

# Missouri Completion Academy Self-Assessment Application

## Introduction

The Harris-Stowe State University administration is appreciative of the opportunity to participate in the Missouri Completion Academy. Members of the administration have reflected on the application requirements carefully and used the following methodology to prepare the institution's response.

1.) We have used the MCA Key Considerations to create a survey which was issued to 15 stakeholders at the university. Our intention was to inventory institutional knowledge to better address the key considerations provided to us.

2.) We have aggregated and analyzed survey data to determine each potential team member's willingness and ability to do the following:

- a. Commit to the project
- b. Contribute meaningfully to the pool of institutional knowledge
- c. Engage in systematic problem solving
- d. Develop creative but realistic ideas to help shape effective institutional strategy related to degree-completion goals

Each member that was selected for the HSSU team has a unique institutional perspective. Using input from all prospective team members, the following narrative is being submitted as part of our Missouri Completion Academy application.

## Section I: Completion Goals

**If your institution has established a college completion goal, please provide it and explain how it aligns with the following key considerations. If your institution has not yet established a goal, please outline your timeline and strategy for its adoption.**

Harris-Stowe State University has succeeded in making slight gains in graduation rates over the past three years, despite lower enrollments. There has been significant discussion about how the annual degree-completion goal is established and other models that might be more appropriate for the institution and the population it serves. The University has traditionally identified its completion goals through the Division of Academic Affairs, which determines how to set goals based on the previous year's outcomes. However, in 2012, the University decided to re-

evaluate its goal-setting method and began considering alternative models. HSSU believes improved models will take into account multi-year averages and variables in cohort sizes to more accurately calibrate its yearly institutional goals. The HSSU administration also believes that introducing a new model requires institution-wide conversations and consensus. Faculty and staff are currently aware that we are working to meet Missouri performance-funding expectations by steadily increasing the number of degree completions. That goal (from a performance funding perspective) is clear and unambiguous. An acknowledged area for improvement at the University is that it needs to more formally plan and articulate the steps it intends to take to achieve its college-completion goals beyond performance-funding expectations. Again, it is expected that the effort will involve input from many university stakeholders and may require up to a year to introduce in final form (July 2014).

Goal setting will address for a variety of factors related to internal and external influences. For example, current economic trends suggest that job markets offer significant opportunity in STEM-based professions. HSSU recognizes this fact and also the fact that minorities are underrepresented in those professions. The University has invested significant resources in developing STEM disciplines because the value of the degree and opportunities in STEM careers are significant. What the University is challenged by is the continuing need to remediate a large part of its incoming first-time freshmen cohorts and prepare those students for success in upper-level STEM courses. Many of HSSU's students come from underfunded public school systems that have not adequately prepared them for the rigors of college, much less disciplines in science, technology, engineering and math. The institution can succeed at filling the gaps in student knowledge to a degree; time and resources are limiting factors. College-completion goals for HSSU must account for this significant challenge.

Additionally, HSSU wishes to establish goals that extend beyond degree-completion numbers. Namely, the University community is committed to helping its students achieve work-place readiness through relevant, contemporary program curriculums. Employer surveys suggest that qualified, competent minority graduates are highly desirable to organizations wishing to improve diversity. This is true in the professional marketplace as well as academia. HSSU administrators believe that it is not enough to graduate a student; it is equally crucial that the graduate be equipped with meaningful skillsets that are valued by the professions in which they are employed. Simply graduating a student with a degree but not the competencies to succeed in the open market does little good. Establishing supporting goals to ensure that degrees are a true reflection of work readiness is a process that involves authentic assessments. Harris-Stowe State University recognizes that opportunities

such as the Missouri Completion Academy offer the chance to expand the conversation by engaging with other state institutions about how their college-completion goals are tied to assessments of graduates entering the job market.

## **Section II: Common Completion Metrics**

**Have you completed an analysis of your baseline data and key findings? If so, please share your findings. If not, please indicate your timeline for doing so.**

HSSU continuously analyzes its completion data. Much of the *course*-completion data we collect is used to improve retention rates which, in turn, drive degree completions. The University has improved its graduation rates over several years but foresees challenges due to declining enrollment in the five-year trend. It is for this reason that HSSU must consider cohort enrollment data in its overall assessment of college-completion goals. It is an institutional priority to assess and recommend changes in the way that the University identifies meaningful performance metrics. The HSSU-MCA team is expected to not only identify a method for establishing the university's college-completion goal but to also devise accountability recommendations for the campus community to consider, which will help the institution reach future goals.

One of the strengths of the University is that it graduates a significant percentage of African-American students (both male and female) as compared to other institutions in Missouri. We do recognize that this is the primary population we serve, but we feel that the HBCU environment (which focuses on developing underprepared, underserved students) has more to offer and can serve diverse populations successfully. We see great promise with our burgeoning STEM programs. We are able to obtain strong grant support for these programs and expect excellent employment and educational prospects for students of all races who are invested in the programs. However, with our STEM programs, it is too early for HSSU to definitively determine the effectiveness of the developmental curriculums we've put in place to support STEM. This will come in time as the first true cohorts graduate students within these programs.

HSSU has made small gains in graduation rates in the past decade. What we have observed (and continue to study with great interest) is the variability of graduation rates for male and female African-American students. In general, we are observing small fluctuations (both increases and decreases) in degree-completion rates. The fluctuations are not outside normal expectations for our institution. What has HSSU more concerned is recent retention data for female students, which is negatively trending. We predict that this specific retention issue will affect future performance data over the next 12-36 months if we are unable to successfully address the causes of attrition in the female student population. It is inconsistent with national trends, and we have not definitively identified the driving force behind the trend, if one exists.

As with any university, the process of implementing policies to increase degree-completion can be time consuming and take years before becoming fully effective. For example, in 2011, the University's Board of Regents approved a change in the institution's tuition schedule. The change was advantageous to the entire student population, allowing students to take up to sixteen credit hours at the price of twelve. It was hoped that the change would provide an economic incentive for students to complete programs more quickly. To date, the evidence is not showing a significant difference in how students are using the revised tuition structure to progress through programs at a faster rate. However, the University believes that there are ways to improve outcomes of initiatives like this one through more outreach. The university is patient when it comes to strategies that best achieve positive and sustainable outcomes.

### **Section III: Completion Strategies**

#### **What strategies are you employing or considering to reduce time-to-degree and to accelerate student success?**

Harris-Stowe State University has several initiatives to assist students with reducing their time to complete a degree.

In 2011-12, the president of HSSU asked that all academic units review and revise their programs to reduce the number of hours needed to obtain a bachelor's degree. The goal is to limit degree requirements to 120 hours (or as close as possible while still maintaining compliance). Program reviews and changes are ongoing; however, the majority of the institution's degree programs have been significantly revised to accommodate the goal.

Moving forward, the institution is seeking to implement a degree-audit system, which is a prerequisite to implementing an online academic planning tool for students. Both initiatives will provide students and their advisors with the ability to explore 'what-if' scenarios and to map a path to degree completion as early as the freshman year. Regardless of the degree path a student chooses, we believe that implementing a degree-audit system alongside an online academic-planning tool will allow our students to better chart and monitor personal progress. Completing these projects exists as part of the institutional strategic roadmap over the next three years. One of the ideas that the institution is considering is embedding academic planning in the college-readiness courses that all incoming first-time freshmen take. The outcome the university is expecting is that students will understand how degree-path changes impact long-range academic goals. Academic planning software will output data that show students how changing from one program to another may add to their requirements and delay degree attainment. Students will be able to work with counselors to estimate the financial impact of their decisions as well. University administrators believe that data-driven academic planning will help students develop

a better awareness of the financial advantages of moving quickly through remedial courses.

One of the possible keys to improved degree-completion outcomes may also be found in more formal faculty advising with HSSU students, widening mentorship programs (currently in place with STEM students), and revising the curriculums in basic skills courses. Block scheduling has been discussed as well as embedding remediation in degree-path course offerings. The university has some concerns about the risk associated with integrating such a large population of remedial students into mainstream courses too early. Such efforts may not have the same outcomes seen at schools with better-prepared cohorts. There are tipping points for any strategy at which effectiveness is lost. HSSU tries to carefully guard against assuming that tactics can be universally applied effectively across all institutions.

The University's Center for Retention and Student Success has been deploying strategies to decrease the time a student needs to attain competencies requisite to higher-level courses. Specifically, the university is investing in on-demand, developmental tools designed to rapidly enhance student competencies in remedial math and reading. The University believes there is more work to be done here.

Competency-based program designs are being discussed at HSSU as part of the long-range strategy of the institution. In a sense, HSSU has been piloting competency-based remediation models since 2011 when it introduced MyLabsPlus in the HSSU Center for Retention and Student Success. The system measures student competencies through an iterative process that promotes mastery over basic college skills in math and reading. Students progress at their own pace (generally with the close assistance of CRSS staff). The efficacy of MyLabsPlus has not yet been determined, as the first cohorts are moving through the system.

Currently the vast majority of the institution's incoming freshmen take placement tests to determine their skill level upon beginning their college studies. Areas for student remediation are identified during testing, and students work with their advisors to develop a schedule that addresses any areas of remediation that are needed. Accurate placement is crucial to student success. The university has, in the past, offered a summer-academy program which allows first-time freshmen to take college-preparatory courses in smaller cohorts, then retest for placement at the beginning of the fall semester. The goal of the effort is to remediate as much as possible prior to the start of their college career.

Probably the most significant challenge that the institution currently faces is retention (as we've already indicated). By examining student responses on attrition surveys, the institution has found that the majority of students who leave before completing

their degree do so for financial reasons. This attrition cause is difficult to address for any institution. Many students understand the value of a college degree but must prioritize family needs. The average age of graduates in the 2013 class was just over 30 (compared to the state average of approximately 24). It is important to understand that the population Harris-Stowe State University serves (by mission definition) often comes to the university with existing financial stresses found less frequently in traditional student populations. Our most successful students not only tend to be older but they also take a little more time to successfully navigate a degree path. In short, future strategies to increase degree completion at HSSU will have to account for the financial challenges of the students HSSU serves. Major initiatives such as putting in a data-driven retention management system have not worked as well as the institution had hoped. However, there is a deeper awareness of the financial challenges that our students continue to face. We are also developing a growing awareness that personal priorities and academic priorities are not always compatible in the minds of students (and especially first-time freshmen).

In conclusion, administrators, faculty, and staff at Harris-Stowe State University, believe there are always opportunities to improve outcomes and to invest in high-value strategies that improve college-completion rates. We have a good understanding of why students exit the institution, and (more than ever) the institution is measuring outcomes and attitudes to better assess the strategies we use to improve college-completion rates. We believe that there is a 'right' college or university for almost any qualified student. We also believe that colleges and universities in the state of Missouri offer diverse opportunities and that collectively we can develop transfer agreements which permit students to obtain their degree or certification at the institution that best suits their educational needs. It is our hope to attend the Missouri Completion Academy and openly discuss challenges and opportunities that other state institutions are identifying.

#### **Section IV: Commitment to the Completion Agenda**

##### **Harris-Stowe State University proposes to send the following team to the Missouri Completion Academy:**

Dr. Dwyane Smith, Vice President for Academic Affairs

Dr. LaTisha Smith, Dean of the College of Education

Dr. Fatemah Zakery, Dean of the Anheuser-Busch School of Business

James Fogt, Executive Director of IT Services, Assessment, and Institutional Research

Heather Bostic, Executive Director of Title III and Sponsored Programs

Anne Grice, Director of the Center for Retention and Student Success

Carla Lee, Director of Advising

Meaghan Effan, Coordinator for Institutional Research