

STRENGTHENING A CULTURE OF ATTENTION

Report of the President's Task Force on Retention

March 2024

I. Introduction – Mission and Charge

In the fall of 2022, President Reveley announced the formation of a Retention Task Force, chaired by Dr. Jennifer Green, Associate Vice President for Enrollment Management and Student Success, and Dr. Wade Edwards, Associate Dean, Cook-Cole College of Arts & Sciences. Other members of the Task Force included Justin Pope, Vice President and Chief of Staff; Cam Patterson, Vice President for Student Affairs; Dr. Mike Mucedola, Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Health, Recreation, Kinesiology; Quincy Goodine, Associate Director of Leadership and Multicultural Affairs; and Melissa Shepherd, Assistant Vice President for University Analytics.

The Task Force was charged with 1) providing a clearer picture of first-to-second year retention that would be helpful and practical for a range of stakeholders across the university, and 2) making recommendations for improvement. President Reveley emphasized that retention is an issue that touches on almost every part of the University. While there is important work underway within individual divisions, notably Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, and Strategic Operations, our comprehensive retention efforts would benefit from a “fresh eyes” approach that tries to look across divisions. He also encouraged particular emphasis on Year 1-Year 2 retention of full-time, first-time-in-college students, which has national measures. The purpose here is to provide focus to an inquiry that might otherwise sprawl too widely to be practical, and because attention to this group will naturally have benefits that ripple across the university.

The report that follows outlines the Task Force's process, goals, findings and recommendations. We have titled this document, “Strengthening a Culture of Attention,” to highlight the university's already solid starting position and to acknowledge the ethos of attentiveness that has long been a hallmark of the university. Before the Task Force was formed, various units across campus were independently making meaningful adjustments to increase the rate of retention. To cite just three among a range of other important efforts: Academic Affairs created retention dashboards for each department; Student Success streamlined the academic coaching program for first-year students; and the QEP focused, in part, on the

academic advising of new students. The Task Force recognizes these multiple, positive, independent efforts and recommends their continuation, assessment and fine-tuning.

Overall, the best path forward is to build on the strong culture and practices already underway rather than create complex new structures and efforts. However, we do believe that Longwood can and must increase first-year retention from current levels, and we have worked to suggest a broader range of steps to create a campus retention culture that is more than the sum of its parts. The university already pays close attention to the success of first-year students. Our goal has been to suggest additional direction, driven by data and our inquiries across campus, for focusing our attention more effectively.

We have undertaken this work with a commitment to avoid simply suggesting “more, more, more” – more programs, more resources, more work. We know resources are finite, and for any new idea there is an opportunity cost of time, energy and financial resources that could be deployed elsewhere. Retention should be a top-tier focus at Longwood, but we must be smart and targeted in our approach – so that such efforts do not come at the expense of other important endeavors. The recommendations we make that do require investment reflect our belief that these particular areas have the most potential to return such investment by improving retention.

PROCESS

The Retention Task Force met most Thursday afternoons starting in the late fall of 2022 and over the course of the next two semesters. For most meetings we invited a panel of faculty/staff for focused but flexible and extended conversation on aspects of retention. These included, among others, two extensive discussions with Student Affairs staff, a meeting with leadership of the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), multiple meetings with staff from consulting firm Kennedy & Co. to discuss data findings, and a meeting with the Associate Director of Enrollment Management & Student Success Waleed Ahmed. The full task force also had two separate meetings with groups of students: one with Peer Mentors and other student leaders, and a second meeting with students who were identified as having come to Longwood with certain risk factor “flags” for not retaining but had nonetheless been academically successful. The goal of that meeting was to hear directly from students what factors they felt had made a difference in their persistence at Longwood. While it is sometimes more elusive, we believe working to understand why students stay – not just why others leave – is important. Also, in order to more efficiently collect feedback, Task Force members met individually with a variety of faculty and staff who serve in various advising roles across campus and reported back to the group on those conversations.

In addition to the focus principally on retention of first-year, full-time students – from fall-to-spring semesters, and from freshman to sophomore year – we also note that issues surrounding “summer melt,” an area of intensive focus for Admissions and Student Success, are distinctive and may warrant separate attention. Because of the known connection to student success and retention, we do touch on the summer before students arrive in the areas of the report where we address the transition into college, such as advising and coaching groups. But overall, our focus is on retaining first-year students once they arrive on campus.

STARTING POINTS

We undertook our work with some important stipulations. The first is that academic rigor is fundamental to the strength of the university and essential for our students. There may be room for improvement where excessively complex processes have become outdated and serve as unnecessary obstacles to retention. But trying to improve retention by somehow “making Longwood easier” would be not just contrary to the university’s mission, but impractical and likely counterproductive.

A second stipulation concerns the findings of an overwhelming body of research nationally, which we did not feel necessary to test: that human connection is among the very most important variables in helping students persist through college, and that facilitating such connections – among students, and between students and faculty and staff – should be a primary goal. Certainly, that notion was validated during our conversations, particularly with students, who consistently reported an essential element of their sticking with Longwood had been “finding their people” – though that meant different things for different individuals.

Lastly, we have no intention of suggesting the way to improve retention at Longwood is to change our mission, or in any fundamental way the kind of students we enroll, as some other institutions have tried. Only a handful of institutions nationally achieve retention and 6-year graduation rates in the 90-percent-plus range. Such figures are possible only at institutions with highly selective admissions. Longwood should continue to accept only students it believes can succeed academically, but we recognize inevitably that some will not. Our goal is building up a culture of attention, helping focus efforts that can move the needle toward retaining more first-year students who have the potential to succeed.

That said, we must not lose sight of the fact that retention can and must improve, even if progress is likely to take time. There is an exceptional degree of waste and loss – for the institution, and for individuals and families – that stems from roughly one in five students not retaining here beyond freshman year. We believe there are students who could persist if they had more targeted help, a deeper network of connections, and adjustments to practices and policies that affect struggling students. We are confident that with creativity, innovation, commitment and energy, progress is possible and should be our goal.

GOALS

Longwood’s short- and medium-term goal should be an increase of a few percentage points in our first-year retention rate, which should lead over a longer time horizon to improvements in overall graduation rates (if it does not, that will warrant future examination of a different set of issues particular to students beyond their first year).

An average increase of one percentage point annually over the next five years would be ambitious, particularly as we enroll cohorts whose K-12 years were deeply affected by Covid, the after-effects of which will be visible for many years to come. The obvious challenges of this generation of students may require considerable effort simply to hold retention constant. Another challenge is that there could be downward pressure on our retention rate stemming from the new flexibility surrounding the NCAA Transfer Portal. This could lead more first-year student-athletes to transfer. This does not necessarily mean it will negatively affect overall enrollment, as more student-athletes may also transfer in, but it could weigh on our first-year retention metric.

Those challenges make concerted focus on retention all the more necessary. Change on approximately that scale – an average improvement of one percentage point annually over five years – amounts to fewer than a dozen students per cohort per year. But on a compounding basis, that would be significant. And it is critical to note that the steps that would lead to any such improvement in retention rates would inevitably have benefits for a wider range of students – those who are not necessarily in danger of leaving Longwood, but who might fare better, both in and out of the classroom.

As for the work of this Task Force, we know there is an increasing appetite for retention data. Accordingly, we are working with campus partners to develop a retention dashboard shared with leaders across the university each semester with general retention information. We are also working to ensure that the program-specific retention dashboards already in place for department chairs and deans evolve to

meet their needs for decision-making purposes. The other goal of our work has been to produce a set of findings and recommendations in a report shared with campus, which follows.

II. Findings

The following are our topline conclusions about retention at Longwood based on this data and our broader inquiry – the main ideas we think the broad Longwood community of faculty and staff should have in mind about retention. The appendices to this report include a more detailed statistical overview, built jointly by Kennedy & Co. and University Analytics, including more detailed statistical analysis of sub-groups, and detailed “Decision Tree” analysis which highlights the factors that correlate most strongly with retention among particular cohorts.

1. After an inconsistent and at times negative stretch, overall retention has trended in a positive direction with the two most recent cohorts, arriving in fall 2021 and fall 2022.

Patterns for retention rates in recent years defy easy characterization due to a range of variables. Overall, however, Longwood’s retention trends have fallen within fairly narrow bounds of a few percentage points. Retention declined with two larger freshman cohorts in 2017 and 2018, and there is some evidence that the composition of those cohorts included higher percentages of populations known to be challenging to retain. After a brief recovery with the smaller 2019 entering cohort, retention was again negatively impacted for the entering fall 2020 cohort, the one most affected by Covid restrictions, which made it far more challenging to build the kinds of connections in the classroom and beyond that are essential to retention.

The most recent cohorts have seen an improvement in Year 1-Year 2 retention, from 73 percent in fall 2020, to 76 percent in fall 2021, to 78 percent in fall 2022. There was also an encouraging trajectory with regards to Pell-eligible students and in some, though not all, sub-groups of the cohort (see finding 3 below). The trend of the last two years leads us to believe that, in broadest terms, we have a strong culture surrounding retention; the challenge we face is improving, not overhauling, our efforts. Our confidence in this finding is strengthened by early positive indicators of academic performance for the incoming freshman class in Fall 2023. Ninety-two percent of first-year students returned for the second semester. Additionally, substantially fewer first-year students were in academic difficulty (probation or suspension) after their first semester.

See Appendix I “Top-Line Retention Trend”

2. Taking account of our students and their risk factors, Longwood does relatively well with retention and graduation compared to other institutions.

We should not settle when it comes to still-substantial numbers of freshmen who do not return. However, institutions with comparable student bodies provide important context, and should reinforce our confidence that we need to build on a strong culture, not start from scratch.

Overall, Longwood has important natural strengths in terms of fostering a healthy culture of retention and progress toward graduation. This is apparent in a metric developed by *US News* to estimate a “predicted” graduation rate for institutions based on incoming student characteristics such as academic performance, Pell percentage, and percentage of underrepresented minorities. *US News* calculates this predicted graduation rate, then compares the institution’s actual 6-year graduation rate to what is expected. On this

comparison, as captured at the last calculation about a year ago, Longwood fares well compared to other public institutions in the Commonwealth. It also fares well compared to its *US News* cohort groups (third of 15 among public 4-year institutions in Virginia; No. 5 of 58 among public regional universities in the South; and 13th out of all 135 regional universities in the South). Taken together, this paints a picture of an institution with habits and a culture that are supportive of students who may need extra attention to help them to succeed.

See Appendix II, “Comparative Expected Graduation Rates.”

3. Longwood has relatively small gaps in retention performance for most groups broadly considered “at-risk.” However, these gaps will require continued attention and progress.

We have focused in particular on underrepresented minority groups (URMs) and students from low-income families (Pell Grant recipients). While there has been some notable progress with some groups in the last two cohorts, others have remained flat.

For the Hispanic, Pell-eligible, and first-gen cohorts, there has been progress in the last few years; there is only a small gap between their retention rates and the overall student body. For Black students, though, the retention rate has been flatter. The fall 2022 cohort remained behind the overall average (70 percent versus 78 percent overall).

There was a particularly noticeable retention issue for Asian-American students from 2015-2022; the retention rate was just 64 percent on average from 2015-2021. This represents a relatively small sample size, and there may be some measurement considerations. While this population had a substantially higher retention rate in 2022, this finding underscores the need to regularly review the various subpopulations’ performance, so we are able to quickly evaluate and appropriately respond before a one-year change becomes a multi-year trend.

Overall, the retention rate for students on Pell has nearly caught up with the overall rate. This is a noteworthy achievement, but will require sustained effort to maintain. The Fall 2023 freshman cohort includes a substantial increase in Pell students over previous years. Longwood has shown that it can retain and graduate Pell students as successfully as other students. Yet, any gap in the Pell retention rate will have an increased negative impact on our overall rate going forward because the overall student body will likely include a higher proportion of Pell students.

Even with the recent improvements, it is important to note that Longwood’s gaps for these populations are more visible when looking more precisely at students who fall onto probation. Additionally, students told us they believe that finding a community of peers – and encountering faculty and staff with shared backgrounds and cultural understanding – are important factors in a sense of belonging and by extension with persistence toward graduation. These findings are consistent with the work of others on campus. Both findings suggest there is a need for special attentiveness to those populations.

See Appendix III, “Retention Trends for Key Sub-Groups.”

4. Highly structured community involvement is an exceedingly significant driver of retention.

It is not always possible to measure involvement and engagement. However, it is clear from our conversations and our data supports that highly structured community involvement is a strong predictor of retention. Although causation likely doesn’t run in just one direction – students inherently likely to retain are more likely to become involved – Longwood must build on its fundamental strength of encouraging student involvement with structured communities.

Of particular note among findings on this topic are the powerful correlations between participation in Greek Life and retention, and also the strong retention for student-athletes and honors students. To some extent these can be seen as measurable proxies for activities that keep students engaged, deepen friendships, and “keep them busy” – and some activities beyond Greek Life naturally have similar benefits. However, these are particularly intensive and structured activities, and it is worth noting how powerful their correlation is with retention. Student Affairs is working on ways to better monitor student engagement levels in a broader range of activities, which could help shed further light on what types of involvement have the strongest effect (and identify students who are not involved in extracurricular life).

The proper conclusion here is obviously not that all students should be made to participate in Greek Life, compete in Division I athletics or enroll in the honors college. We should, however, understand the particular values – in terms of identity, camaraderie, structure and accountability – that have made these entities particularly helpful with retention. We should be particularly attentive to students who are not finding their way to such structured and communal experiences, as they are more likely to be at risk. Students find their community at different points in the Longwood career. Until they do find their group, our on-campus housing requirement serves as a primary connection for students to reach a richer network of peers, activities and support resources. As we reviewed the data, we found an interesting connection between meal swipes and retention. Among students with 54 or more meal swipes per month, 91 percent retain from Year 1 to Year 2. Among students at less than 30, only 75 percent retain. Meal-swipe data may be a proxy metric to identify students who have not yet found a community.

Another interesting finding related to the concept of involvement in community relates to parents. For understandable reasons, parents – especially families of minority and first-generation students who may be especially focused on succeeding academically and earning a return on their investment in college – not infrequently convey to students that they should refrain from getting involved in extracurricular activities on campus so as not to distract them from their academic work. Among the many topics Longwood could usefully help parents better understand is that such advice, while well-intentioned, may be counter-productive. Of course, parents should also hear that some students at Longwood do take on too much outside the classroom; the key is balance, but some extracurricular involvement is almost always positive.

See Appendix IX, “Further Predictors of Retention”

5. Most students who leave go “home” – typically to community college.

Roughly two-thirds of the students who left Longwood from 2015-2021 can be tracked as moving to another institution through the National Student Clearinghouse Data system. Of those, about two-thirds end up at community colleges, and one-third at four-year institutions. Virtually all students at community college are returning to their “home” community, and it seems self-evident that’s the case for those who go to four-year institutions, too. A small handful of students typically transfer to more academically selective institutions, but that is rare. There are also some instances of transfer to comparably selective institutions that have particular programs that Longwood does not, or where there is a perception that the program is stronger.

While we likely cannot prevent students from returning home, strengthening their sense of belonging and connection to other students (individually or within organizations) is the likely strategy to address this concern.

See Appendix V, “Destination Institutions”

6. For most students who depart, academic struggle is the core reason – though often other factors contribute.

It is frequently hard to untangle the mix of financial, mental well-being and emotional concerns of students who do not persist, and there is room for meaningful improvement in the information we capture about students who depart. Existing survey data asking students to provide the reasons they are withdrawing has real limitations and should be used, but with significant caution.

Generally, we found retention is above all a problem of academic struggle. Longwood data show a strong correlation between lower GPA and lower likelihood of retention.

Clearly, financial pressure is a part of the explanation for why students depart in some cases, and students receiving strong financial support do retain better. However, finances are generally not a frequently cited reason by such students themselves – though there has been a small uptick in that number recently, so the trend bears continued monitoring and support for the important, targeted work undertaken by Financial Aid to work with students who face financial emergencies.

The experience of those working closely with students is also that while affordability often can be a factor, financial issues are genuinely resolvable, at least in terms of keeping students enrolled in good academic standing; it is the poor academic standing that is fatal to the effort of keeping students on track. A common way these factors interact is that poor academic performance puts financial aid in jeopardy, so affordability suddenly does become a major problem, if not the underlying cause.

Similarly, health issues are often cited on withdrawal survey forms, but these also can be hard to untangle – as to whether the issues are more directly related to physical health, mental health, or interplay between health and other factors. A better indicator is that across all undergraduates, in recent years about 10 students per semester go through the formal medical withdrawal process (as opposed to simply citing it as a factor on the general withdrawal form). The Dean of Students office estimates a majority of these are mental health driven. Certainly, mental health concerns can be part of a more complex picture in instances of non-medical withdrawal, and of course the issue is an important one for many students who don't end up withdrawing. But as a decisive factor in a withdrawal, it is present but not especially common – accounting for on the order of about 10 percent of withdrawals. Overall, it seems rare for a student to withdraw without at least some element of academic struggle at the core of the reason – though the line of causation can be complex.

The survey data collected from withdrawal forms has some value but also warrants caution. The answers are self-reported by students and ask them to choose among broad categories of reasons that are often complex. Students may also ascribe failure to, for example, financial or mental health considerations beyond their control even if academic considerations are clearly central (or vice-versa). Longwood could rethink the categorization options we ask students to provide when they complete withdrawal forms to try to get clearer responses and then incorporate this data into an annual review of retention data. It would be especially helpful to separate out this information about students who withdraw despite good academic standing, in order to get a clearer picture of which factors beyond academic struggle are in fact most prevalent.

See Appendix VI, Student Response Data for Departure Surveys.

7. Class attendance and deadlines really matters to academic success.

Longwood has a class attendance policy in the Faculty Policies and Procedures Manual (FPPM) and in the Undergraduate Catalog that states that students are expected to attend all classes and provides

minimum penalties for not attending class, including instructors having the right to assign a course grade of “F” to a student if they have missed 25 percent of class meeting times. The policy gives faculty flexibility in how they may enforce attendance and requires them to publish it in their syllabus. Although some academic departments are fairly consistent in their approach to attendance, attendance policies and enforcement vary from instructor to instructor. In recent years, in large part because of the pandemic, some faculty have become very accommodating to student needs and have loosened their attendance and deadline policies, even going so far as to accommodate students’ requests for mental health days, or what students informally refer to as a “Lancer Day.”

While some flexibility and humanity to handle issues on a case-by-case basis is needed, the variation in attendance policies does not serve many of our first-year students particularly well. For many students, their K-12 school experience, combined with the disruption of the pandemic, did not adequately instill in them the habits of attending class regularly and turning in assignments on time. Students need to receive stronger and consistent messaging, beyond what they read in a course syllabus, about the importance of these habits to their academic success. Additionally, when it comes to anxiety in particular, there is a growing awareness in the mental health profession that accommodating anxiety – for instance, by allowing students to miss class or avoid other stressors – rather than pushing students to confront and address it directly, is well-intentioned but often counterproductive.

The university does not keep institution-wide data that shows the impact of poor class attendance or assignment submissions on academic performance. But among people who work closely with students in academic difficulty, it is a clear factor. The ability to monitor attendance, assignment submission and classroom performance across a student's entire schedule provides a more complete picture of that student’s engagement and is a best practice many institutions use to support retention efforts.

8. Academic advising also really matters - for retention and the overall Longwood experience that sets us apart.

A recurring theme of our conversations with students, faculty and staff was that sound academic advising is critically important. Academic advising is central to prospective students’ and families’ conception of what the Longwood academic experience should be about, and what should set it apart from other institutions. It also really matters once students arrive.

Academic advising touches on a range of issues central to retention – guidance through the curriculum, support during times of academic struggle, the formation of meaningful human connections between faculty mentors and students, and setting direction for graduate school and future career and life plans. When it goes right, it is a strong force for good. But the negative consequences of an ineffective advising experience – either in terms of the connection, or the quality of the advice provided – are potentially serious. Given the nexus between academic advising and a broad range of key aspects of retention, it would be difficult to make strides on overall retention without a concerted focus on attentive academic advising.

A key theme of the research and literature on advising is that advising should fit the culture of the institution and it should have a unifying vision. At Longwood, a somewhat eclectic system has emerged in which professional advisors from the Registrar’s office advise some students (College of Business and Economics first-year students – including transfer students with fewer than 25 transfer credits, and those enrolled in Exploratory Studies), while departmental faculty advise most others. Both approaches have strengths, and reflect the genuinely different needs and priorities of departments. Within these structures, there are some strong advising sub-models already implemented across campus. Two other highly structured communities (athletes and honors) have professional staff to support the students in a variety of ways, demonstrating the value of this additional support role to student success.

However, we heard from students and others about how academic advising can fall short of its potential. While not all students who claim they got ineffective advice from their advisor are sharing the whole story, many faculty and staff agree that poor advising does happen - particularly with regards to navigating the complexities of the curriculum. Many faculty members are less than satisfied with their advising experience as well. Too many good academic advisors are spread too thin in advising duties, and too many faculty members are dispatched to advise students without sufficient training, resources or accountability. Advising well requires preparation, clear expectations for both students and advisors, ongoing training, and responsiveness to unique student needs, all of which take time.

There are benefits to both advising conducted by professional advisors in the Registrar's office and by faculty in departments. Different approaches are best for different fields and departments. But, to increase the proportion of students whose academic advising experience reaches its full potential, there is room for improvement all across the university. Our goal should be to minimize instances of a poor advising experience by leveling up all aspects of academic advising, in all forms, so that a much higher proportion of students experience it in its best form.

To further refine our key findings about academic advising:

- A. Quality academic advising is at the heart of the Longwood academic experience.** For many students, academic advising is the epitome of what is good and distinctive about Longwood – a personal connection with a faculty member who helps navigate Longwood and models scholarly and professional life. We suspect academic advising is a positive experience for a higher proportion of our students than it is for students at peer institutions, particularly larger universities. We heard from numerous Longwood advisors that they are eager to be good, and better, advisors. But we also heard frustrations from faculty and staff advisors who work closely with struggling students, about how best to help them and understand their role in the context of broader Longwood resources, and from students themselves.
- B. Academic advising presents genuine challenges of resources, time, structure and fairness.** One clear challenge, hardly unique to Longwood, is that variation in the numbers of students and faculty across different departments spreads the load of advising work unevenly. At any institution, regardless of how advising duties may be divided, there is a nearly ineluctable force at play: those willing to take on advising, or who are good at it, find themselves with more advisees. Absent structural support, this inevitably results in an inconsistent advising experience.
- C. Advising is missing a “North Star.”** The research on advising indicates the importance of a vision, expectations and assessment of advising as instrumental to making advising an effective retention tool. The language about advising in the FPPM provides an important foundation about the purpose and elements of advising, but it does not extend to staff or to students. Having a broader vision for advising would ensure that faculty, staff and students understand what academic advising should try to accomplish, how it fits within Longwood's mission, and how it fits within the constellation of other support services.
- D. Advisors need more help and tools in order to be as effective as possible.** Strong advising is a skill that must be supported, nurtured and rewarded. In setting expectations of advisors, Longwood must also more effectively equip academic advisors with tools and best practices to meet these expectations. There is a range of proven habits, established across higher education and documented by substantial research. These habits might include simple practical tools like checklists, conversation-starting questions to pose, a mechanism for keeping notes for advisors to reference during subsequent work with their advisees, and pre-

loaded check-in calendars. Research into strategies such as a “Belonging Mindset” shows that simple techniques and seemingly modest language adjustments can have a positive impact on students.

Meanwhile, many faculty members report that they are eager to understand better other parts of the Longwood student support network, and to learn more about how to advise well. Training that does happen on campus is not always mandatory, or consistent, reflecting the lack of a clearly articulated purpose and set of expectations. In addition to best-practice tools, effective academic advising also requires specialized “local knowledge” of the curriculum landscape – and people – within each department and college, as well as other institutional resources.

E. Many incoming students would benefit from earlier contact with academic advisors. We heard from many quarters about the importance of getting quality academic advising – along with a range of other mechanisms of support – in front of students more effectively in the critical transition weeks of summer heading into their first semester, and during the very first weeks of the semester. This is the moment when forging relationships, early flagging of problems and challenges, and making good choices in course selection are most consequential. There is a range of mechanisms across the university whereby, in different ways, departments make initial contact with incoming students over the summer months, with the work generally falling to department chairs. Some of these naturally reflect the size and faculty resources of departments and the nine-month faculty contracts, but there is also variation beyond those dimensions. Some of these seem effective, but we heard, especially from those who work with struggling students, that they are often navigating challenges where an earlier and more effective connection between a student and their academic advisor would have helped.

F. Longwood could strengthen the role and profile of academic advising in our campus culture. Against the backdrop of a strong commitment among most individual faculty members to strong advising, we also need a stronger culture that reinforces, steers and rewards advising quality, recognizing and reinforcing it as a high institutional priority. The critical importance of retention to Longwood, and of advising to retention, should be further ingrained into structures of time and resource management, of promotion and evaluation, and accountability. Soliciting and making appropriate use of student feedback related to advising can be a helpful tool – both in substance, and in signaling to students that we take advising seriously. The university as a whole, in its strategic, budgeting and fundraising priorities, should also recognize the importance of a broad-based commitment to strong advising.

A final note on our conclusions regarding advising: We recognize that the five-year Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), which has been developed as part of Longwood’s SACSCOC reaffirmation process, also includes a focus on first-year student advising. We believe the QEP’s emphasis on post-graduate success and life design holds promise as a tool to help strengthen first-year advising, along with many other ways it can benefit the student experience by providing greater direction, purpose and focus. The QEP’s recommendations align with best practices and approaches that we believe can help support the broader culture of advising we hope to see flourish. It is also a natural vehicle to implement pilot programs and other practical steps that will be among the tools that can help make academic advising stronger.

9. Students need a better understanding of where to get help in the support system – but with constant reminders of their obligations in the process. Longwood faculty and staff need stronger tools – both “carrots and sticks” – to get students to engage with these resources.

The full collection of resources to support students can come across as esoteric to students, and frequently is not fully clear even to faculty and staff working within it almost daily. This is the understandable and commendable product of efforts over many years to add layers of support. The range of resources has its virtues: students reported a wide variety of places on campus where they had found help, and there's no one-size-fits-all solution. However, we feel that there are areas where structure can be simplified and communication can be improved, so students (and families) can follow a more direct path to assistance. For many students struggling academically, a stronger, coordinating point of contact, particularly within their college and familiar with university-wide resources, could be quite helpful.

We were reminded throughout our conversations of the importance of conveying that Longwood's resources and support mechanisms can only succeed alongside the efforts of students to meet their own obligations. In general Longwood does this well. However, without care, there is a danger, particularly in light of general shifts and family expectations, that students will hear "this person will solve your problem," when what they need to hear is "this person can help you develop a plan to solve this problem, and connect you with other resources that will help you as you undertake the work to stay on track academically."

We also heard from Student Affairs staff and others that students who leave the University are typically those who do not adequately avail themselves of resources available on campus. Staff can become frustrated at their lack of tools to improve the chances of students using these resources. There is room for improvement in communications, and in some cases practices and policy, to increase the chances that students will be pushed harder to avail themselves of the help that is available. There are potential benefits to both intrinsic and extrinsic reward and accountability structures, and some pilot experimentation comparing such approaches could be worthwhile.

10. There is a need and desire to identify students in academic trouble earlier in the semester, and get those who will benefit from help the right kind of help sooner – without flooding the system.

A consistent theme of our conversations was that too often academic trouble is not flagged until too late in the semester, when it may be too late for students to recover. First, there are opportunities to have a stronger sense – more systematically across departments and colleges – even before classes start of who is at academic risk. High school GPA is a strong predictor, but there are valuable, less obvious markers as well. Longwood data show that failing to complete the simple online incoming-student module "5 Things Every Lancer Should Know" is an extremely strong predictor of academic risk. It is unclear whether the value resides in the usefulness of the content or simply in a correlation among students who complete the module and also have other attributes helpful to persistence. But either way, the indicator is useful.

There is also room for improvement once classes start. Submission of mid-term grades on time is extremely important, but even that deadline (which follows the mid-semester break) can come too late – both for students and for those looking out for students who are struggling. The current system of alerts is based almost entirely on faculty/staff awareness and voluntary input, and is inherently reactive: "student has missed a week of class;" "student seems depressed;" "student is in the hospital." Responses to such alerts may go to a patchwork of offices. Care Team reports are funneled through the Dean of Students, who works as a traffic cop pointing to various resources. Academic alerts go through associate deans in the colleges or Student Success, whose responses are inevitably also reactive.

This type of reaction is important, but it could be improved, and its academic and non-academic components need to communicate more effectively. One hole in our early alert system, such as it is, is in noticing when students are struggling across multiple courses at once. When there is a flag, a well-honed, committed culture of caring and support springs into action. But that effort could benefit from smoother

communication among the Care Team, residence life staff, coaches, faculty, deans and others who may be involved. Above all, it could, at least in a meaningful number of cases, begin sooner.

It's not enough to simply flag more students – identifying more students at potential retention risk just creates more work for those responding. The goal should be to flag them both earlier in the semester and more efficiently (fewer false negatives or positives regarding academic difficulty). This touches on academic advising, but getting information from faculty sooner on struggling students is vital – even if it's just a “thumbs-up, thumbs-down” indicator to determine if the students seem to be on track or not. And, as noted above, we need a stronger set of tools in working with those on probation to compel them to get the help and guidance they need.

Helping students act for themselves is likewise vital. We heard from some students that they were unaware that they were in academic trouble because they had not received sufficient graded feedback. No doubt some such students had indeed received appropriate feedback or should have been attentive to other warning signs. And disciplines, of course, have varying methods of assessment. But this amalgam of signals reinforces the value of a kind of flexible, yet systematic indicator, within the first third of the semester.

11. We need to strengthen our culture/set of habits related to sharing of data regarding retention, and responsiveness to such data.

We must do better with the collecting, sharing, and using of data regarding retention. Data specific to retention exists and is accessible by University Analytics, but there is no particular mechanism or venue by which it is collected, laid out clearly and shared with stakeholders around campus. For the last three years at its annual “data dive” meeting, Academic Affairs has shared retention data with deans and department chairs. A more seamless and easily accessible mechanism is needed for all areas of the university (athletic teams or extracurricular organizations, for instance). With an easily accessible mechanism, time can then be spent on identifying focus areas and corresponding strategies for improvement. Additionally, while it is inherently difficult to collect from students who depart Longwood useful and reliable information that sheds light on what went wrong, there is meaningful room for improvement in how we do so.

III. Recommendations

The first four recommendations below are those that attempt to address multiple findings above, and in some cases would require additional resources. We have taken care to be selective with recommendations that would require meaningful funding, but are highlighting these as the ones with the most promise for a retention return on investment. The remainder of recommendations are not necessarily any less important, but flow more naturally from current structures and duties.

1. A retention-focused coordinating role within Cook-Cole, CBE and CEHHS to support first-year students as well as their faculty and advisors.

We recommend creating a position within each dean's office of the three academic undergraduate colleges, supporting the dean and associate dean and working closely with faculty academic advisors, Student Success and others across campus, to provide proactive academic support for matriculating students coming into the college; monitor and respond to “early alert indicators” to identify students at academic risk; and serve as a kind of “case manager” coordinating and helping students who struggle academically once the semester begins.

The primary focus of this position would be first-year students, but not exclusively so. This position would be the natural next step in the personal relationships and responsive culture students experience during the admissions process. This position would be a resource for students, families, faculty and staff with a portfolio centered on retention and student support.

Core responsibilities would include:

- a. to work with deans, department chairs and Student Success to successfully “onboard” students as they matriculate to Longwood, and through the critical course selection period of the summer, when most faculty advisors are off-contract. A key requirement is being fully engaged during the summer months.
- b. to help prevent problematic first-semester scheduling choices across the departments within the college.
- c. to serve, once the semester begins, as a known point of contact for students who would benefit from academic assistance, developing strong, long-term working relationships with faculty in the college, advisors, the Dean of Students, the Registrar’s Office, Title IX office, Care Team, tutoring resources, the Writing Center, CAPS, Financial Aid, Athletics, the Cormier Honors College, Student Success, and other campus partners. This position in particular should aspire to a goal of “No Cold Transfers” – not passing students along to other parts of the institution without also communicating to that office themselves (see below).
- d. to help coordinate individualized academic recovery plans for such students, involving the particular resources they need, and educating students about relevant policies, and if needed, help them understand and navigate the academic appeal process.
- e. to serve as a known point of contact for families, communicating as appropriate.
- f. to serve as a liaison to departments and supporting faculty, including advisors, keeping them abreast of best practices for infusing student success and retention activities naturally into their advising work and first-year courses. Maintain strong working relationships with professional advisors under the Registrar for applicable students.
- g. to help students who want or need to change majors find the right “fit” and navigate curriculum on-ramps and off-ramps. Knowledge of departments across a college, and relationships across campus, give this person a particular capacity to help a student navigate a change in major.

Longwood’s individual colleges operate on a scale where an individual in this position can make a meaningful difference in helping students navigate the system and, we hope, get back on track academically.

2. A flexible-but-across-the-board commitment to improved advising.

Elements should include:

- a. a university-wide vision for advising, clarifying for students, faculty and staff the purposes, parameters and goals of academic advising.
- b. a university-wide set of expectations of advisors, reflecting national best practices and our own institutional culture, and clarifying specific expectations of advisors, such as regularity of

communication with students and participation in early alert process. Expectations for students should also be articulated. Such guidance may also encourage and provide tools such as checklists, conversation-starting questions, suggested timelines, a mechanism for taking and tracking notes that follow the students, and other items. We suggest these expectations and tools be developed by the Retention Task Force, or a new iteration thereof, in continued consultation with others on campus, including the QEP leadership team, which is also developing tools for improving advising. These conversations will continue during spring/summer 2024 with the goal of initial implementation during the 2024-2025 academic year. (An example of another institution's one-page statement of advising philosophy and expectations, described there as an advising "syllabus," is provided as Appendix VII. Naturally, the substance at Longwood would vary, but we found the format commendable).

- c. a strong commitment to professional, regular development for all those who advise first-year students, helping them better deploy well-established best practices for advising. We need to ensure a system of accountability in support of the articulated institution-wide goals for advising and fulfilling the institutionally chosen expectations.
- d. the use in departments, in coordination with their deans, of the newly established University-level vision for advising (above) to conduct an audit of their advising practices. Areas determined to need improvements would serve as the foundation for an enhancement plan. Deans and departments would create a plan for ongoing assessment and improvement of advising. Elements of enhancement plans could include any of the following:
 - pilots or other advising-related initiatives from the QEP to infuse career and life design elements into advising.
 - stipends or course releases for strong advisors to take on additional advising duties, or to make possible sufficient advising resources within a department to try a mentor advising program pairing new and more experienced faculty.
 - a transition for first-year students to professional advising via Enrollment Management and Student Success, allowing departmental faculty to focus on the advising of advanced students or other initiatives.
 - the development or advancement of an "Introduction-to-the-major" course with an advising element (perhaps as part of the QEP, though not necessarily). Experiments that seem potentially promising include having such courses taught by the faculty who also advise the first-year students. The course becomes the mechanism by which they get to know their advisees well.
 - incorporation of student feedback into advising, such as "encounter forms" after advising sessions. Like all student feedback, it is critical that such information be used appropriately, recognizing its limitations. However, it can be both substantively helpful, and in places within Longwood where this has been tried previously, it usefully conveys to students that Longwood takes advising seriously.
- e. steps to strengthen the institutional habits and culture of valuing exceptional advising. Prospective students and families consider a strong advisor-student relationship to be almost the embodiment of the Longwood academic experience – why they choose to enroll and what they expect (advising is a frequent topic of questions at admissions and orientations sessions). That relationship should be conveyed as a priority, not an afterthought, in ways large and small. Longwood's commitment to advising should feature in the faculty hiring process, communicating to prospective faculty that advising is valued and taken seriously. Advising should also be better addressed in faculty review and evaluations, and in the faculty reward and award structure.

3. Steps toward an earlier, more automated capacity to identify students in academic difficulty, and deploy effective interventions before it is too late for a student to recover.

As noted above, we heard that earlier academic warning signs and interventions are extremely important. Research also supports these best practices. Currently, Student Success identifies students who are arriving with certain risk factors are systematically flagged and shares with student success coaches which students may require particular attention. Examples of these flags include HS GPA, whether or not students have completed the online “5 Things Every Lancer Should Know” Canvas module during the summer, difficulty of proposed course schedule, and other known risk factors. While helpful, we know students may need to hear from multiple sources across a span of time what they need to do before students take action. As such, sharing the flagged information more widely and equipping academic advisors, department chairs and deans with strategies for helping students overcome these risk factors is needed.

We also need to improve the ways we flag and respond to concerning trends in student attendance and academic performance. Currently, there are multiple ways in which faculty can report their concerns about first-year students, but we need a more streamlined way of collecting data about those students at risk of academic trouble. We recognize numerous faculty members are cognizant of the value of earlier assessments and feedback and are experimenting with ways to provide it in their own syllabi and courses; none of the recommendations below should be understood as discouraging such helpful efforts. Recommendations for improving the reporting of concerning trends in student attendance and academic performance include:

- a. We recommend the creation of a simple “thumbs-up” or “thumbs-down” reporting mechanism that faculty teaching 100- and 200-level courses could use no more than four weeks into the semester. This would provide a more subjective report as to whether, based on any number of factors, they are concerned about a student’s prospects for passing the course.
- b. We recommend that colleges ask all faculty who teach 100- and 200- level courses commit to using Canvas for grades and attendance. This would help facilitate more proactive monitoring – in particular by flagging students struggling in multiple classes – and would represent an important step toward some useful automation.
- c. While the great majority of mid-term grades are submitted on time, those that come in late are an obstacle to retention interventions – not least with regard to student self-awareness of how they are doing. We encourage deans and departments to prioritize grade estimates and continue working together to improve on-time submission. We encourage talking with students about their grade estimates to help them understand better their choices for the rest of the semester.

We are skeptical that there is a single, IT-centric solution achievable in the near-term to the challenge of “early alert”; indeed, an emphasis on silver-bullet IT solutions can be counterproductive by ignoring the human element and existing practices. However, with the college position above playing a key role, and in coordination with Student Success and IT, we believe that the steps above will be helpful. We believe the best path would be a relatively simple, accessible system that focuses on a handful of key academic indicators and funneling them to a single-entry point in each college. That point of entry can then work with the Care Team and others if there are additional issues. A better academic early alert system will require broad buy-in from faculty and staff users, so simplicity and compatibility with existing systems is preferable to seeking some complex, university-wide endeavor to try to fully integrate with the Care Team and other systems on campus.

Additionally, the intervention strategies we deploy, including referring students to the various tutoring resources, also warrant a broader approach to assessment, both in terms of academic effectiveness and the process and logistics of tutoring (issues such as availability and scheduling).

4. Steps to better help students find the “right” major.

Students who are excited about their selected major and academically well prepared for it are more likely to succeed. However, there can be substantial “friction” – academically and financially – for both the student and the institution when students decide to change majors, even as we acknowledge that, for purposes of retention, it is good that they do. Exploratory Studies is an important program that provides flexibility and exploration so students can make a well-informed decision when they commit (Civitae also allows for some flexibility and exploration) and onboard seamlessly into a department. However, we believe there are some steps Longwood could take to strengthen a culture that celebrates finding the “right” major, even if there are curves in the road.

- a. **“Intro to the Major” Courses.** A number of departments have shown small-scale but promising initial results developing such courses, which are also a feature of the QEP. They have a range of benefits. Such classes can both excite students about their major and help establish them on a strong path to make the most of it. In other cases, they can help them realize more quickly that it is not the right fit. Some set-ups also offer strong potential to help build pathways between students and academic advisors. These may not be appropriate for every department, and they do call for ongoing assessment. Continued experimentation and growth should certainly be encouraged.
- b. **Curriculum “off-ramps.”** Departments such as Biological & Environmental Sciences have created pathways for students who struggle with a prerequisite course to veer into a version of the course that doesn’t satisfy requirements for the major, but which they can more readily pass and transfer into a new major with less detrimental impact to their GPA. These are practically useful and consistent with maintaining appropriate standards in a major. These alternative courses may also save students time and money, since they do not have to retake a course they fail. Off-ramp courses also send a good message: the standards in the major are high, but it is acceptable to change a major, and the department will try to help.

Deans and departments should continue working on such pathways where appropriate – as well as “on-ramps” that might help students coming into a major catch up. The goal is not to unduly encourage a broad habit of changing majors, which could be disruptive – but rather to encourage and make the path easier for students who clearly need to do so.

- c. **Stronger rituals around choice of major.** We recommend rethinking the “Majors Fair” concept. We encourage the development of a new ritual around the moment when choices of major are confirmed, for those in Exploratory Studies and across the University. This could happen at the departmental, college, and/or university level. We believe this might help Admissions show families that Longwood is a place where students can dive right into their major (as many want), but also a place where for every student there is a chance to explore, especially through Civitae, and ratify that choice after reflection.
- d. **Make use of the proposed college position to help students who decide to change their major.** As noted above, based on familiarity across the college and institution, this role could be particularly helpful to students considering changing majors and navigating the process.

Additional Recommendations

1. Students “meet their people” in a range of ways, and Longwood has a broad range of programs and structures across the University to try to help them forge connections on campus. This is good, and consistent with our culture – but it demands regular assessment and awareness of the opportunity costs of running many efforts with similar goals.

Coaching groups, peer mentors, as well as other programs such as Beginning Our New Direction (B.O.N.D.) and Collaborating with Lancers for Academic Success Program (CLASP), all have student engagement and support among their main goals. All are well intentioned, and there is some benefit to variety: Students told us of a broad range of ways they found connection, and so there is an argument for the “more the better,” even if there is some redundancy or inefficiency. However, we also should aspire to a more rigorous culture of assessment and improvement with these programs, and must be open to the possibility over time that Longwood would benefit from greater focus. Furthermore, the needs of students change over time – indeed they may have been changing especially rapidly over these past few years – and so support activities must adapt and change, too. These programs must strive for constant improvement, rooted in data, and be the subject of regular “fresh eyes” examination.

The example of coaching groups provides a useful illustration. Coaching groups strongly fit Longwood’s culture but in the past have shown mixed results. While some students had positive experiences in coaching groups, for others we spoke with they were disappointing and ineffectual. The shortcomings clearly lay partly in the selection of the identifying characteristics of affinity group, and the varying commitments of coaches and limited tools of accountability to ensure consistency. And while the overall goal of forging relationships with and among students was clear enough, improvements were needed in terms of providing strategies and practical tools to help coaches accomplish that.

These challenges have been readily acknowledged by leadership, and the coaching groups made a number of changes heading into fall 2023. These include improving the training of coaches to infuse life-design activities; improved marketing and knowledge of the purpose of coaching groups for students; confirming a student’s coaching group select during orientation; expecting the coach to meet with each student individually in the first three weeks of classes to form a relationship (expecting 80 percent participation); and completion of coach and peer mentor feedback on students’ engagement and risk-of-leaving levels after individual meetings and after group activities. Anecdotal reports and data are encouraging that the coaching group program was stronger in fall 2023. Almost 70 percent of students that met individually with their coach shared that it was very or extremely helpful.

Coaching groups should continue with reforms in the 2024-25 academic year and further work to help coaches and peer mentors accomplish the key goal of forging connections with and among students. Results should continue to be assessed with clear eyes, making use of survey data, by the relevant vice presidents. If the changes appear to be helping, they should be further encouraged and intensified – and the value of the investment will be confirmed. But if there are still meaningful shortcomings, or other strategies are succeeding with similar goals, Longwood’s leadership should not hesitate to move away from coaching groups in favor of a more focused, consolidated approach built around stronger peer mentors and resident advisors, perhaps supplemented by involvement from a broader range of advanced peers at the departmental level (all of which could also incorporate life design elements of the QEP).

Other initiatives geared toward first-year students transitioning to college and forging connections should also be regularly assessed, with results shared more broadly with other campus stakeholders. All of these programs – which have various methods of internal and external financial support – are consistent with our culture, and may be valuable on their own terms. But there can be a tendency at any institution for

well-intentioned programs to proliferate organically, without sufficient prioritization, taking into account the tradeoffs between a variety of programs and an ability to support those programs well.

2. Embed retention messaging and resources into communications with students.

We hope that via the findings of this report, and a broader point of emphasis, communications with and about students could help reinforce habits of retention and increase understanding about resources. Easier “in the moment” access to information about resources for students is needed. Providing exhaustive information during Orientation or New Lancer Days is of limited use; it is usually only when students and families encounter a problem that they are suddenly focused on where to turn for help. We suggest:

- a. The Longwood Ready app, used by students for information on health and safety, and to submit work orders, could also include information on additional resources, including CAPS, tutoring, or Accessibility Resources. A future iteration of the app might be customized to the user, and could include more specific information for an individual. (This information could also potentially be accessible to students via Lancer Life or other parts of the Longwood home page, possibly eventually generated for them individually once they are logged in.)
- b. Sometimes a “hard copy” is helpful. Longwood should consider customizing for each incoming student the name and contact information of key resources – their academic advisor, peer mentor, generalized information such as LUPD, Title IX, etc. -- to share with the students on a magnetized one-sided sheet they could keep on a wall or refrigerator.
- c. A university-wide commitment to “No Cold Transfers” when passing students to other resources across the institution. This practice has been effectively used in areas such as Financial Aid. The aspiration is that whenever referring a student to another part of the institution for assistance, we should go beyond simply providing the contact information to the student; we should be in contact ourselves with that office to make a connection, convey the issue at hand, and ensure as smooth a “hand off” as possible of the matter. The purpose is not simply to provide better customer service to the student (though it is welcome by students). And it is certainly not to relieve the student of any of their responsibilities. Rather, it is to reduce inefficiency in communication (always having to start from scratch) and thereby improve the chances of the issue being resolved. This is already a common practice by many at Longwood and certainly consistent with our culture; an institution-wide commitment would be both practically helpful and a strong signal to students and families, current and prospective, of the kind of place we aspire to be.

3. Embed helpful retention information in communications with parents.

As noted above, parents play a role in retention, one that can be helpful or unintentionally harmful. Some ideas for what might help:

- a. Messaging related to what matters for retention – particularly the importance of connection and extracurricular engagement – in the Parents Pipeline.
- b. A printed card, along the lines described above, but for parents and families about Longwood resources. Unlike the student card, a card for the family should provide much less in the way of direct contact information (the trend of parents reaching out to seek help for students before students themselves even attempt to do so needs no further encouragement). But framing the information in terms of “what to advise your child if they report they need help with xxxx” could

improve awareness of resources and channel better information eventually to students themselves. It could also channel legitimate parental inquiries to the appropriate places more efficiently – for instance, Financial Aid, Student Accounts, or Campus Police.

- c. Longwood might consider a course (credit, certificate or badging options) for parents. Institutions such as VCU have tried this. The purpose would of course be broader than retention, but it could be a tool to increase engagement and also channel behavior and questions more effectively. An actual credited course would be something families would pay closer attention to than just a module.

4. Encourage the effective relationship-forging efforts in Student Affairs.

Longwood’s strong culture of extracurricular engagement, traditions, and outside-the-classroom support is one of its greatest strengths. It is no accident that the institutions noted in Finding 2 above for outperforming their predicted graduation rates tend to have a distinctive student-life culture. This strength of Longwood’s should be continuously supported. Some recommendations include:

- a. Greek Life and other highly structured groups of belonging should be encouraged. Participation in Greek Life correlates extremely strongly with retention (See Appendix III). Of course, causation may not run purely in the direction of Greek Life to retention; some self-selection is involved. But nor is the correlation insignificant. While Greek Life is not for every student, we should be looking carefully at what exactly about Greek life seems to help students retain, and how we can infuse that into other Longwood extracurricular activities.
- b. Enlist incoming students earlier in a sense of belonging and participation in extracurricular activities. These groups are indeed where many students “find their people,” so we should look for opportunities to begin building relationships, or at least excitement, before arriving on campus. One place to start could be Admissions and Campus Recreation working together to identify incoming students who participated in high school sports – and arrange for them to get communication about club and intramural sports ahead of orientation (or potentially sooner, when they deposit or even when they are accepted). Students with a background in music, theatre, or the arts could be treated similarly.
- c. Apply fresh attention to the needs of Black and Asian American students. A concerted effort has made progress on this front with Hispanic and first-generation students, which supports a similar focus for other populations whose retention rates are not as strong. Helping foster the sense of community and connectedness among URM warrants fresh attention from Student Affairs and partners across campus.
- d. Support for Residence Advisors. As noted above there is a complex ecosystem of entities that work to engage and support students, which bears constant assessment and vigilance against inefficient blurring of responsibilities. We do see Resident Assistants as an important part of the broader “early warning network” and support system when students are struggling, particularly in the first year. Over time, we encourage prioritizing some support to reduce the ratio of students-to-RAs, particularly for first-year students.
- e. Improved student-faculty contact outside the classroom. A mark of a strong liberal arts campus culture is the prevalence of students and faculty interacting beyond the classroom. A positive interaction with a faculty member outside the classroom can set in motion a consequential

relationship over the course of the remaining college experience— and is often remembered fondly years after. The midnight Pancake Breakfast during finals week is one such tradition. High-impact practices, such as field trips, individual research projects, service learning or community-based projects, help to forge faculty-student connections. We encourage Student Affairs and Academic Affairs to work together to advance a “Take Your Professor to Lunch or Coffee” week or similar rituals.

5. Help faculty and staff better assist students navigating mental health challenges.

Student mental health challenges are common at Longwood and ubiquitous across higher education. In recent years, the landscape has shifted enormously – with much greater acknowledgment of mental illness, but associated increased burdens on institutions to help students manage it. The number of instances where mental health is the main driver of first-year students leaving Longwood appears relatively small; those who leave typically have very acute issues. However, mental health can and does factor into a constellation of connected challenges a student may face – academic, financial, getting connected on campus, disciplinary issues, or physical health.

Further complicating matters is the hard and complex line separating acute mental illness from the normal challenges of development for traditional-aged college students – and all against the backdrop of a time of legitimately and heightened anxiety nationally and across the world.

The Task Force is not the right entity to try to fully assess the issue of mental health on campus. However, faculty and staff have for some time now expressed, understandably, anxiety themselves about the distinction between “normal” struggle and struggle requiring professional intervention. Others on campus must be equipped with some better tools to understand and recognize those distinctions; otherwise, the reflex reaction will be to simply send all students struggling in any way to CAPS, and resources will be quickly overwhelmed.

There are a number of initiatives underway including our federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Grant, which has introduced resources including the WellTrack app, providing guidance to students and connecting them with campus resources, and the Mental Health Crisis Support Line for Longwood students, staffed 24/7/365. These are tools faculty and staff are already using in partnership with CAPS to support students. Additionally, CAPS has introduced key training opportunities for faculty and staff through the work of a Trauma Specialist. The SCHEV Workforce Pilot Grant has also increased counselor resources available on campus.

All of these resources are the product of energy and prioritization in seeking grants as well as funding from the Commonwealth. We hope this will continue to be a priority. We encourage leaders across the university to take greater advantage of opportunities to enlist CAPS, through these programs and otherwise, as well as outside experts as appropriate, and that particular focus be applied to this challenge of helping faculty and staff better recognize signs of mental illness versus normal growth and challenge.

6. Consider modest policy adjustments that could better support students in academic difficulty and reduce “friction” for those changing majors.

We believe Longwood’s policies and practices around student support are generally strong, but a few ideas that could help with at least some students warrant consideration.

- a. Change the term “Probation” to “Academic Recovery” for first-year students.

- b. Bring careful and thorough attention - and continuity across the colleges – to the crafting of communication with students (and if appropriate, families) regarding academic recovery and suspension. Communication should explain carefully what these terms mean, and also set in motion an in-person meeting or at least telephone conversation with the proposed “case manager” position within the college. This should happen as soon as grades are in. Words matter in these moments. Students should be told “you have been scheduled for an appointment at ...” – as opposed to inviting the student to contact the office. This conversation should make clear to the student the pathway for academic recovery (probation) or off suspension and what is required of them, including addressing scheduling issues for the upcoming semester, or help changing majors if appropriate. We should not wait for students to just reach out.
- c. Make information about academic policies, including academic recovery (probation) and suspension, more accessible to students and families. This information could be found more easily online, or could be shared, consistent with FERPA, in response to queries.
- d. Pilot both an incentive- and a consequence-based program to support students in academic difficulty. Completion of either option would allow the student to register for the following semester in the second time-ticket. (This would be a worthwhile project for the dean’s office position to oversee).
- e. Provide more directed guidance to students in the appeal process. In the case of a student who has been working with the associate dean (or student success contact) who views the student as having good prospects for success, such students should be encouraged to appeal to the Faculty Petitions Committee and provided with a letter of endorsement. There should be in-person advice to the student regarding the appeal process. Appeals will appropriately succeed or fail through existing structures on their merits, but there is no reason any student should not proceed with an appeal just through lack of understanding of the process.
- f. Regular review of academic policies to assess their impact on retention, including best practices in the field and how those may be relevant to Longwood. One particular example is how the current grade forgiveness policy does not adequately address a student who changes their major in their second semester of college. Students who change majors sometimes find themselves in an insurmountable GPA hole stemming from courses they only took as they began their “first” major, which could include Pillar courses required for the major. Accounting for a way these students trying to recover from such a low GPA under the grade forgiveness policy would be tremendously impactful for these students.

7. Improve habits of transparency and data-informed decision-making

- a. University Analytics should continue work this spring to finalize the substance and structure of a dashboard that can be generated and shared with academic leadership, departments and Student Success each semester showing retention within the major, retention within the university, key sub-populations identified in this report, and D/F/W rates for each class.
- b. Each semester’s report should be reviewed and discussed by the dean and department chair to ensure efforts to improve retention remain a top priority. Any course with D/F/W rates higher than 25 percent should consider concrete improvement steps. Among ideas that might be considered are: curriculum “off ramps” for those exiting the major; catch-up tracks, perhaps involving additional work for struggling students over winter break; rethinking whether the designated prerequisites are still the right ones, and other best practices. Such evaluation naturally

happens already in many instances, and we are not proposing a blanket solution – only a commitment to a process by which the improved dashboard prompts a regular conversation.

- c. The Registrar’s Office, in conjunction with University Analytics, should compile each semester a “withdrawals” report that summarizes and presents an overview of the withdrawing cohort – who they are, and the reasons they are giving for leaving. The categories offered as choices on the current form should be rethought, in consultation with the Dean of Students and others, to provide more refined data. Lastly, the report should separate the findings for students who withdraw in good academic standing and those who do not. This will provide a helpful, clearer picture of the reasons beyond academic difficulty that prompt students to leave – the reasons that are powerful enough to derail even students who are doing well enough in the classroom.

8. Support philanthropy for retention efforts.

We recognize retention can be a “tough sell” for donors given the complexities and policy aspects of the challenge. However, we believe some donors will be interested in supporting retention. We hope the findings of this report may be useful in providing Institutional Advancement tools to advance donors’ understanding around the issue and ideas for ways they can support it.

These include areas such as student financial aid; support for academic advising (highlighting the faculty-student connection that is central to what many donors appreciate about Longwood); and support for campus extracurricular life and engagement (which also resonates with the fond memories of many alumni). Similarly, retention is a top-tier interest among higher education foundations, and Longwood should certainly continue to pursue funding for such support, building on recent successes in this area.

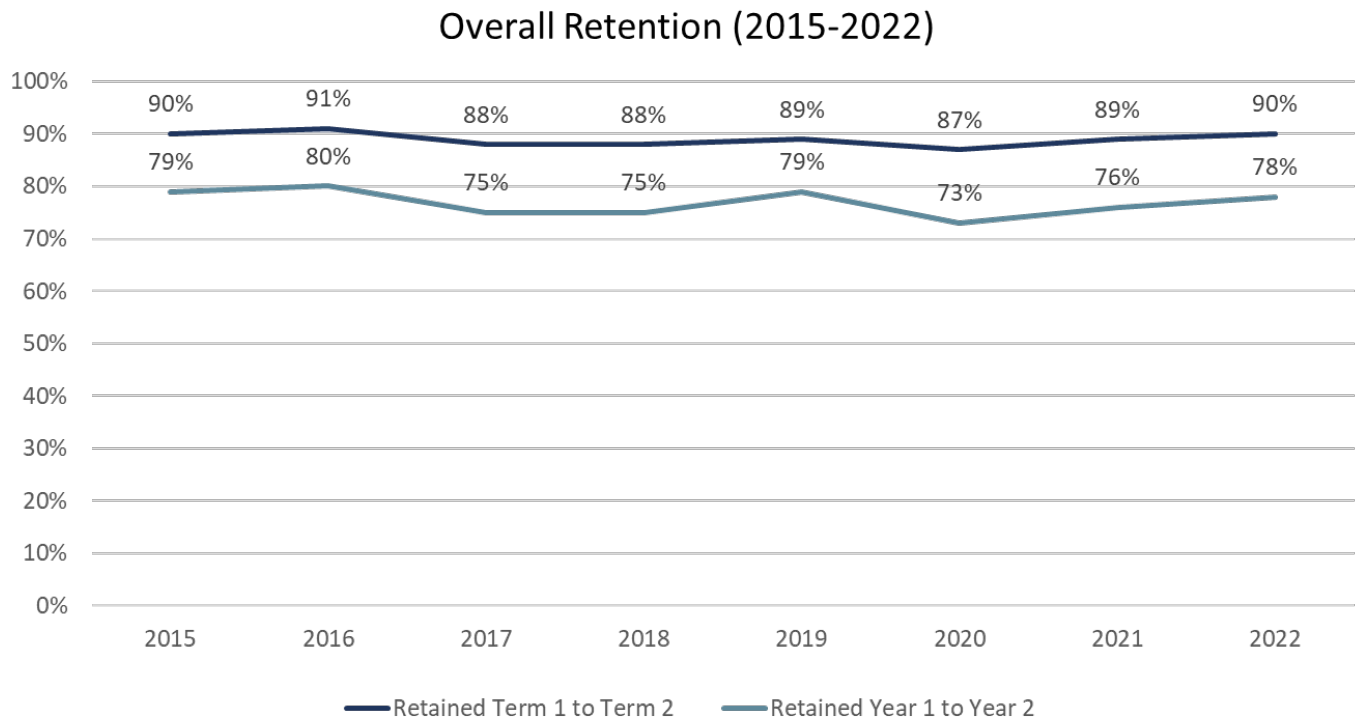
Conclusion

The Retention Task Force accomplished the goal of painting a clear picture of first-to-second year retention. We found a strong cultural and organizational foundation of retention already in place. We believe that elevating awareness of and nurturing a culture of attention to retention issues, as well as implementing the recommendations outlined above, can achieve the goal of improving the retention rate by one percentage point annually; this would mean retaining about a dozen additional students per year. This improvement, compounded across years, would be significant to our enrollment. Moreover, the benefits of adopting the recommendations above would extend beyond just the first-year student experience to serve students during their entire experience at Longwood.

APPENDIX I. Top-Line Retention Trend

YEAR 1-2 RISING IN RECENT YEARS

While both Term 1 to Term 2 (top) and Year 1 to Year 2 (bottom) retention hit a low point in 2020, both metrics have recently trended upward and reached pre-pandemic levels.



APPENDIX II. Comparative Expected Graduation Rates

US News Predicted Graduation Rate – Virginia Public Universities

University	Predicted Graduation Rate	Actual Graduation Rate	+/-
James Madison	72	82	+10
Virginia Tech	78	87	+9
Longwood	57	65	+8
Mary Washington	62	68	+6
George Mason	65	70	+5
VCU	63	68	+5
VMI	70	74	+4
Christopher Newport	72	75	+3
Virginia State	40	41	+1
Radford	54	54	0
U.Va.	96	94	-2
Norfolk State	40	37	-3
William & Mary	95	91	-4
Old Dominion	53	49	-4
U.Va. – Wise	55	40	-15

Predicted Graduation Rate – Public Regional Universities in South (Out of 58 in Category)

Rank	University	Predicted Rate	Actual Rate	Difference
1	North Carolina Central University	39%	51%	12%
2	Fort Valley State University	35%	45%	10%
2	Arkansas Tech University	37%	47%	10%
2	Grambling State University	27%	37%	10%
5	Longwood University	57%	65%	8%
6	The Citadel	66%	73%	7%
6	Appalachian State University	66%	73%	7%
8	Alcorn State University	36%	42%	6%
9	Christopher Newport University	72%	75%	3%
9	Fairmont State University	43%	46%	3%

Predicted Graduation Rate – All Regional Universities in South (Out of 135 in Category)

Rank	University	Predicted Rate	Actual Rate	Difference
1	Florida National University	23%	57%	34%
2	Inter American University of Puerto Rico--San German	26%	45%	19%
3	Universidad Adventista de las Antillas	29%	46%	17%
4	Everglades University	40%	56%	16%
4	Inter American University of Puerto Rico—Aguadilla	20%	36%	16%
6	North Carolina Central University	39%	51%	12%
6	Inter American University of Puerto Rico—Arecibo	24%	36%	12%
8	Midway University	48%	59%	11%
9	Cumberland University	43%	53%	10%
9	Fort Valley State University	35%	45%	10%
9	Arkansas Tech University	37%	47%	10%
9	Grambling State University	27%	37%	10%
13	Longwood University	57%	65%	8%

APPENDIX III. Retention Trends for Key Sub-Groups

GAPS HAVE IMPROVED BUT SOME PERSIST

Both first-generation college students and Pell students have showed improved retention from year 1 to 2. The gaps between Black students and the overall rate have been fairly flat. Asian students from the 2022 Cohort retain at 94% (up from 64%).

Retention Rates

White n = 5,120	90%	79%	90%	80%
American Indian n = 18	75%	56%	100%	50%
Asian n = 98	81%	64%	100%	94%
Black n = 752	84%	70%	90%	70%
Hispanic n = 427	89%	75%	88%	78%
Multiracial n = 344	88%	75%	90%	71%
NR Alien n = 73	92%	69%	88%	63%
Unknown n = 193	83%	69%	88%	71%
	Term 1-2 2015-2021	Year 1-2 2015-2021	Term 1-2 2022 Cohort	Year 1-2 2022 Cohort

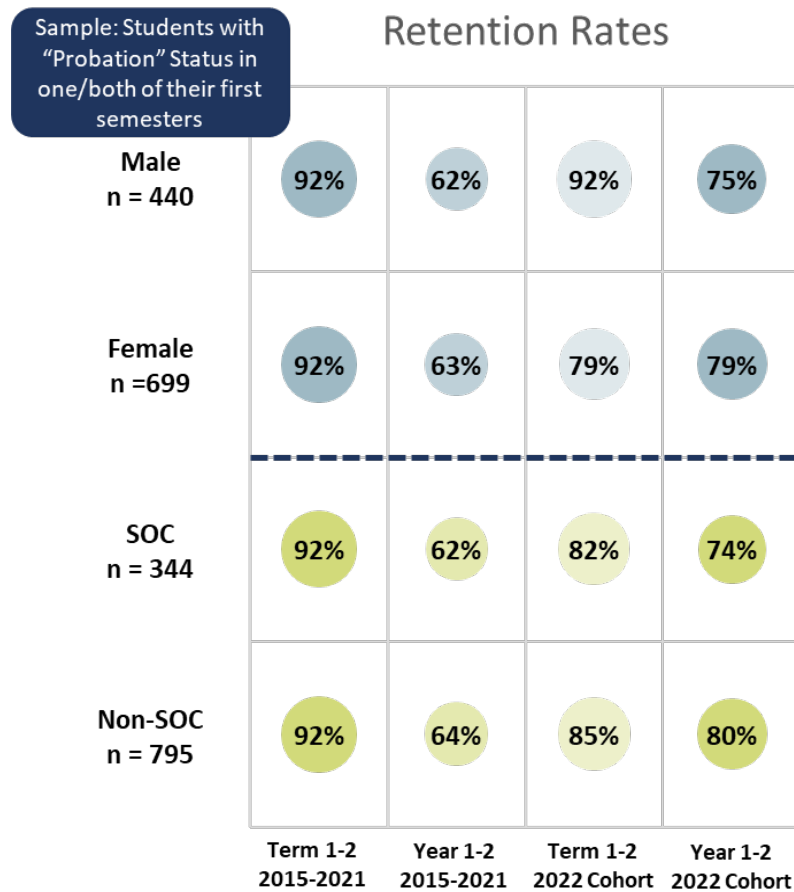
Retention rate = # students returning in term/year 2 divided by # of students enrolled in term/year 1

Retention Rates

Female n = 4,843	90%	78%	91%	79%
Male n = 2,182	85%	73%	88%	75%
First Gen n = 2,219	87%	73%	92%	77%
Non-First Gen n = 4,806	89%	78%	90%	79%
Legacy n = 1,016	91%	83%	83%	79%
Non-Legacy n = 6,009	88%	75%	91%	78%
Pell Eligible n = 2,041	86%	71%	89%	76%
Non-Pell Eligible n = 4,984	89%	78%	91%	79%
	Term 1-2 2015-2021	Year 1-2 2015-2021	Term 1-2 2022 Cohort	Year 1-2 2022 Cohort

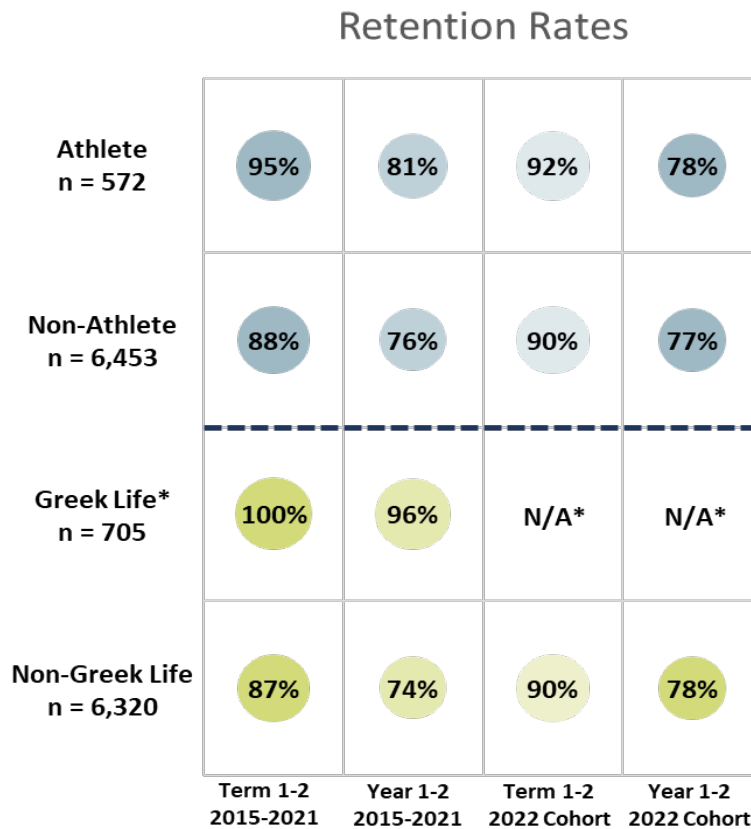
STUDENTS ON PROBATION REQUIRE INTENTIONAL SUPPORT

Retention rates for students on probation have recovered amongst all groups when comparing retention by year. Pell students on probation, in particular, retain nearly 20% more in 2022 than in previous years. (SOC = Students of Color).



APPENDIX IV. Further Predictors of Retention and “Decision Tree” Predictive Analysis

STUDENTS INVOLVED IN INTENSIVE COMMUNITIES SUCH AS
GREEK LIFE RETAIN WELL.



**Deferred recruitment for Greek Life for Fall 2022 Cohort*

Retention Rates by Incoming Credits

Associate Degree n = 181	93%	85%	93%	93%
AP Credits n = 867	96%	90%	96%	90%
IB Credits n = 42	100%	87%	100%	92%
DE Credits n = 2,387	92%	83%	92%	84%
	Term 1-2 2015-2021	Year 1-2 2015-2021	Term 1-2 2022 Cohort	Year 1-2 2022 Cohort

Retention Rates

Pell Eligible n = 2,041	85%	69%	90%	76%
Non-Pell Eligible n = 4,984	90%	80%	90%	79%
Aid Applicant n = 6,210	88%	77%	91%	78%
Non-Aid Applicant n = 815	92%	76%	87%	78%
Work Study** n = 1,572	87%	73%	92%	77%
Non-Work Study n = 4,638	89%	78%	90%	78%
	Term 1-2 2015-2021	Year 1-2 2015-2021	Term 1-2 2022 Cohort	Year 1-2 2022 Cohort

***Work study is only offered to aid applicants*

STUDENTS RECEIVING INSTITUTIONAL GRANTS RETAIN MORE

Students with over 64.5% of need met and more than \$4,000 in institutional grants are more likely to retain to the next term and into the next academic year. Retention is lowest for students with no institutional grants and students with 22.2%-37.5% of need met (note: the proportion of students with greater than 22.2 % met is increasing, which can affect time-lapse comparisons).

Retention Rates

> 64.5% Need Met	91%	80%	92%	86%
> 47.7% and <=64.5% Need Met	88%	74%	92%	71%
> 37.5% and <=47.7% Need Met	85%	72%	83%	72%
> 22.2% and <=37.5% Need Met	91%	82%	83%	65%
<= 22.2% Need Met	87%	72%	90%	66%
> \$4,000 Institutional Grants	93%	84%	94%	84%
>\$2,000 and <= \$4,000 Institutional Grants	92%	81%	88%	77%
<\$2,000 Institutional Grants	86%	74%	85%	71%
No Institutional Grants	86%	73%	82%	55%
	Term 1-2 2015-2021	Year 1-2 2015-2021	Term 1-2 2022 Cohort	Year 1-2 2022 Cohort

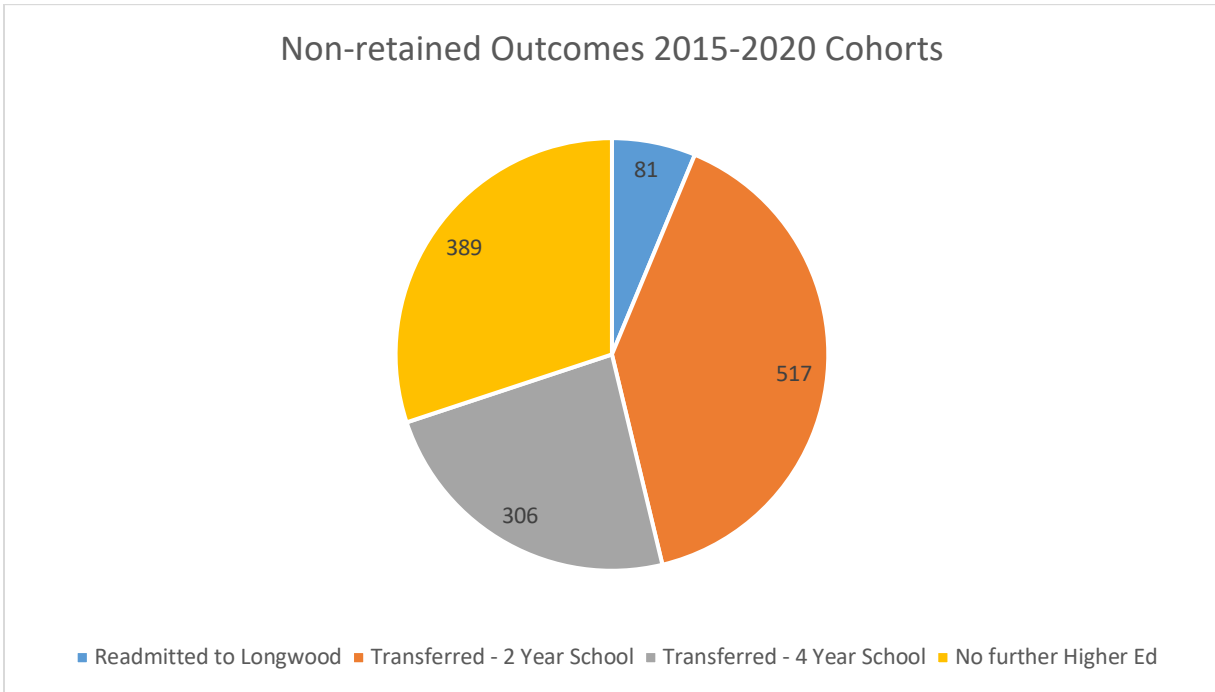
*Percentage need met split into quintiles

**Institutional grants split into quartiles

APPENDIX V. Destination Institutions (via Student Clearinghouse)

Transfer-Out Data, 2015-2020 Cohorts

Source: National Student Clearinghouse. Most students who transfer out appear to eventually enroll elsewhere, most commonly at 2-year colleges.



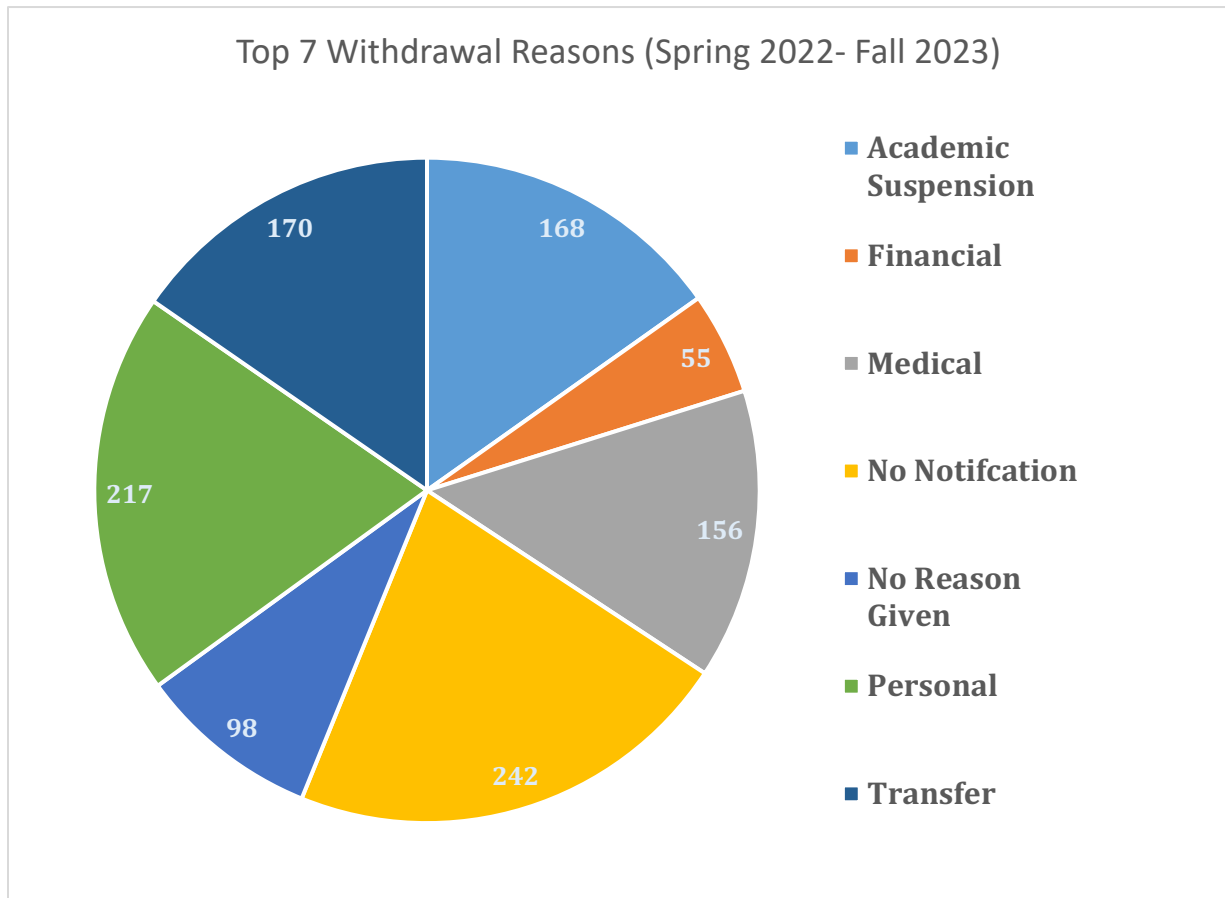
Destination of outgoing students who enroll elsewhere, 2015-2020 cohorts. The majority of students who transfer go to public 2-year institutions.

First Transfer - 2Y School	517
NORTHERN VIRGINIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE	93
BRIGHTPOINT COMMUNITY COLLEGE	83
TIDEWATER COMMUNITY COLLEGE	73
J.SARGEANT REYNOLDS COMMUNITY COLLEGE	46
VIRGINIA PENINSULA COMMUNITY COLLEGE	32
GERMANNA COMMUNITY COLLEGE	31
PIEDMONT VIRGINIA COMM COLLEGE	26
CENTRAL VA COMMUNITY COLLEGE	24
SOUTHSIDE VIRGINIA COMMUNITY CLG	21
LAUREL RIDGE COMMUNITY COLLEGE	16
OTHER	72

First Transfer - 4Y School	306
VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY	57
OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY	25
LIBERTY UNIVERSITY	24
JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY	17
GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY	12
VIRGINIA POLYTECH & STATE UNIV	11
RADFORD UNIVERSITY	9
SOUTHERN NEW HAMPSHIRE-09WEEK	8
CHRISTOPHER NEWPORT UNIVERSITY	7
UNIVERSITY OF MARY WASHINGTON	5
OTHER	131

APPENDIX VI. Exit Survey Data From Withdrawal Forms

For important context on this data, including its limitations, please see Finding 6 above.



APPENDIX VII. Example of an Institutional Advising “Syllabus”

Advising at Roanoke College

Academic advising is central to the mission of Roanoke College. Academic advisors meet individually and in group settings with their first-year students several times each semester, beginning during orientation. Advisors get to know their advisees and provide guidance, especially regarding academic progress and course selection. Advisors often suggest co-curricular and community service activities to encourage students' personal development and involvement in campus culture. Students remain with their initial advisors until they declare majors, usually at some time during the sophomore year. At that time, they are advised by faculty in their major departments. The academic advising of undeclared students is coordinated by the Director of Academic Support Services.

Advising Philosophy

Academic advising is integral to fulfilling the teaching and learning mission of higher education. Through academic advising, students learn to become members of their higher education community, to think critically about their roles and responsibilities as students, and to prepare to be educated citizens of a democratic society and a global community. Academic advising engages students beyond their own world views, while acknowledging their individual characteristics, values, and motivations as they enter, move through, and exit the institution.¹

Expectations

Your advisor will:

- Help you to understand the meaning and relevance of the college experience.
- Assist you in developing and achieving realistic academic and career goals based on interests, abilities, values, and needs.
- Interpret College policies, procedures, and requirements.

- Refer you to appropriate resources, including Student Health and Counseling Services, the Goode-Pasfield Center for Learning and Teaching, Career Services, etc....
- Address your academic questions and concerns.
- Respond to academic questions via roanoke.edu emails.
- Guide you in selection of courses.

You will be expected to:

- Take responsibility for your educational experience.
 - Learn how to access, use and check your university e-mail often.
 - Become familiar with campus resources, including Student Health and Counseling Services, the Goode-Pasfield Center for Learning and Teaching, Career Services, Fintel Library, etc....
 - Maintain contact with your advisor throughout the semester.

 - Come to each advising appointment prepared to ask questions and discuss concerns. You should bring all advising-related materials, this advising syllabus, completed forms, etc.
 - Assess your interests, abilities, values, and needs and be ready to discuss these with your advisor.
 - Clarify your educational, career and personal goals.

 - Use the Academic Catalog and appropriate checksheet(s) and other resources to become knowledgeable of academic requirements, policies, and procedures.
 - Know important dates and deadlines (registration, drop/add, final exams, etc.) as listed on the College's Academic Calendar.
 - Discuss selection of courses with your advisor.
 - Accept responsibility for decisions and actions (or inactions) which affect educational progress and goals.
-

Learning Outcomes²

- Craft a coherent educational plan based on assessment of abilities, aspirations, interests, and values
 - Use complex information from various sources to set goals, reach decisions, and achieve those goals
 - Assume responsibility for meeting academic program requirements

 - Articulate the meaning of higher education and the intent of the Roanoke College curriculum
 - Cultivate the intellectual habits that lead to a lifetime of learning
 - Behave as citizens who engage in the wider world around them
 - Identify and use academic and non-academic support resources
 - Appreciate the value of being involved in the campus community
-

Year-by-year for Students

Freshman Year

- Know who your advisor is and how to contact him/her.
- Learn and accept the differences between high school and college.
- Know that academic advising is different from high school guidance counseling.
- Become familiar with the Intellectual Inquiry and General Education requirements.
- Know how to access checksheets for individual majors, minors and concentrations.
- Become familiar with RC academic calendar/deadlines, add/drop, registration dates, etc.
- Participate in campus activities and join clubs which interest you personally and professionally.
- Develop a high degree of academic integrity.
- Understand the College's expectation for student behavior.
- Learn to manage your time successfully so that you are able to complete assignments and still manage personal responsibilities (including coming to understand that sometimes you cannot do it all).
- Learn to ask for help when you need it rather than attempting to deal with overwhelming situations alone.
- Learn about/take care of financial aid responsibilities, including filing FAFSA on time.
- Discover your own personal learning style and learn how you can use it to be a more successful student.
- Become familiar with campus services (e.g., Center for Learning and Teaching, Career Services, Accessible Education Services, Student Health and Counseling Services, Office of Multicultural Affairs, Fintel Library)
- Visit Career Services and begin to develop a resume, cover letter, and/or portfolio.

² Adapted from NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising. (2006). NACADA concept of academic advising. Retrieved from <https://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Pillars/Concept.aspx>.