

Task Force on Undergraduate Retention and Graduation

In *A Science and Technology Research University for the 21st Century*, NJIT's approved self study design for reaccreditation by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, retention and graduation issues play a significant role. The significance of retention and graduation is also reflected in the *NJIT Strategic Plan, 2010-2015*. **To be recognized for attracting high achieving students and faculty from diverse populations, the plan acknowledges, we must undertake an analysis of the reasons students withdraw and develop and implement retention tactics. It is the purpose of the Task Force on Undergraduate Retention and Graduation to complete an analysis of undergraduate retention and graduation and to recommend tactics for implementation that will yield improvements on both areas.**

The work of the Task Force falls within the context of recent findings on college completion rates, with national initiatives on post-secondary success, and with state demands on higher education's involvement in workforce and economic development. Examples of recent studies and initiatives include the following:

- In *Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America's Public Universities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), William G. Bowen, Matthew M. Chingos, and Michael S. McPherson have completed the new gold standard study on educational attainment at post-secondary public universities. As their study of 21 flagship public universities reveals, attention must be paid to overall US educational attainment, disparities in outcomes, graduation rates, time to degree, and the role of public universities as engines of progress.
- Congruent with such challenges, the Access to Success Initiative, a project of the National Association of System Heads and The Education Trust, works with 24 public higher education systems that have pledged to cut the college-going and graduation gaps for low-income and minority students in half by 2015.
- In New Jersey, *The Report of the Governor's Task Force on Higher Education* (January 4, 2011) recommends that workforce and economic development in New Jersey would be strengthened by a study undertaken to analyze "the extent of the cost of remediation at its colleges and universities, and should adopt a plan to address the issue" (p. 19).

Among the analyses undertaken of retention and graduation at NJIT, the Task Force should pay special attention be to the NJIT undergraduate learning environment, including:

1. The NJIT Remediation Environment. *The Report of the Governor's Task Force on Higher Education* notes that "a surprising number of students entering New Jersey's institutions of higher education require remedial instruction, particularly in English and math. The cost of these courses that repeat material that should have been learned in high school is tens of millions of dollars, diverting resources from higher education" (p. 70). This statement assumes that colleges have articulated criteria of those skills and that

placement tests are in place that reliably and validly identify those skills. As well, the analysis assumes that effective courses are in places that are able to remediate the skills so that student success is the outcome of delayed time to graduation. **The Task Force's report should address the remediation environment at NJIT, the assumptions underlying remediation as they relate to the NJIT mission and its undergraduate degree programs, and the impact of remediation on retention and graduation.** In the analysis of impact, studies such as that of Andrea Venezia, Kathy Reeves Braco, and Thad Nodine in *One Shot Deal? Students' Perceptions of Assessment and Course Placement at California's Community's Colleges* (San Francisco: WestEd, 2010) may be helpful. Quantitative analysis will allow the Task Force to understand more clearly the impact of remediation for both first year and transfer students.

2. **The NJIT Graduation Environment.** Information publicly available under the NJ Student and Parent Consumer Information Act of Graduation Rates (P.L. 2009 Chapter 197 2. a. [1] thru [3]), reveals that NJIT has a 23% graduation rate after 4 years and a 54% total after 6 years. New federal regulations appended to the Higher Education Opportunity Act (Public Law 110-315) require that such graduation rates be posted predominately on all web sites and recruitment materials of the university. State and national demands for accountability and public disclosure necessitate that a great deal of information must be at hand if we are to understand fully barriers to graduation and the best practices that avoid these barriers. **The Task Force's report should address the barriers to graduation at NJIT, including the role of both admissions tests and placement tests. A detailed cohort analysis of the time to graduation for each of our undergraduate programs and their enrolled students, with special attention to factors that best allow us to understand the potential of failure and the prediction of success, should be included. These questions should be framed in a comparative analysis with benchmark schools. While these questions are quantitative in nature, in the report the Task Force should address qualitative questions such as the following: How are students advised, and how is their academic progress monitored? While these questions may involve case studies, they must also be addressed if we are to understand fully the NJIT graduation environment.**
3. **The NJIT Instructional Environment.** Both our regional accreditation agency (Middle States Commission on Higher Education) and our program accreditation agencies (Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology, Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, and National Architectural Accrediting Board) require assessment of student learning activities. How do these initiatives impact student learning? **Specifically, when student learning is assessed, what is done with the information, and what is the relationship of that process to improved student retention and timely graduation? Besides student learning assessment, new initiatives such as the development of learning communities promise to improve student success. How are we defining learning communities, and how are they to be assessed so that their value added to retention and graduation may be understood? How may we better understand the impact of such initiatives on retention and graduation? Finally, the number and kind of courses taken in fulfillment of the major and of the General University Requirements have an impact on time to**

graduation, yet the extent of that impact is undetermined. A third aspect of the report is to examine, analyze, and interpret the undergraduate learning environment.

4. Recommendations for the Future. **This aspect of the report should focus on evidence-based recommendations for the future. Following the ViSTA model, these recommendations should be presented in terms of a vision for student retention and graduation, as well as strategies, objectives, tactics, and metrics for the achievement of that vision.** Presenting recommendations in this form will allow a report that will be able to be implemented as part of the *Strategic Plan, 2010-2015*.

Each of these analyses should be examined in terms of the gender and ethnicity of our diverse student population.