

Academic Affairs Student Success Taskforce

Final Report – May 2025

Charges

- Identify student success goals for reorganization and venues for divisions to encourage open discussion about student progress
- Communicate reorganization to students, working with institution-wide communication offices
- Seek feedback from Academic Affairs Department Merger & Curriculum Synergies ad-hoc committee on reorganization and from student government and student groups
- Collaborate with faculty and staff to identify resources and support structures for student involvement in opportunities
- Identify opportunities for students to engage with the two Unit structure through undergraduate research, entrepreneurship programs, community projects, experiential programs and projects

Introduction

In early discussions, it became clear that this taskforce would consider campus-wide student success instead of limiting discussions to the SOP / SOE merger. After the initial open discussion of student success in general and at Buffalo State, ideas were organized into four topics for which committees were formed:

Find Your Way

This committee considered ways to support students in taking more ownership of their academic journey and better understanding academic options, opportunities, and roadmaps.

Introduction to Buffalo State / First Year Success

Attention is given to a student's first semester at Buffalo State, but the entire first year is critical to student success. This committee looked at ways to improve the first year experience both academically and in ways that increase students' sense of being part of the Buffalo State community.

Continued Student Success

Although a student's first year sets the foundation for their success, it is important to continue support for and engagement in their success throughout their time at Buffalo State. It is also important to include graduate student success when discussing ways to improve student success across campus.

Communications and Marketing to Students

Because students don't always notice important information, methods to distribute notifications about registration, scholarships, opportunities, and other topics are considered. Involvement of students and student input in the recruitment process is also discussed.

We note that some discussions of this task force are consistent with recommendations from the 2024/25 Buffalo State Senate Academic Plan Committee and from previous committees and task forces that looked at the general education program and student success.

Recommendations

These recommendations generally follow the order of the committees on the previous page, but there is overlap in some of the discussions and resulting recommendations.

- 1) Reimagine programs for undeclared students. Establish a more defined program for students who have not declared a major. This could potentially be named “Exploratory Studies” and be structured similar to the Individualized Studies program. Students would work with an advisor to develop a 4-year graduation plan. This option could be the same as or different from a General Studies degree.
- 2) Develop a General Studies degree(s). This would be a flexible, multidisciplinary program for students who are unsure of their career interests and/or want to explore multiple disciplines. It could be additionally beneficial to have concentrations, such as a Bachelor’s of General Studies with a concentration in Science (or Art, Humanities, etc.). This degree option would be attractive to potential students and would be an opportunity for students who have an interest in a general area (i.e., Arts) but do not want to focus on one area.
- 3) Increase student involvement/agency in their academic journey. This should begin before the student’s first semester and continue through their entire time at Buffalo State.
 - a. Move away from setting student schedules for their first semester. This can be done through set times during orientation where students are guided on selecting their own courses. This would give students more ownership of their academics right from the start and would allow them to consider courses that align with their interests.
 - b. Develop a general education catalog with short descriptions of the courses.
- 4) Establish a better connection between students and their academic road maps. The existence and importance of the road maps should be conveyed to students from the very beginning of their academic journey. Road maps should include examples of and/or links to information about potential occupations related to the academic program.
- 5) Improve student understanding of differences between BA and BS programs and how those differences are not the same across disciplines. Programs with BA and BS options should have a clear description/distinction included on their web sites and academic roadmaps.
- 6) Overhaul the First-Year Experience. Explore whether to focus on the first semester or the entire year. Students have a wide range of levels of preparation for college, with many not knowing “how to be a college student”.
 - a. Consider whether best to have independent, focused courses (such as UNC 100), incorporating info/skills into existing required courses, or a combination.
 - b. Increase focus on transition to college and personal/independent growth
 - c. Target ways to develop “soft skills” and rename “soft skills” to “life skills”
 - d. Further integrate social media literacy, online learning skills, and artificial intelligence
 - e. Increase research skills and library competence
 - f. Need to consider Financial Aid implications and Honors/Transfer students
 - g. Assess what works from existing programs such as Roar to Success and which aspects of programs are not working. Discontinue support programs that have not been demonstrated as working.

- 7) Cultivate a greater feeling of belonging, not just among first-year students, but for all students, especially commuting and transfer students. Hold focus group discussions with programs with high retention such as Africana Studies, Geosciences, Honors and others to determine successful practices to apply to other areas. This applies to academic departments and other offices that serve students (Financial Aid, Student Accounts, etc.). For instance, practices of the Honors Program, such as peer mentors, targeted social activities, etc., should be expanded upon.
- 8) Revisit UNC 100
 - a. Consider a new prefix other than UNC
 - b. Enforce strict uniformity across sections of UNC 100. There is inconsistency between what is in the approved course proposal and what is actually being taught in some sections.
 - c. Curriculum should be more intentional in developing 21st century skills
 - d. Set Student Learning Outcomes for UNC 100
- 9) Move the SLOs in CWP 102 into courses in the majors. By integrating into major courses, the SLOs will be more applicable to the student's major, making them more meaningful. This would reduce the current number of Gen Ed credits required, possibly opening up room for a course related to skills mentioned above. By full-time faculty instructing these courses, students will be further engaged in their major programs, and there will be less reliance on adjunct faculty. It is likely that some sections of CWP 102 will still be needed, but the number would be far less.
- 10) Many programs already have experiential components (studio, field, lab, research, etc.), but assistance should be given to those that do not so they can also develop these components. More can be done through orientation and advising to increase student appreciation of the importance and benefit of experiential learning.
- 11) For students in programs where a capstone experience does not already exist, a general Buffalo State Capstone experience should be developed. Consideration should also be given to requiring such an experience for all students, possibly as a 1-credit culmination of their academic path.
- 12) When appropriate, encourage 1-credit, 2-credit, and half-semester offerings of material.
- 13) Revisit Learning Communities. Learning communities are an effective way to engage students and develop their sense of belonging. Assess what didn't work with previous learning communities and implement known best practices of learning communities into a pilot program with the goal of expanding it to, ideally, all first-year students.
- 14) Investigate why some/many students are not taking advantage of resources for assistance. Too few students are accessing support. Instead of adding more, we need to maximize what is already being done. Accessing support services should be part of the expectation from the start instead of something students think of after mid-terms or at the end of a semester.
- 15) Many students are passive learners with false expectations (i.e., they can succeed just by showing up to class without being actively engaged). This is an unfortunate artifact of many students' high school experience where that worked. As with other recommendations, addressing this requires a more concerted effort starting at orientation and continuing through students' entire time at Buffalo State. For some students, this will require more direct "hand holding", but that is what is needed for those students to succeed, and we should not shy away from that.

- 16) Re-evaluate the Professional Advisor Program. Academic programs should be able to opt out of having their students assigned professional advisors, so that the students can be integrated into their academic homes more quickly. Many students are confused when a professional advisor and an academic advisor are both assigned. This will also free up professional advisors to focus on departments who need their assistance in advising.
- 17) Move away from the narrative that General Education courses are taken during a student's first two years before students enter their majors. In many (most?) programs students benefit by starting major courses in their first year to ensure a smooth progression toward graduation.
- 18) Revamp orientation for new students. Incorporate more focus on academic preparation and dedication. Existing orientation program provides initial support, but students don't retain much of what they learn. More practical and applicable information should be focused on.
- 19) All Student Success and Retention activities should be housed within Academic Affairs. This will enable better collaboration between these activities and academic departments.
- 20) Determine how best to communicate important information (deadlines, opportunities, etc.) to students. There needs to be multiple avenues to deliver information, but they should be what works best. Many students don't read emails from Buffalo State because many are from the bookstore. Students should opt-in to receiving emails from the bookstore instead of that being the default. A focus group of varied student populations should be used to determine the best way to communicate.
- 21) Student successes should be more widely marketed to the Buffalo State Community. There are so many amazing experiences and activities being undertaken by Buffalo State students, and there are additional opportunities. Better communication of these to the campus community will increase understanding and appreciation for these achievements. Coordination of communication about the Buffalo State Experience to those on and off campus will lead to more efficient and widespread knowledge. Many ideas were generated in the task force and more exist. A separate meeting about this topic should be convened.
- 22) Because *Telling Our Story* is most related to academic successes, the Marketing and Communication Office should be realigned under Academic Affairs. That office has been somewhat rudder-less over the last several years for multiple reasons. A focus on student recruitment, engagement, and success (all academic areas) will help develop a more coherent message to audiences within and outside of Buffalo State. This realignment should also help solidify partnerships between academic departments and MarCom to help with student recruitment, engagement, and success.

Summary

Some of the above recommended actions can be taken immediately, while others require deeper discussions about details and implementation.

Smaller task forces should be established to address several of the recommendations above related to:

- 1) The first-year experience / reimagining general education;
- 2) Degrees in Exploratory Studies and in General Studies; and
- 3) Others as deemed necessary.

Any changes require faculty and staff buy-in and commitment. In the past, ideas for improvement have been rejected because of the attitude that they were too different or difficult to enact or because software “can’t do that”. Many faculty and staff recognize that we must change in order to survive and thrive as an institution. Without reinvigorating change in academic and support programs to improve student success, we risk limiting student success and retention which will just exacerbate the university’s reputation and financial problems.

As an institution and its employees, our primary goal is the successful education of our students. If that is not the main goal for which we all strive, then why should Buffalo State exist? Although many faculty and staff have moved their attitudes away from when we had over 10,000 students, some still resist change and need strong messages and actions from administration and fellow faculty and staff (including the unions).

There are many improvements that can be made that would benefit student success and the student experience. These will take a lot of work, but they are exciting opportunities to transform Buffalo State in ways that will benefit all of us.