August 21, 2013

MEMO

To: NC State Faculty Instructors

From: Dr. Mike Mullen
Vice Chancellor and Dean

Re: Student Success at NC State

Dear Colleagues,

Welcome back to the Fall Semester for 2013! I hope that this time of year is as exciting for you as it has always been for me. I enjoy seeing new students arrive on campus, ready for this big step in education and personal growth. As we are opening the new academic year, I wanted to share a few thoughts.

First, allow me to introduce myself to many of you. I just finished my first year at NC State providing leadership to the Division of Academic and Student Affairs, which was formed from the merger of the Divisions of Student Affairs and Undergraduate Academic Programs in July 2012. This reorganization united two divisions with the mission to support student success outside of the college. As an alumnus of NC State (PhD, Soil Science, 1987) I have found the experience to be a gratifying one.

Student Success at NC State is goal one of our strategic plan. Success can be measured in any number of ways. Official measures used in the media and government includes our retention rate for first year, first time freshmen and our 6-year graduation rate. We do very well on retention, with a first year rate in excess of 92% for the fall 2012 cohort. This rate compares very favorably with our peer institutions. However, once our students return for the second year, that persistence drops off, and our 6-year graduation rate is about 72%. That is quite low compared with our overall peer group, which has an average 6-year graduation rate of 77%. And, compared with some our aspirational peers, we are very low indeed. For example, Georgia Tech, Texas A&M, Virginia Tech, and UC-Davis have 6-year rates of 79, 80, 82, and 86% respectively. Our retention is as good as at those institutions, but we lose far more rising juniors and seniors than they do (see http://upa.ncsu.edu/ir/rate/retention-grad-rates-comparison).

There are a number of reasons for this attrition: financial concerns, family issues, lack of perceived fit at NC State, problems moving into majors internally, or not having the desired major to transfer into. About 18% of our students in a given cohort actually leave NC State in good academic standing, while only about 6-7% leave on probation or suspension. As an institution, this is not acceptable, we invest in these students and we need to find ways to see that investment pay off for these students in realized baccalaureate degrees.

Our goal is to move our retention rate to 94% or better, and to achieve a 6-year graduation rate of at least 80%. Given the quality of the incoming students, the retention rate should be relatively easy to achieve. Graduation rates are lagging indicators and will take longer to improve. However, I think of success as being more than the numbers given above. It should also be about the quality of the educational experience, which often impacts that graduation rate. As we think about the quality of the experience, we are really talking about making the exceptional opportunities in and out of the classroom available to more students, to engage them in the life of the institution and in our own research and creative endeavors. Our own strategic plan identifies that we want students to experience more high-impact educational activities – activities that enhance their learning and prepare them for their futures. These include first-year seminars and experiences, common learning experiences and learning communities, participation in Learning and Living Villages in residence halls, study abroad and other diversity and global activities, research and creative work with faculty, internships, writing intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects and integrative capstone courses and projects. We offer opportunities in most of these areas already, and our plans are to make more opportunities available.
in the next few years. We want as many students as possible to take advantage of all that a great research university has to offer. And, this year, we will also be ramping up our efforts on our new Quality Enhancement Plan – the THINK plan – to enhance our students’ critical and creative thinking. You will be hearing more about the THINK plan in a separate communication. I encourage you to be involved in this effort in the next several years as we build the program.

Essentially, a key to our students persisting and graduating is engagement with the university in many ways. As is suggested by the activities listed above, engagement with faculty, in and out of the classroom is very important. And messages from faculty about the importance of their education and time at NC State can make a difference.

Given our institutional goal to enhance student success, I ask that you think about how you can provide the message that your students’ success is important, particularly in those first and second year courses. Here are some things you might want to consider discussing with your students during this first week of classes.

Time Commitment: How much time do you expect your students to spend preparing for and reviewing the materials for your class? In a recent NC State survey (National Survey of Student Engagement – 2011), 52% of first year students reported studying 15 hours or less per week. Are we challenging our students? Our seniors tell us through the same survey that we may not be challenging them enough, with fewer than 55% studying 15 hours or less per week. Tell them what it takes to be successful.

Attendance: Do you stress attendance? Attendance is a very strong indicator of student academic success. Even if you do not require attendance, discuss the importance of attendance to success in your class. Emphasize the fact that there are activities during class that are in addition to the outside readings and assignments and that missing these will negatively impact their learning, and of course, their grades. Of course, we must also make sure that our class time does indeed offer up challenges, content and activities beyond what can be gotten from the text or someone else’s notes!

Class Participation: How would you like for your students to participate in your class? Can you give students suggestions for preparing for class such as bringing questions or simply arriving on time and reviewing notes? Are there short activities you can add to your class to enhance the engagement of students with the material? If you are interested in ideas for your class, consider contacting the Office of Faculty Development (http://ofd.ncsu.edu/).

Academic Support: Let students know about support outside of class. Talk about your office hours, and any tutoring or other support available in your department or college. You may also want to refer students to the Undergraduate Tutorial Center (http://tutorial.ncsu.edu). Students can get tutoring assistance in a variety of gateway science, English, and language courses there. And, we also have writing and speaking support services in the Tutorial Center for undergraduates and graduate students.

Academic Progress Reports: If you have students who are missing class or performing poorly on homework or tests, especially during the first two to three weeks of the semester, please consider submitting an Academic Progress Report. The Academic Progress Reporting system is located in MyPACK Portal under the Faculty Center. Using this system you can communicate information about course performance to the student and their advisor. Progress reports are also available for viewing in the Advising Dashboard in MyPACK Portal. Early notification and intervention provides the best opportunity for improving student outcomes.

Finally interaction with you, with faculty, is important. Stress office hours, review sessions, and other opportunities to talk with students. Tell them why your discipline is exciting to you, why what they are studying is important. Discuss your research; perhaps encouraging students to consider undergraduate research opportunities in your field. Talk about the value of internships, study abroad, service learning, clubs and organizations and other activities in your department or college that tie the student back to the major in concrete ways.

I wish you all the best this coming year. And, I thank you for your part in helping our students find their way to their ultimate goal, a degree from NC State. I will be reaching out to faculty during the coming year to discuss these and other issues. Please do feel free to contact me if you would like to discuss student success issues or to learn more about the Division of Academic and Student Affairs.