Arizona's Universities
Student Success

CONCLUSION: The State's universities—Arizona State University (ASU), Northern Arizona University (NAU), and the University of Arizona (UA)—have established goals and appropriate strategies for improving student retention and graduation rates and can further enhance these efforts by more consistently evaluating their strategies and improving their strategic plans. The Arizona Board of Regents (ABOR) worked with the universities to establish student retention and graduation goals for each university to meet by 2025, and all three universities have developed multiple strategies that may help them achieve these goals by addressing common obstacles students face to staying in school and graduating in a timely manner. However, the universities' evaluations of these strategies did not always address important evaluation components. Therefore, they should develop and implement university-wide guidance to more consistently evaluate their student retention and graduation strategies that aligns with program evaluation best practices. In addition, although the universities' strategic plans include some best practice components, they should better align their strategic plans with their student retention and graduation goals and strategic-planning best practices.

Universities have established goals and designed numerous strategies to increase student retention and graduation rates

ABOR and the universities have established student retention and graduation goals—ABOR oversees the activities of and sets strategic priorities for the universities. Since 2008, one of ABOR's strategic priorities has been increasing the number of Arizonans with a college degree, which it refers to as educational attainment. To increase Arizona's educational attainment, ABOR worked with the universities to establish four student retention and graduation goals for each university to meet by 2025. These goals, which incorporate specific targets for each university, are:

- Increasing the percentage of freshman students who remain enrolled in the university;
- Increasing the percentage of undergraduate students who graduate with a bachelor's degree within 6 years;
- Increasing the number of bachelor's degrees awarded to all students; and
- Increasing the number of bachelor's degrees awarded to Arizona community college transfer students.

Improving educational attainment may provide various benefits to the State and the universities, including increasing citizens' earnings, which could result in higher consumer spending, and increased tuition revenues for the universities.

ASU, NAU, and UA have designed numerous strategies to increase student retention and graduation rates by addressing common academic, financial, and social obstacles—Literature identifies common obstacles that could prevent students from staying in school and graduating in a timely manner, including academic, financial, and social obstacles. Additionally, literature indicates that low-income, first-generation, transfer, and minority students are more likely to face multiple academic, financial, and social obstacles to staying in school and graduating in a timely manner, and the universities enroll large numbers of students in these four groups. ASU, NAU, and UA have designed numerous strategies consistent with those identified in literature to help students overcome common academic, financial, and social obstacles, including developing transfer agreements with Arizona community colleges to help transfer students understand how specific courses completed at a community college will transfer to their universities, targeting financial assistance to high-need students, and providing students with peer and staff mentoring and support.

Universities should establish guidance for more consistently evaluating student retention and graduation strategies

Program evaluation can enhance student retention and graduation strategies—Program evaluation is a study of how well a program is working and can help guide a university's implementation and revision of its student

retention and graduation strategies. Specifically, evaluating strategies can provide the universities with important information on whether a strategy effectively addresses a common obstacle to staying in school and graduating in a timely manner, what additional actions a university could take to improve a strategy and better help students, and how to allocate limited resources to the most effective strategies.

Universities' evaluations of student retention and graduation strategies did not always address important evaluation components—We reviewed the evaluations of nine student retention and graduation strategies that the universities had implemented—three at each university—and found that the universities had conducted evaluations of each of the reviewed strategies. However, the universities' evaluations did not consistently address two evaluation components: assessing whether the strategy achieved its purpose of helping students overcome the common obstacle the strategy was designed to address and accounting for self-selection bias, which occurs when participants' likelihood of participating in a program or strategy is correlated with the intended outcome of that strategy. Four of the nine evaluations we reviewed assessed whether the strategy achieved its purpose of addressing a common obstacle and accounted for self-selection bias, when appropriate. The remaining five evaluations did not assess whether the strategy achieved its purpose and/or did not account for self-selection bias. Although each university has existing approaches for evaluating academic programs, the universities have not established formal, university-wide approaches for evaluating their student retention and graduation strategies.

Recommendation

ASU, UA, and NAU should continue efforts to develop university-wide approaches for evaluating their student retention and graduation strategies, including developing related policies, procedures, and/or guidance.

Universities should improve strategic plans to help achieve student retention and graduation goals

Strategic planning can help universities achieve student retention and graduation goals—Strategic planning can help the universities achieve their student retention and graduation goals by guiding resource allocation, staff activities, and the implementation of strategies for addressing common obstacles that can prevent students from staying in school and graduating in a timely manner. Additionally, strategic planning establishes a foundation for performance measurement by which university leaders can monitor progress toward goals and identify and remedy any issues that may prevent a university from reaching those goals.

Universities developed strategic plans but should further align them with student retention and graduation goals and best practices—Each university has developed a university-wide strategic plan and other strategic plans and related planning documents (strategic plans) focused on specific areas, including their efforts to achieve their student retention and graduation goals. Strategic-planning best practices identify three components that should be included in a strategic plan—objectives, performance measures, and action plans—that collectively work together to help an entity achieve the goals in its strategic plans. We found that, although the universities' strategic plans included some components recommended by strategic-planning best practices, the universities should improve their strategic plans by developing additional components and/or further aligning the components with the university's student retention and graduation goals. Where appropriate, this would include developing additional objectives, performance measures, and/or action plans.

Recommendations

Where appropriate, ASU, NAU, and UA should each:

- Develop an objective for one or more of its student retention and graduation goals, and determine whether developing multiple objectives for each goal would be appropriate;
- Develop performance measures for and/or revise existing performance measures to assess the progress of its strategies and tasks for achieving its student retention and graduation goals, and consider using a combination of different performance measures; and
- Revise or continue efforts to develop action plans for its student retention and graduation goals that include the strategies and tasks that will be implemented to achieve each goal and/or to specify deadlines and the parties responsible for implementing each strategy.