



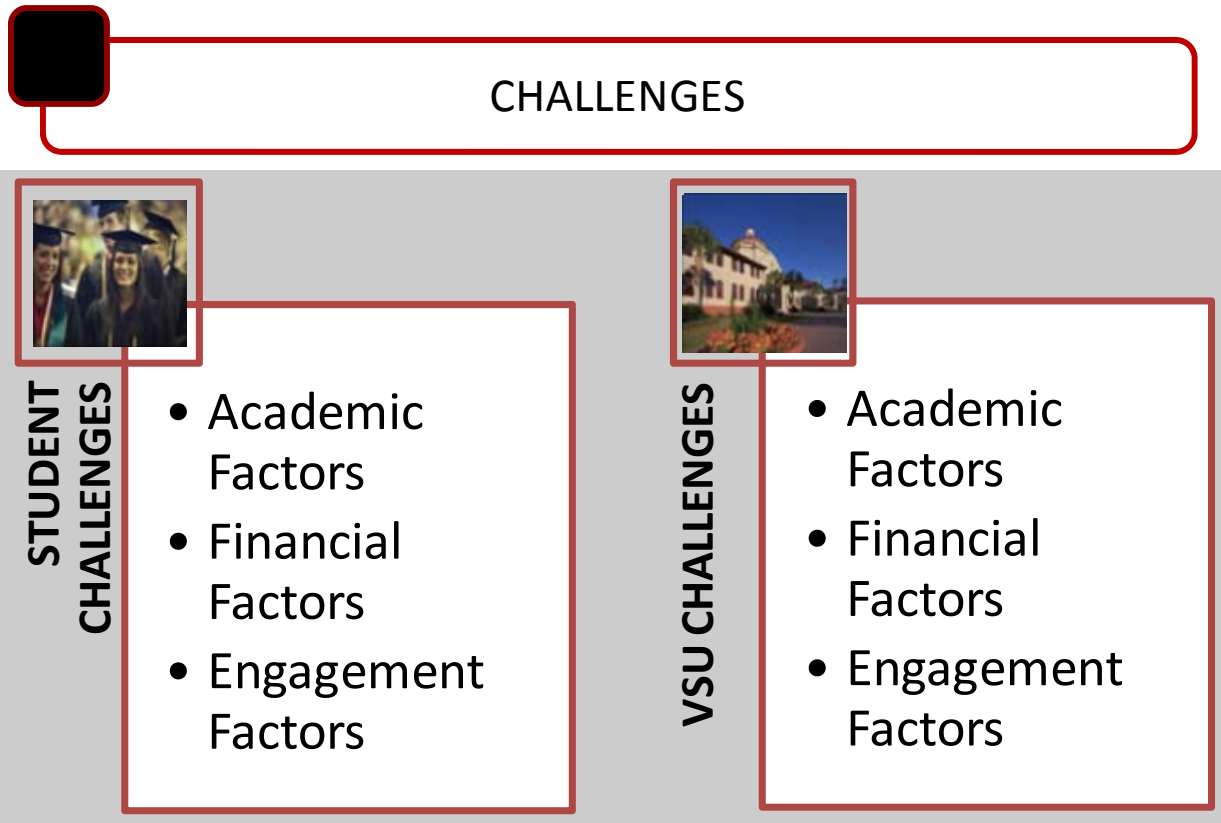
A Retention and Graduation Report from Valdosta State University for the Regents' Graduation Rate Taskforce

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Introduction

One of two Regional Universities in the University System of Georgia, Valdosta State University (VSU) is located in a metropolitan area along the Florida-Georgia border in South Central Georgia. The campus is noted for its Spanish mission architecture and natural beauty. The University offers programs leading to 58 undergraduate degree majors and 49 graduate degree majors with nationally accredited programs in Art, Business, Library Science, Music, Nursing, Sports Medicine/Athletic Training, Speech-Language Pathology, Theatre, Public Administration, Social Work, School Counseling and Educator Preparation. VSU has a budget exceeding \$165 million and employs over 1,500 faculty, staff, and administrators.



Student Challenges—National:

- *Academic Factors.* Students can increase their probability for graduation by attending a college that matches, or is close to, their academic ability. Many students do not consider critical success factors when selecting a college or university.
- *Financial Factors.* Students in the lowest income quartile have historically been the least likely to attend college and have lower graduation rates than their higher income counterparts. Additionally, students that receive a merit-based scholarship (i.e., HOPE) may find that they are unable to afford college if they lose the scholarship.



- *Engagement Factors.* Students who have less on-campus interactions such as contact with faculty and involvement in activities, clubs, or sports are less connected and committed to the institution and therefore less likely to complete a degree.

Institutional Challenges—National:

- *Academic Factors.* Some institutions experience the trickle down major effect, whereby a student ambitiously selects a major which is too academically rigorous and therefore trickles down to a major with a better academic fit. However, this alternate major may not be available at the home institution, leading the student to transfer to a school in which the major is available.
- *Financial Factors.* Institutions are challenged to raise enough money for merit scholarships that assist talented students with the costs of their higher education degree.
- *Distance from Home.* The further a university is from a student's home, the less likely to a student will matriculate to graduation. Regional Universities are increasingly reaching out to wider distances to recruit students. This has a desirable effect of attracting larger freshman classes but an undesirable effect on retention and graduation.

Challenges at Valdosta State University

Factors that impact VSU's retention and graduation rates are listed below. These factors are categorized as either a student factor or an institutional factor and are further classified as academic, financial, or engagement.

Student Challenges:

Academic Challenges

- VSU serves the South Georgia region which has traditionally been the most rural area in the state. Students from these areas have attended high schools which may have provided less academic rigor and less college preparatory support. Many of these students are first-generation college students and the level of academic encouragement received at home may be insufficient to encourage success in college.
- The graduation rate of feeder high schools in the area impacts the number of students VSU enrolls. For example, Valdosta High School has a graduation rate of 61%, compared to the state average of 75%. The percent of Valdosta High School students passing the Georgia High School Graduation Test in 2009 was 67.4%.
- A highly publicized statistic is Georgia's average SAT score, which decreased for the third consecutive year in 2009 and is one predictor of student success. Georgia ranked near the bottom of all states in average SAT score.

Solutions

- In 2008, the Department of Education awarded VSU a Federal TRiO grant to begin an Upward Bound program designed to provide opportunities for high school students from underrepresented populations to succeed in the postsecondary environment.
- VSU provides academic support via the Student Success Center (SSC). Acting as a compass, the SSC helps students navigate their college careers, utilizing tutoring, advising, and on-campus job opportunities. Their mission is to increase student retention by supporting students, at any level and ability, in their coursework, job experiences, and academic and career planning, thereby fostering determination and drive to graduate on time and lead fulfilling lives.
- Valdosta Early College Academy (VECA) is an innovative school formed as a partnership between the Valdosta City Schools and Valdosta State University which is located on the VSU campus. It blends middle/high school and college into a seamless technology-rich education program, provides rigorous curriculum with high academic and behavioral expectations, and provides small classes and instruction designed to meet the needs of every student.



Financial Challenges

- Students from a rural area such as South Georgia generally have a lower socioeconomic status (SES) than students from other areas of the state.
- Many students from VSU's regional service area are first-generation college students and their expected family contribution is typically less than that of a student who is not a first-generation college student. According to the Southern Region Education Board (SREB), the per capita income in Georgia is \$33,975. Although Georgia's public four-year college and university median annual tuition and fees is the third lowest among the 16 SREB states, this amount remains out of reach for many families.
- Due to the rising cost of college, many VSU students work to supplement or entirely fund their postsecondary educations. Graduating seniors, in the VSU 2009 Senior Exit Survey, responded that 20.0% worked full-time and 52.2% worked part-time during college.

Solutions

- The institution seeks external donors to increase its offering of need-based financial aid through an Annual Giving campaign. Last year, the VSU Foundation awarded approximately \$377,000 in scholarships, which financed tuition and educational costs for 342 deserving young men and women.
- Students with HOPE scholarships comprised 52% of VSU's first-time freshmen from Georgia high schools in Fall 2008. Approximately 25% of students maintain the HOPE scholarship through graduation. VSU students attending college with a HOPE scholarship are more likely to be retained; an analysis of VSU's withdrawn students showed that 20.9% of students who withdrew over the past six years had the HOPE scholarship.

Engagement Challenges

- Students may plan to transfer to another institution before, or as soon as, they matriculate at VSU. This is typical of students who do not gain admission to their first choice institution.
- Today's millennial students arrive at a higher education institution with greater appreciation, knowledge, and expectations for technology. This technology can serve as students' principal form of entertainment in some cases, allowing them to be less civically and socially engaged with VSU and the City of Valdosta's activities.

Solutions

- Approximately one-third of VSU's Fall 2010 freshmen will participate in a student learning community, which is an effective tool in retaining freshmen and fostering a sense of campus community. Student Life activities and the recent completion of new infrastructure (Student Union and residence halls) will also assist in engaging students.
- The institution can better incorporate technology into current programming or redesign activities to further engage students.

Institutional Challenges:

Academic Challenges

- While VSU offers an array of academic programs, the institution does not currently offer certain degree programs such as advanced Nursing programs, Medical Technology, Advanced Design and Technology, Medicine, Pharmacy, and Engineering. An absence of these programs, coupled with student desire to obtain a degree in these areas, results in students leaving to earn the desired degree. Students interested in these programs may attend VSU for their core courses and then transfer.
- According to the VSU Summer Orientation Survey, more than half (52.9%) of potential incoming freshmen selected VSU as their first choice college in 2008 and 50.5% made VSU their first choice in 2009.
- Because of institutional course scheduling and varied levels of academic advising, some students may not move through a degree program in a timely manner, especially if they stop-out, take a reduced course load, or take courses out of sequence.

More than half (52.9%) of potential incoming freshmen selected VSU as their first choice college in 2008.



Solutions

- VSU will conduct a needs assessment and is expanding its program and course offerings in these fields to attract more students. For example, the College of Nursing has proposed two new degree programs and VSU is planning, with the USG, a major capital project for a new Health Sciences and Business Administration facility.
- In Fall 2009, VSU implemented DegreeWorks, a real-time advice and counsel advising system to assist students in reducing time to graduation and streamlining the graduation process. The system minimizes errors by offering consistent degree plans, reducing paperwork, and monitoring unique program changes. The impact of this change has yet to be realized.

Financial Challenges

- The institution is serving more students with less state appropriation. From Fall 2008 to Fall 2009, enrollment increased 7.8%. General state appropriation per VSU student decreased 13.6% from \$4,972 in FY09 to \$4,295 in FY10. Over a two-year period, this is the equivalent of 1,000 students without state appropriations.

Solutions

- With no additional state dollars, VSU accommodated these students by expanding course section size to ensure all students could create a full schedule of courses that apply to their degree.

Engagement Challenges

- VSU cannot change its location. It is located further south in the state than other four-year institution, and this often represents a long distance from home for our students. VSU will forever have this barrier, but can employ strategies to overcome it. While VSU has traditionally served the South Georgia region, now nearly 50% of incoming freshman come from the Metropolitan Atlanta area. Students find themselves approximately four hours from home and suggest that Valdosta lacks the entertainment options they are accustomed to in their home area.
- VSU cannot accommodate all students who apply to live on-campus. Students living off-campus have less opportunity to be engaged in VSU's academic and social events. Freshmen comprise 74.5% of the on-campus housing population and sophomores comprise 14.6%. Because the institution has a housing commitment to freshmen, a limited amount of housing space is available for sophomores, juniors, and seniors which results in a decrease of non-freshmen living on campus which can translate to a decrease in graduation rates.

Nearly 50% of VSU's incoming freshman class comes from the Metro Atlanta area.

Solutions

- Increase the recruitment presence in Atlanta and promote online education opportunities for students living more than 50 miles away. By doing so, VSU admissions recruiters can attend more high school college recruitment fairs and distribute more marketing materials.
- Since Fall 2004, VSU's housing capacity has grown by 62.8% due to the construction of new residence halls and increased capacity during renovations. VSU is examining efficiencies in current residence halls in order to increase occupancy and continues to investigate locations for new residence halls. In the short-term, VSU is offering triple room accommodations to students. Although crowded, room tripling results in students being engaged on campus rather than living in off-campus housing that could be considered sub-standard.



SUCCESS AND BARRIERS TO SUCCESS

VSU has instituted three administrative changes to promote student success and help the institution thrive.

Strategic Focus

In an effort to engage in a continuous, cyclical institutional planning process that adheres and effectively accomplishes the mission of VSU, a process entitled Strategic Focus is used. This effort is designed to foster growth that is specifically targeted towards one or more areas which the university community identified as key priorities (e.g., recruitment, retention, scholarship, or financial solvency). Proposals are requested and reviewed through an open process which includes the University's Planning and Budget Council. Projects are selected for funding based on overall impact as well as potential to generate long-term cost recovery. Strategic Focus is an annual process with distributed funds earmarked out of the annual budget. In fiscal year 2010, \$1.7 million was distributed to 16 projects that advance VSU.

Under the retention/graduation criteria, proposals have been funded that will: enhance student engagement (e.g., concert choir, marching band, athletics, extracurricular research, etc.); create learning communities that tie small cohorts of students to select faculty and specific curricular areas; develop special support for students from diverse backgrounds and cultures; and enhance support services in areas including physical health, mental health, tutoring, and disability accommodation.

Dedicated Funding Pools

Several dedicated funding pools have been established and are designed to move resource allocation closest to the mission.

Graduate Stipends:

- This pool establishes criteria for award of stipends to attract and retain talented graduate assistants (i.e., graduate students performing work in their field). For the 2009-10 academic year, 75 new Graduate School Strategic Assistantship positions were created, increasing the total number of graduate assistants to 229. Of those 75, there are 37 positions that directly reach freshmen through instruction, advising, academic support, or housing.

75 new Graduate Assistantships were created in 2009-10; 37 directly reach freshmen.

Academic Equipment/Maintenance and Major Scientific Equipment Purchases:

- This pool prioritizes requests for scientific equipment used in research and teaching with a cost exceeding \$50,000. Priority is given for items that support multiple disciplines, are likely to be used in undergraduate research, and which directly enhance the instructional and/or research mission of the university.

Reassigned Time for Student Engagement in Research:

- This pool prioritizes requests for faculty release time to engage in scholarly research appropriate to their discipline. This fund will partially support VSU's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) on Undergraduate Discipline-Based Inquiry (part of SACS reaffirmation) to enhance student-faculty engagement in research and creative activity. Pending approval from SACS, the QEP projects will be deployed beginning in Spring 2011.

Mid-Term Grades Process

In Fall 2007, for the first time, VSU provided mid-term grades to all students taking 1000- or 2000-level courses. As students receive mid-term progress reports, they are encouraged to talk with their advisors and faculty about their academic performance to discuss ways to improve the likelihood for a successful semester.



METRICS

The most appropriate measures for success are the four-year and six-year graduation rates. Components of retention and graduation as they relate to Valdosta State University are explained in the below sections.

National Graduation Rates

Despite college and university programming efforts and extensive research conducted in the area of retention and graduation, graduation rates have remained stable at 50%. Graduation rates of students attending public four-year institutions have declined over the last two decades, with the average five-year graduation rate dropping from 52.2% in 1983 to 41.9% in 2001. In contrast, more selective public colleges and universities have graduation rates of 75% or higher.

VSU Retention and Graduation Rates

Table 1 contains VSU's institutional and system-wide retention and graduation rates from 1995 through 2008 (most recently available data). VSU's one-year retention rate of first time, full-time freshmen has remained constant in the low to mid-70th percentile. Both institutional four-year and six-year graduation rates have varied, which is consistent with the variation in the system-wide rates. Several factors contribute to the strength or weakness of the graduation rate:

- The distance of VSU from the Atlanta metropolitan area.
- The socioeconomic status of families in VSU's regional service area is lower than families from the metro, north Georgia regions.
- Lower graduation rates and lower average SAT scores, which are two factors of academic success in college, of feeder high schools to VSU.
- To successfully engage students on campus, national trends suggest institutions house at least 30% of their undergraduate population on campus; VSU can accommodate 25% but is working to increase this percentage.
- Some students in South Georgia are typically seeking only a bachelor's degree to secure employment. Students who enter the institution with high degree aspirations are more likely to complete at least a bachelor's degree.
- Transfers from VSU will be reported in the overall USG retention and graduation rates, but not necessarily VSU's institutional rate

VSU regularly benchmarks against its peer institutions, including aspirational institutions. VSU is currently at 40% for the six-year bachelor graduation rate; the median graduation rate of aspirational institutions is 41%. The highest six-year bachelor graduation rate of the aspirational institutions was 51% and the lowest was 26%. With regard to retention rates, VSU currently has a retention rate of 71.5%; the median retention rate of aspirational institutions is 71%. The highest retention rate of the aspirational institutions was 77% and the lowest was 62%.



Table 1: VSU's Institutional and System-Wide Retention and Graduation Rates

Cohort	First Time, Full-Time Freshmen	Inst'l Retention Rate	System-Wide Retention Rate	Inst'l 4-Year Graduation Rate	System-Wide 4-Year Graduation Rate	Inst'l 6-Year Graduation Rate	System-Wide 6-Year Graduation Rate
1995	1,660	69.9%	78.0%	15.2%	17.6%	33.9%	43.3%
1996	1,829	64.3%	74.3%	12.6%	14.2%	30.2%	38.7%
1997	1,589	69.4%	78.7%	11.4%	13.3%	33.4%	43.2%
1998	1,289	66.2%	78.0%	12.4%	14.7%	38.6%	48.3%
1999	1,168	70.6%	79.5%	18.2%	20.2%	41.0%	51.1%
2000	785	72.0%	81.6%	18.0%	19.2%	42.2%	52.1%
2001	1,517	75.1%	84.0%	17.5%	19.6%	41.1%	50.9%
2002	1,572	74.3%	85.0%	15.3%	17.6%	39.6%	51.2%
2003	1,756	75.7%	84.2%	15.5%	16.9%	42.8%	53.0%
2004	1,690	76.2%	84.4%	16.7%	18.7%		
2005	1,775	73.6%	82.6%	17.2%	20.4%		
2006	2,015	71.5%	83.6%				
2007	2,029	71.2%	82.6%				
2008	2,106	71.8%	82.2%				

Source: VSU 2007-08 Factbook; VSU 2008-09 Factbook, VSU EAS Portal; USG by the Numbers Academic Data Mart

Positive Departures

Although an institution may at first consider the departure of students to be a sign of failure, there are some losses that are advantageous. For example, students leaving for other programs within the University System of Georgia benefit the student by allowing the student to study in a program which may not be offered at VSU. VSU's system-wide retention rates and graduation rates have been approximately 10% higher than VSU's institutional rates, suggesting that VSU's loss is an overall gain for the System.



THREE-YEAR PLAN

For the past one and a half years VSU has refocused efforts to increase student retention and graduation rates. The following methods are currently in operation or will be enacted during the next three years.

Recruitment

- *12-City Tour:* VSU has commenced a 12-City Tour throughout Georgia to recruit new students and better connect with alumni.
- *Hire Additional Admissions Counselor for the Atlanta Area:* Hiring a part-time admissions counselor to assist with college fairs, high school visits, and coordinating special events such as student receptions in Atlanta.



- *Expansion of the Athletic Band:* Recruiting additional students to VSU by expanding the size of the Athletic Bands. To accomplish this, resources have been realigned to allow the Director of Athletic Bands sufficient time for additional recruiting throughout Georgia and nearby states.
- *Chamber Singers Tour:* Marketing directly to high school students with a two-day tour to Atlanta to target key demographic counties and help recruit quality students to Valdosta State University. There is a special focus on urban population centers that have been atypical recruiting locations such as churches and community centers in inter-city Atlanta.
- *Annual Fundraising Campaign for Merit Scholarships:* Generate external resources which further the institution's mission, including funding for merit scholarships. Last year, the VSU Foundation awarded approximately \$377,000 in scholarships.
- *Interactive Admissions Website with Virtual Video Tour:* Software design and implementation of a competitive, interactive admissions website including a virtual video tour, short admissions videos by subject, and student testimonial videos.

Additional Athletic Opportunities

- *Women's Soccer:* Development of a new women's intercollegiate sport, women's soccer. A coach was hired February 2010 and recruitment of student-athletes will take place in Spring and Summer 2010. Recruiting, scheduling, and purchasing equipment will take place in fiscal year 2011 with competition beginning in fiscal year 2012.

Expansion of Academic Programs

- *Online Degrees:* To meet the growing demand for online degrees for graduate and undergraduate education, VSU is working to expand and transition current academic programs to an online format. Two programs currently under development are:
 - *Office Administration and Technology Degree:* Development and implementation of an Online Baccalaureate Completion Program for nontraditional adult students in Office Administration and Technology.
 - *Online Criminal Justice Degrees:* Provides course release time for two Criminal Justice faculty members to prepare the bachelor's and master's Criminal Justice curriculum for online delivery.

Diversity

- *Online Certificate in Spanish for Community Professionals:* Implementation of a certificate which constitutes course work in Spanish that will benefit students who intend to enter professions such as Social Work, Criminal Justice, Social Services, Medical, Teaching, or Business Administration.
- *Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL):* Implementation of a track for majors in Spanish and French which may also be taken as a stand-alone Certificate Program. This Track/Certificate will be offered entirely online and, with vigorous marketing strategies, will reach the needs of future TESOL teachers both in the United States and abroad. At this time, there is no similar online track or certificate in Georgia.
- *Changing Demographics:* Because of the increasing Hispanic population, more students in Georgia and Florida speak Spanish as their primary language. VSU offers preparatory classes and limited modifications to serve students who are non-native English speakers.
- *African American Students:* VSU embraces diversity and targets minority students such as African Americans. At VSU, the Fall 2008 first time full-time cohort retention rate for African Americans was 73.5%, which is 1.8% points above the institution's average of 71.7%.
- *Student Organizations:* VSU currently has 151 student organizations and these organizations represent many diverse interests for the student body. As the institution grows in enrollment, more organizations will be added.

VSU's African American student retention rate was 73.5%, above VSU's average of 71.7% in 2008.



Student Support Services

- To increase the student support services offered by VSU, study groups will be formed to research the feasibility of:
 - One-stop Student Services;
 - Summer Student Success Bridge Program;
 - Block Scheduling/Prioritized Scheduling;
 - Preferential Scheduling for 15 credit hours;
 - Limited Withdrawals; and
 - Early Alert System with common triggers such as financial record, academic record, health (mental and physical), conduct/discipline, Residence Hall director reports, and lack of engagement.

Retention and Graduation of Students

- *Living-Learning Communities:* Students who select to live in one of the six living-learning communities (LLCs) live together in a designated block of rooms in a residence hall, take one or more courses together, and participate in activities specifically designed for their community. The Division of Student Affairs, the Office of Housing and Residence Life, and the OASIS Center for Advising and First Year Programs are collaborating to begin more than 50 new living-learning communities with one-third of the new incoming freshmen class in Fall 2010. The University currently operates six LLCs: Air Force ROTC, Emerging Leaders Program, Foreign Language House, Freshman Year Experience, University Honors Program, and Voicing Our Gender's Unity and Equality.
- *Stop-Out Intervention Program:* Establishment of a Stop-Out Intervention Program devoted to contacting students who have not returned to VSU to complete their course of study and referring these students to the appropriate campus department for assistance in returning.
- *Opportunities for families to be involved with campus life:* In January 2010, the Division of Student Affairs formally designated a coordinator of Parent Programs. This individual directs family members' engagements into the university in meaningful ways through annual activities and the Parent Resource Center. The intent is for informed parents to be supportive of their students thereby encouraging them to remain at the institution through events such as the Parent's and Family Association, Family Council, Visitation, Parent's and Family weekend, and a newsletter.
- *Glorifying class standing transition:* Little recognition is currently given to our students who surpass sophomore class standing to become juniors and our juniors who become seniors. The institution will investigate methods to recognize this achievement (such as a ceremony) to demonstrate to students the importance of class level transitions.
- *Prominence of commencement:* Student participation at commencement does not accurately represent the number of graduates. The institution will increase its on campus advertising to promote the significance and prominence of the commencement ceremony.
- *Leadership programs:* Through the Division of Student Affairs, the Emerging Leaders program is designed to engage new students at the time of initial enrollment. Growing components of the leadership programs include service learning and community involvement, which could be made ready for course credit.

Maximizing Data Support

- An appointed study group or task force will create feasibility studies to evaluate the proposed projects and efforts. These studies will incorporate and maximize current national research and institutional data to make recommendations. Some information is regularly produced and could be helpful with these endeavors:
 - *Backlog Analysis:* This report provides data on the number of available sections/seats to ensure that a full schedule for students is available.
 - *Weekly Enrollment Model:* This report better connects enrollment to the institution's budget forecast. For example, as soon as enrollment changes, a portion of the increased revenue is proportioned for additional faculty for instruction. The remainder is apportioned to meet student academic and support needs.



GRADUATION AS A CAMPUS PRIORITY

Valdosta State University recognizes the need to improve retention and graduation rates and has committed resources to develop programming and monitoring systems.

- Strategic Focus is an annual process that is currently underway for fiscal year 2011. This effort is designed to foster growth specifically targeted towards one or more areas the university community has identified as key priorities (recruitment, retention, scholarship, and financial resources). Proposals have been requested and are currently under review through an open process.
- VSU will connect faculty and staff merit increases to student success (i.e., retention and graduation). A critical merit-based faculty and staff salary increase pool, along with instructions for applying these increases, has been discussed and is in the process of being developed. Staff members are also directly connected to student success, whether it is an academic advisor, financial aid counselor, or public safety officer. Good customer service can retain students.

VSU's faculty members are closest to the mission, therefore they are the principal individuals able to create a culture of student success. The Faculty Senate, Council on Staff Affairs, and Student Government Association provide voting representatives to all the University's committees and councils. Stakeholder representation is integrated into campus budgeting and planning via the Planning and Budget Council, of which a principal responsibility is the Strategic Focus program. Standards and incentives for promotion and tenure as well as salary increases (when available) will be evaluated to emphasize retention and graduation.

Our stakeholders outside the campus, such as alumni and community members, are able to monitor activities through various media such as the school's website, alumni magazine, student newspaper, Board of Regents website, and local newspaper. To involve key stakeholders, the VSU Office of Communications will use various media sources to advertise and promote successful campus efforts such as:

- website features of successful students, successful faculty, successful staff, and student testimonials;
- more television, radio, and press releases;
- televised and online streaming of the university's biannual convocation.

The programs and plans mentioned in this report are only a sample of the daily efforts the faculty, staff, and administrators at Valdosta State perform to reach students and to help them become productive citizens.