



RESPONDING TO THE
**student retention
challenge**



I IN OCTOBER 2006 ...

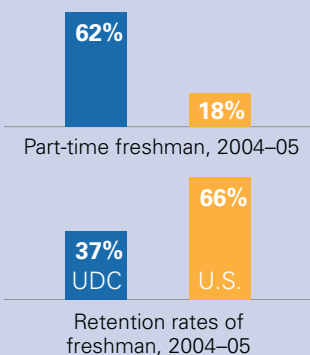
... a new coalition of leaders from Washington, DC's education, government, business, and civic sectors published a landmark report that focused significant attention on how few of the City's public school and public charter school students graduate from high school and college "on time." Of the class of students who entered 9th grade in 2001, only 9 percent graduated from high school within five years, enrolled in college within 18 months, and earned a four-year degree within five years, according to research conducted by the Bridgespan Group (*Double the Numbers for College Success*). That performance is far lower than the national average (23 percent) and not nearly good enough to ensure that young adults in DC have opportunities to succeed in the 21st century.

KEY CHALLENGES

As the institution that enrolls about one-third of DC public school graduates, the University of the District of Columbia (UDC) drew special attention in the report for our "essential but difficult role." Among the realities:

- Our open-admissions policy enrolls some of the City's highest-needs students, who on average have lower grade point averages (GPAs) and SAT scores;
- The majority of our students work full time;
- A disproportionate number of our freshmen are only part time (62 percent versus the U.S. average of 18 percent);
- Huge percentages require remedial courses — 70 percent in reading, 79 percent in basic math; and
- As UDC leaders pointed out in fall 2004, too many of our students lack a sense of belonging, advising programs are limited, student support services are uncoordinated, customer service is poor, and data are inadequate to inform decisions.

High percentage of part-time students contributes to low retention



Given factors such as these, it is not surprising that UDC's retention rate (37 percent) in 2004 was about half the national average (66 percent) for public undergraduate programs.

At the same time, the Double the Numbers research also singled out UDC's commitment to reform, which already was well under way. This report documents our progress in keeping that commitment and, in the process, helping more students earn a degree that will open doors to their futures.



III. CHALLENGING GOALS, promising progress

Since the mid-2000s, we have been implementing a multipart strategy to ensure that UDC provides more of the supports that our students need to stay in school and, ultimately, to graduate. Our goals are ambitious (see Retention Plan Goals sidebar at right). And they are driven by several underlying principles: Efforts must be universitywide and comprehensive, research-based and assessment-focused, and goal-oriented and data-driven. We have been making progress on several fronts.

A BROAD-BASED, COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

To help develop and oversee our strategies, UDC established a universitywide Student Retention Committee, which includes students, faculty, staff, and administrators. Subcommittees meet regularly to discuss and update each component of our plan.

PROACTIVE ADVISING

With the addition of five full-time academic advisers, we are now providing much more guidance to students on everything from career planning and course options to the availability of financial aid. Regular advisory sessions are now mandatory for all UDC students at least twice a semester. These new advisers supplement the support traditionally provided by faculty advisers, and they are especially beneficial for the many students who have not yet declared a major.



RETENTION PLAN GOALS

- ✓ Increase student retention rates by 5% each year
- ✓ Develop and implement a strategic recruitment and enrollment management plan
- ✓ Develop and execute a comprehensive academic advising plan
- ✓ Increase the quality and effectiveness of teaching
- ✓ Provide out-of-class “connection” opportunities
- ✓ Enhance customer service



EXPANDED LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Based on a successful pilot (100 percent retention rate) with 25 science, technology, engineering, and mathematics students last year, we have expanded this group-mentoring and peer-tutoring program to other students.

INCREASED COLLABORATION BETWEEN ACADEMIC AFFAIRS AND STUDENT AFFAIRS

To ensure a more seamless provision of services to students, the two offices have initiated a few programs:

- TEAM 100, through which 100 students participate with faculty mentors in workshops, addressing issues such as time management, financial literacy, goal setting, study skills, writing skills, and transition to college life;
- The 4.0 Lounge, where student study groups gather in what used to be a pool hall;
- Early alerts, so faculty can give the counseling and career development offices a more timely heads-up on student absences; and
- The BEAMS team (details below).

BEAMS (BUILDING ENGAGEMENT AND ACHIEVEMENT FOR MINORITY STUDENTS) TEAM

UDC is one of 100 schools participating in this national initiative that fosters data-driven improvements at historically black, Hispanic-serving, and tribal colleges and universities. We leveraged our participation to create a highly regarded professional development program (see next page). A report by the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) and BEAMS found “[t]he BEAMS project at UDC has been successful because of multiple factors on campus. ... The team’s creativity in identifying internal resources was particularly valuable in the development of a project that has involved the broader campus community.”

EXPANDED FRESHMEN ORIENTATION COURSE

Traditionally, UDC has provided guidance and information to first-year students about how to navigate college life generally and UDC specifically, but we also are developing modules that are relevant to older students as well.

STUDENT RETENTION COMMITMENT PLEDGE

I pledge to uphold the mission and high standards of the University of the District of Columbia; to hold as fundamental and worthy the academic success of all students; to promote by my words and my actions the principles of achievement, character, community, and excellence; and to support the student retention initiative by helping to create connections for student success.



MORE FOCUSED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Myrtilla Miner Professional Development Academy (MMPDA), named for one of UDC's founders, offers monthly workshops and presentations by faculty, student, staff, and outside experts to help strengthen student learning and retention. Topics include academic advisement, assessments, online teaching and learning, and undergraduate student research. "MMPDA is the crown jewel of UDC's student retention effort and has become a continuing education think tank for improving curricula and services related to engagement and enhanced student learning through the vibrant exchange of ideas and best practices," according to a March 2008 report from IHEP and BEAMS.

IMPROVED CUSTOMER SERVICE AND CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT

Based on feedback from the National Survey of Student Engagement, we are broadly encouraging students, faculty, and staff to submit suggestions for improvement in areas from hours of operation to registration procedures. In response to student demand concerning access, Student Services is now open into the evening, and we have simplified how students can have their transfer credits validated.

In addition, systematic assessment has become part of the campus culture, from academics to counseling, and we are using the data to adjust our programs. For example, when a fall 2007 survey found overwhelming dissatisfaction with the UDC advising program (particularly for nondeclared students), we added five advisers and established a Center for Academic Advising in fall 2009.

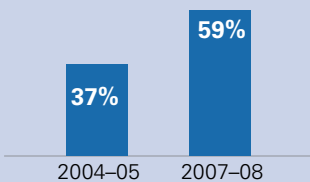
HIGHER EXPECTATIONS

To help all students understand that they should strive for excellence, entering freshmen now must sign the Student Retention Commitment Pledge (see top of this page), which faculty and staff reinforce throughout the year. Such explicit reinforcement is especially important for our many first-generation students.



III ALREADY getting results ...

Improved retention rates



Sources: UDC Office of Institutional Research

As a result of initiatives such as these, we have improved our retention rate from 37 percent in 2004–05 to 59 percent in 2007–08.

Evaluations by faculty, students, and deans indicate that the effectiveness of teaching has improved.

Many more students are participating in out-of-classroom experiences, such as research projects, that help them build relationships with faculty members.

Customer satisfaction surveys indicate that the level, quality, and coordination of student support services have improved.

Our summer remediation program has won national recognition. A 2007 *Washington Post* profile (“UDC Counteracts Damage Wrought by D.C. Schools”) of our successful eight-week remedial math program found:

“It took year upon year of massive failure for [UDC physics professor Daryao] Khatri to decide that ‘if all these students are failing, it’s my fault, so I have to change.’ He did. Now he runs a tight ship in the classroom, demands hard work and devotes extra hours to working with students on basic skills. Since the summer program began, Khatri and [colleague Mahdi] Hajiani have seen their retention rates — the portion of students who complete their courses — skyrocket.”

... AND CONTINUOUSLY improving

Building on these early gains, we have identified several priorities for the 2009–10 school year. With the addition of a new Director of the First-Year Experience, we will expand our offerings to freshmen, including a Summer Bridge program and Freshman Seminar. We will launch the Scholars on a Roll (SOAR⁴) learning community, which will target assistance to the many students needing remedial instruction. We will roll out expanded offerings to sophomores through Project SHINE. And, in response to an additional priority identified by the Double the Numbers report, we are taking steps to strengthen and separate our many community college offerings.

The 2006 Bridgespan Group report said, “Improving UDC’s success is inextricably linked to the success of thousands of DC students and this effort [to double the numbers of students who enroll in and graduate from college].” We agree ... and remain even more strongly committed to doing our part to meet this worthy community goal.