

October 28, 2024

Dear President Granberg, Provost Bracey, Professor Feldman, and members of the Innovation and Steering Committees:

We are writing as the Co-chairs of the university's Educational Policy and Technology (EPT) committee of the Faculty Senate with recommendations to advance the strategic planning process as it relates to undergraduate education. These recommendations address the university's first-to-second year and second-to-third year retention rates, and its six-year graduation rate.

EPT is composed of 54 members, faculty, staff, and students, from across GWU. The committee's mission is to examine educational and academic technology-related issues affecting GW and recommend policies in these areas. More specifically, for this academic year, the Faculty Senate Executive Committee has charged EPT to "proactively engage with the strategic planning process as the framework is developed this year."

The Strategic Framework rightly highlights the importance of undergraduate education, specifically that of "providing an educational experience that is both distinctive and of the highest quality." GWU faces a strategic threat from nationwide trends, including a declining college-age population in the United States, the continued decline of international enrollment, and COVID-related challenges to academic preparedness. This "demographic cliff" and national "learning loss" mean that competition for high-quality undergraduate students will become increasingly stiff, even while the university will be increasingly judged by its ability to recruit, retain, and graduate its students.

EPT, therefore, recommends that the university establish a set of clear and measurable goals for undergraduate education over the next decade, specifically related to six-year graduation rates and student retention (first-to-second year and second-to-third year).

First, *we recommend that the university establish a six-year graduation goal of 90% and identify a year by which it aspires to reach that goal (e.g., by 2034).* While it varies by year, our current graduation rate is about 85%. A 90% six-year graduation rate is an ambitious but reachable goal that has already been achieved by schools in our market basket and that would help bolster GWU's reputation for national excellence.

Graduation rates are widely considered one of the most important ways to communicate the value of a GWU education to prospective students, even as it crosses the \$100,000/year tuition threshold.

Students and their families increasingly look to graduation rates nationwide as evidence that the investment in an expensive education will “pay off” with a degree. Competitive graduation rates also demonstrate that students enrolled at a university enjoy their time there, as they do not transfer or leave. It signals that students care about GWU, want to remain here, and successfully complete their studies. There is no better way to measure or evaluate the student experience.

Furthermore, high graduation rates enhance the ability to attract and retain students because they are the most important factor in a university’s national reputation. Popular rankings for national universities have largely become indices of graduation rates. For example, the new *US News and World Report* methodology treats graduation rates as 47% of the overall basis for ranking national universities that are test optional. By contrast, the collective weight *US News* assigns to research is only 4%. Other ranking systems, such as the *Wall Street Journal* and *Forbes* rankings, also emphasize graduation rates and it is the top piece of data highlighted by the Department of Education’s Scorecard for universities.

Finally, we want to highlight the urgency of the graduation rate issue. There is clear evidence that low or falling graduation rates precede university crises in enrollments and, thus, finances. The universities around the country experiencing the most financial stress, such as American University and Drexel, missed their undergraduate enrollment targets. Such failures were typically preceded by falling national rankings, which were driven lower by poor six-year graduation rates. Our market basket schools have struggled but many have reached this plateau (e.g., Georgetown, USC, Wake Forest, and BU) and many are close (e.g., Tulane). These universities are realizing the rewards with enrollment booms, improved national rankings, higher quality students, and, as a result, enhanced resources that can then be used for research and other priorities. We are more likely to be successful if we plan for success, set measurable goals, and engage in a strategic framework that is likely to advance them.

Second, we recommend that *GWU sets clear, nearer-term benchmark goals for first-to-second and first-to-third year retention (e.g., 95% first-to-second year retention and 92% first-to-third year retention) as early metrics to identify progress toward the end goal of reaching a 90% six-year graduation rate.*

Student retention is critical. Most students who depart GWU (and therefore do not graduate from the university in six years) do so after their first year, and the remainder largely depart after their second year. Establishing near-term benchmarks enables accountability and short-term measures of progress on the six-year graduation rate (which, of course, cannot be measured for many years from the inception of the strategic plan).

Third, *we recommend that the six-year graduation rate and the first-to-second year and first-to-third year retention rates be used as the standard by which to evaluate the efficacy of major new endeavors.*

While the main goal is an improved six-year graduation rate, the problem with this goal is that it is long term with a six-year lag. Capturing retention data is a way of measuring six-year graduation rates with a one-year (for first-to-second) and two-year (for first-to-third) rather than six-year lag. A focus on retention data is also useful because it focuses on the freshmen year, when most students tend to transfer. From a policy perspective, measuring retention is critical to encouraging the development of policies and programs most likely to boost graduation rates.

There are well-known levers for enhancing graduation and retention rates, including:

- Meeting Students' Demonstrated Financial Need
- Improving Students' First Year Experience
- Re-envisioning and Strengthening Special Programs such as University Honors

In crafting the Strategic Framework, a key question should be whether funding a specific program, institute, or initiative will enhance graduation and retention rates. Along the same lines, having clear, measurable goals will allow costs to be fully apparent and decision-making to be effective.

These observations and recommendations are based on the continuing work of the Educational Policy and Technology committee. We look forward to partnering in the strategic planning process and providing input before the plan is presented to the university community at large.

Sincerely,

Sarah Wagner

Irene Foster

Co-chairs Educational Policy and Technology Committee