grimes, Bassett, Lewis, and Rideau (2014/this issue).

SUMMARY CHARTS

Let us now review the strong start in the 1st-year students with the changes in graduation GPAs in order to see the alignment between high graduation rates and correspondingly high GPAs (see Figures 7 and 8).

We can see that as the percentage of students with GPAs between 3.4 and 4.0 after one semester increases, the percentage of students with GPAs between 3.4 and 4.0 after 4 years increases. We want a strong start, and the following R^2 shows the progressive advance (see Figure 9).

We want a strong finish at graduation, and the following R^2 shows the progressive and strategic expansion of our high honors group (see Figure 10). Parenthetically, as each class starts well, the number of students that need drastic academic support decreases. To ensure that we

TABLE 5
Aligning Graduation Rates and Grade Point Averages

Graduation Year	Degree Recipients	Percentage 3.0–4.0
Class of 2008	278	37.4
Class of 2009	307	38.8
Class of 2010	267	40.5
Class of 2011	314	45.9
Class of 2012	328	51.9

maintain and expand graduation rates, we want to be sure that no students fall below 2.0 (see Figure 11 and 12)

Correlatively, as cohorts of matriculating 1st-year students advance to 3.0, graduating GPAs for cohorts of classes begin to exceed 3.0.

Although 51.9% of the graduating class of 2012 had GPAs above 3.0, and 30.2% had GPAs above 3.4, we want to maintain and expand that high honors group in order to ensure that more students enter graduate and professional schools as well as competitive workplaces (see Figures 13 and 14 and Table 5).

CONCLUSION

Five key points are apparent from the previous discussion. First, students are now starting with strong GPAs (in the class of 2015, 47.48% were above 3.0 after one semester). Second, the strategic ascent to 3.0 and above for each graduating class has begun (in the graduating class of 2012, 30.2% were above 3.4). Third, the class of 2012 graduated as a cohort with a GPA of 3.033. Fourth, these figures constitute a more desirable alignment between high graduation rates and correspondingly high GPAs. And fifth, the decisive factor regarding sustainability is the capacity to continue to sustain the expansion of the 3.4 to 4.0 group of high honors as well as increase the number of graduating students above 3.0.

Thus, we have a data-driven catalogue of GPAs and other findings that speak to the alignment of high graduation rates with correspondingly high GPAs. We came to this alignment by ensuring that strategy precedes the creation of programs. To that end, we have ensured that the precept of the end depending on the beginning is operationalized as follows. There is a strong start to the undergraduate career. Moreover, the “honors” and “high honors” categories of strong GPAs are privileged. These are the students we are targeting for graduate and professional schools, and productive workplaces. Further, we implement strategy over a horizon of 5 or more years, rather than year-to-year programming. Finally, we cannot overemphasize here that graduation rates are not the ceiling but the floor.

AUTHOR BIOS

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