

UW-Oshkosh “Graduation Project”

August 18, 2004

Wisconsin lags behind neighboring states, and the national average, in the percentage of state residents holding a baccalaureate degree (the state ranks 32nd nationally in the share of adults with bachelor’s degrees). As a consequence Wisconsin has proportionally fewer educated workers than other states and state workers have lower average earnings than other states. It is imperative that the state consider new proposals with the potential to increase the number of bachelor’s degree holders.

UW-Oshkosh’s “Graduation Project” is modeled on a successful project implemented in 1996 at the University of New Mexico. Under the direction of Associate Provost David Stuart, UNM’s Graduation Project identifies students who left the University in good academic standing close to completing their bachelor’s degree and entices them to return to complete their degree. When the Project began in 1996, more than 3,000 UNM students who had maintained at least a 2.0 grade point average and had achieved senior status were identified. These students were contacted and invited to return; their re-entry was supported by a shortened re-admission process, waiver of application fee, a degree-audit summary clearly identifying courses needed for graduation, priority enrollment in classes, and personal assistance if problems arose. Special tuition assistance was available to returning students who maintained or achieved a GPA of 2.50 or higher.

Of UNM’s original 3,000 students, more than 800 responded, and eventually 180 enrolled as returning students. Since the Program’s inception more than 2,000 students have returned to the University, and of these over 1,000 have completed their bachelor’s degree.

After learning of the University of New Mexico Graduation Project, Chancellor Richard Wells directed that UW-Oshkosh undertake a similar project, on a “pilot” basis. An initial query identified more than 750 UW-Oshkosh students who had achieved senior status and maintained a GPA of 2.00 or higher, but left the University within the past five years without completing their degree. By raising the GPA to 2.50 or higher, highlighting students within one semester of graduation, and identifying students who had transferred to and graduated from another institution, the initial group of 750 was reduced to a pilot group of 100 students.

The University has obtained current addresses for these students, and has run degree-audit reports that are currently being reviewed by academic advisors. This review will identify specific course requirements remaining for the student’s successful degree completion.

By mid-September, the University will contact the students in the pilot group and invite them to return to the University. This invitation will include the student's degree audit report and the name and contact information for the Graduation Project director. Returning students will receive priority enrollment for needed courses.

Because the students in the UW-Oshkosh pilot group have higher GPAs and more credits earned than the initial New Mexico group, we expect that our yield rates (both the follow-up and participation rates for the pilot group) will be higher. Our initial projection is that of the 100 students in the pilot group, between 12 and 15 will re-enroll at UW-Oshkosh.

Through its pilot Graduation Project, UW-Oshkosh will gain valuable knowledge of the particular needs of these returning students and both the short-term and long-term resource implications. The returning students will need focused attention from campus staff and specific courses to complete their degrees.

The University of New Mexico has an annual headcount enrollment of 25,000. UW-System's annual headcount (excluding students at the two-year UW's) is 148,000. In the first year of their Graduation Project UNM identified 3,000 targeted students. Extrapolating this ratio suggests that UW-System would identify more than 17,500 students in good academic standing who had achieved senior status but left without completing their baccalaureate degree.

In eight years New Mexico's graduation project has resulted in 2,000 targeted students re-enrolling, with 1,000 completing their baccalaureate degree. Because we have integrated resources across the UW-System, a System-wide Graduation Project should at least do as well, and more likely improve on UNM's results. Over five years, at least 4,000 and perhaps as many as 5,000 additional UW-System students would complete their baccalaureate degree as a consequence of a System-wide Graduation Project.

In terms of residency status, UW-System's headcount is 80% resident, 11% non-resident, and 9% compact. It is probable that a significantly higher percentage of students following up to a System-wide Graduation Project would be Wisconsin residents; our prediction is that this could reach 95%.

There is a strong rationale for a comprehensive UW-System Graduation Project. The state has already invested substantial resources in the UW-System students who would participate, as have the students themselves and their families. The return-on-investment to the state in terms of an increase in the percentage of residents holding a baccalaureate degree would be very significant.