BROOKLYN COLLEGE RETENTION TASK FORCE

SUMMARY OF
MAJOR FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For the purpose of discussion, the findings and recommendations of the Brooklyn College Retention Task Force have been organized into five major categories—Communications, Policies, and Planning Tools; Comprehensive and Cohesive Academic Advisement; Faculty and Teaching; High-Impact Programs; and Recommendations Regarding Implementation.

I. COMMUNICATIONS, POLICIES, AND PLANNING TOOLS

Concern #1: There are too many competing sources of information about degree and program requirements. Students, faculty, advisors, and Registrar’s staff do not always share a common understanding of degree and program requirements.

Recommendation(s) #1: Initiate a comprehensive review of the means by which the College communicates degree and program requirements:
- Ensure that there is a single, recognized college wide resource on approved degree and program requirements that is highly accessible, accurate, and current and used by everyone—students, faculty and staff alike.
- Ensure that degree audit tools are accurate and current and correlate with the published degree and program requirements.
- Continue to promote wide use of degree audit tools (e.g., Degree Progress or successor application) at all points in the student’s career and provide training for students, faculty and staff in the use of these tools.
- Change the recommended threshold for students to file an official degree audit in the Registrar’s Office from 90 credits to 75 credits.

Concern #2: Degree and program requirements change too frequently and go into effect too often.

Recommendation(s) #2: Establish a single annual effective date, preferably the start of each fall semester, for all new programs and for all changes that affect program and degree requirements. Ensure that students, faculty and staff have access to the full range of possible effective program and degree requirements for each program.

Concern #3: Students cannot reliably predict when required courses will be offered beyond the current semester and cannot engage in long-term planning. Academic departments have no reliable means of predicting the number of students who will require advanced courses over time and can not provide information about projected schedules beyond the current semester.

Recommendation(s) #3: Implement a major curriculum mapping initiative and require each department to publish a projected two-year cycle of course offerings.

Concern #4: Dealing with personal and financial emergencies can pose serious impediments to students in their progress toward graduation. The management of personal finances, and especially navigation of financial aid rules, is a major factor in persistence. Some students need assistance in building a financial plan that sustains them through graduation. Other students require counseling, health services, and other support as they face unexpected life crises.
Recommendation(s) #4:

- Implement a financial literacy program option for students to build a personal financial plan, to learn the rules and regulations of various financial aid programs, to learn how to manage their course and program choices to maximize benefits, and to learn how to manage cash flow as it relates to receipt of their financial aid awards.
- Ensure that all faculty and staff advisors understand the potential impact of financial aid regulations as they relate to curriculum planning and course selection every semester.
- Establish and publicize an easily accessible, consolidated (i.e., one-stop) student personal resource page for all students with resource information that addresses available services to support students who are experiencing personal and financial emergencies.

Concern #5: The large and growing number of student appeals heard by the Faculty Council Committee on Course and Standing (as reflected in its 2008-09 Annual Report) creates stressful situations for students (often in their last semesters) and consumes faculty and CAASS time that could be better invested in student advisement.

Recommendation(s) #5: Routinely monitor the disposition of student appeals to ensure that improvements in communicating degree and program requirements are having the desired effect. Identify additional improvements and work with appropriate governance bodies and administrative offices to resolve identified issues.

II. COMPREHENSIVE AND COHESIVE ACADEMIC ADVISEMENT

NATIONAL BEST PRACTICE FINDING:

Frequent and proactive advisement is an essential pillar of a successful institutional retention program.

Concern #6: On average, the one-year retention rate for first-time, full-time Brooklyn College freshmen who do not participate in structured programs (e.g., Honors Academy, BA-MD, Presidential Scholars Program, SEEK, etc.) is 10% lower than the one-year retention rates for students who find a community, a home, and an identity within one of the College's structured programs.

Recommendation(s) #6: Gradually expand the number and variety of freshman learning communities to eventually include all first year students not otherwise affiliated with a special program. Focus initial expansion efforts on engaging students who meet minimum SAT and GPA admissions requirements (and whose one-year retention rates tend to be lower than those of other members of their admissions cohort) in freshman learning communities.

Concern #7: The mean one-year retention rate of first-time, full-time freshmen over the period fall 2004 to fall 2008 was 77.8% and the mean two-year retention rate for first-time, full-time freshmen over the same period was 66.5%. Clearly, as reported by BC students in the 2009 Princeton Review, “it [has been] easier to get in here than to stay in.”

Recommendation(s) #7: Focus on the experience of the unaffiliated second year student and create a structure that helps second year students successfully transition to the major and upper division status:
• Expand the services of CAASS to include a Second Year Specialist whose responsibilities would parallel those of the First Year Specialist but who would lead college efforts in defining a second year student program that encourages students to explore and to become independent and to engage in High-Impact Programs (see IV. High Impact Programs) designed to address their specific needs.

• Pilot a second year student support project directed by the Second Year Specialist. Target unaffiliated second year students who have not yet declared a major. Utilize the successful SEEK Program CUNY CAP model (wherein trained graduate students providing mentoring and guidance and extend the reach of the advisor).

**Concern #8:** Students, particularly those who have had to repeat introductory major courses, require additional support in the process of selecting a major.

**Recommendation(s) #8:** Focus on the activity of selecting a major and initiating study in the major:

• Develop a more elaborate protocol for supporting undeclared, unaffiliated students in major selection that is based on expanded partnership among academic departments, CAASS, and the Magner Center. Ensure that this program addresses the needs of students who entered BC as first-time full-time freshmen AND as transfer students.

• Develop a new protocol for supporting students who have selected a major but have failed introductory courses in their chosen major. Encourage them to explore other options for success. Engage the CAASS, the Magner Center and academic departments in developing and implementing this new protocol. Ensure that this program addresses the needs of students who entered BC as first-time full-time freshmen AND as transfer students.

• Consider abolishing the practice of declaring a major online or revising it to include approval by a faculty advisor.

**Concern #9:** Transfer students do not receive timely evaluation of their advanced standing and are at risk of wasting their initial semesters at the College.

**Recommendation(s) #9:** Improve and publicize transition support for transfer students:

• Continue efforts to streamline the transcript evaluation process for all entering transfer students.

• Assemble, publish and maintain all articulation agreements with primary transfer sending institutions.

• Engage academic departments and, eventually staff resources within the proposed new school structure, in creating specialized services for transfer students. Especially, ensure that faculty advisors are available to support entering transfer student advisement and registration.

**Concern #10:** One of the most significant elements missing from the current system of advisement is the integration and coherence of the advisement mechanisms available on campus. Transition from affiliation with CAASS as a new or undeclared student to advisement in the major is not always clearly articulated. The quality of advisement services within the various academic departments varies greatly. Students do not see advisors often enough in the course of their undergraduate careers.

**Recommendation(s) #10:** Continue to emphasize the importance of a coherent academic advisement strategy that bridges from the first and second college years to the major department. Expand collaboration between academic departments and CAASS:

• Continue and expand the Smart-to-Finish programs that provide faculty advisors with basic knowledge of college wide advisement policies, issues, and concerns. Ensure that these sessions alert faculty advisors to financial aid regulations that relate to course and program selection.
• Institute specialized training within the New Faculty Orientation program for new faculty who wish to serve as academic advisors within their departments.
• Invest professional advisor positions in each of the proposed new school structures to extend the reach of faculty advisors within the school and to assist in coordinating department- and school-based advisement programs with CAASS.
• Encourage departments to strengthen and assess their major academic advisement programs within a retention framework.
• Capitalize on successful peer mentoring models to expand the reach of both CAASS and departmental advisors. Design and implement a pilot peer-mentoring program as a proof of concept.

Concern #11: CUNY has identified a university-wide trend toward an increase in the number of students who graduate with 120+ credits.

Recommendation(s) #11: Identify the extent to which this is a problem at BC and what factors contribute to the problem. Based on results, implement an advisement stop on the registration of all students who have amassed 130 undergraduate credits.

III. FACULTY AND TEACHING

NATIONAL BEST PRACTICE FINDING:

An ENGAGED FACULTY that interacts with students both inside and outside of the classroom is the single most important asset of an institutional retention program.

Recommendation(s) #12: Promote a cultural change aimed at highlighting the importance of faculty engagement with students among the obligations of the faculty, including providing quality advising and developing and implementing high-impact activities (see IV. High-Impact Programs below). Address the issue of how faculty engagement is valued.

Recommendation(s) #13: Each academic department should assess its gateway and introductory courses within a retention framework to identify and address potential obstacles to student success. Student evaluations should be a major element of this assessment activity.

Recommendation(s) #14: Identify effective new pedagogies that support student success in gateway courses, assist faculty in implementing them and continue to provide high-quality learning support programs that are closely coordinated with the new approaches:

• Sustain and expand training and support for faculty interested in introducing these new pedagogies into their courses and evaluate results to achieve course specific models of best teaching practice.
• Intensify collaboration between academic departments and the Learning Center to ensure that student success in gateway and introductory courses is addressed through coordinated and well-publicized support programs.
• Widely implement proven best teaching practices in gateway courses throughout the College.
IV. HIGH-IMPACT PROGRAMS

NATIONAL BEST PRACTICE FINDINGS:

_Students who are presented with a rich set of options for advancing their independence, broadening their worldview, and achieving their goals are engaged, excited, and invested in their student careers. High-impact programs involve students with faculty, staff and peers around substantive matters; enable students to experience others from diverse backgrounds; provide a framework for exploring a wide spectrum of career options; provide students with feedback about academic performance; foster understanding of how learning is applied to a variety of personal, career and societal circumstances; and offer students the opportunity to participate in what can be life-changing experiences._

BROOKLYN COLLEGE FINDINGS:

The College offers a full spectrum of high-impact programs such as internships, community- and place-based learning opportunities, study abroad programs, undergraduate research projects, honors societies and Greek lettered organizations, student leadership development programs, and nationally recognized civic engagement programs. While the range is impressive, the programs are not intentionally linked and promoted to students as opportunities that will enhance their success. Nor is there a recommended or defined ladder of high-impact program experiences that students should consider as they progress through their undergraduate careers.

_**Recommendation(s) #15:** Create, package, and promote a cohesive high-impact program that incorporates existing efforts into a comprehensive student success program:_

- Assess the effectiveness of existing high-impact practices such as internships, study abroad, community and place-based learning, service learning, student research opportunities.
- Implement program improvements and expand programs based on planning and assessment.
- Develop a comprehensive and multi-layered framework for promoting high-impact programs and publicize the proven value of high-impact programs to students in every possible venue.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING IMPLEMENTATION

It is strongly recommended that a small Student Success Steering Committee be appointed to oversee the implementation of the actions recommended by the President’s Task Force on Retention and Graduation. The first task of the Steering Committee should be to identify an action plan for 2010-2011 that will be initiated in fall 2010 and will result in a series of measurable outcomes by June 2011. The Steering Committee should then develop a long-term plan of action for the more complex and resource-intensive recommendations and share it with the college community. The Steering Committee should also monitor progress and issue regular updates to the entire college community.

It is also strongly recommended that a Student Success Incentive Fund to support the development of demonstration projects leading to improved student retention and graduation outcomes be identified as part of the long-range implementation strategy. Criteria for award of such incentive funds should include the strength of the proposed project’s assessment model and the potential impact of the project—e.g., all first year students, all majors in a given subject, etc.