

**Graduation Rate Outcomes Study Campus Visit at Valdosta State University  
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**Prepared by**

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## II. Executive Summary

Valdosta State University has experienced success in increasing six-year graduation rates from 30.1% for the Fall 1996 cohort of first-time, full-time freshmen to 38.3% for the Fall 1998 cohort. This progress reflects a combination of new institutional policies and programs that were instituted beginning in 1997. The elements that appear to be the most significant contributors to this higher graduation rate include: (1) An increase in the minimum SAT scores required for admission (10 points each on the verbal and mathematics sections); (2) Inception of a Freshman Year Experience program; (3) Required and more consistent advising practices; and (4) Specific programs that offer individualized attention such as continual communication regarding the academic performance and attendance of student athletes. Integration of these features occurs through a close working relationship between the Divisions of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs. These programs and policies directly support Goal 3 of the university's Strategic Plan which focuses on "Excellence in Student Learning and Retention": *VSU encourages continuous enhancement of curricula and research opportunities, resulting in highly informed graduates and increased student retention and graduation rates.*

The primary challenge for the university is to continue this strong momentum and build on the gains that have been realized. For this to occur, it is essential that the reasons underlying the success be fully understood. Thus, the campus has begun to identify and conduct the systematic research needed to assess the impact of various policies and programs and help guide future efforts. At the same time, a number of promising features have been initiated during 2003 and 2004, including new apartment-style residence halls that promote an integrated living-learning environment, the LeaderQuest Program, and fifth-year scholarships for athletes. The campus culture is open to – and welcomes – such change. In addition, new processes are being implemented across the university. These include appointment of an Enrollment Management Committee, initiation of a feature to provide academic departments with better feedback on students who did not graduate due to issues discovered during the degree audit process, and implementation of the CAPP automated degree audit module in BANNER. The relationship of these programs and processes to increased student retention and graduation will be studied. If they do, indeed, prove successful, these features can serve as models and may be expanded or adapted to reach other student populations.

Students use positive terms to describe VSU's academic environment and the chance to connect with faculty. A recent student survey developed and sponsored by the Student Government Association indicated that the opportunity for "faculty interaction" was the feature students like best about VSU. Faculty are described as "caring" and "approachable." With a total enrollment of 10,400, the university is still able to offer the individualized attention and small classes that make a significant difference in the educational environment. As Valdosta State University continues to grow, it will be especially important to find ways to retain these personalized features and sense of community within a larger environment. The development of such features as the "living-learning" communities, freshman cohorts, and leadership programs has laid solid groundwork that will enable the campus to maintain this important focus on the individual.

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#### **IV. Context and Nature of the Visit**

##### **A. Purpose of the Visit** [Omitted – Template language to be used]

**B. Organizational Context** - campus description containing information such as history, demographics, and the items reported by AASCU in the campus profile information:

1. CEO name and title:  
Dr. Ronald M. Zaccari
2. Whether a system member or not. If so, identify the system:  
Valdosta State University is one of two Regional Universities within the University System of Georgia
3. Setting of the campus (i.e., Urban, Metropolitan, Rural):  
Rural
4. Whether it is a minority serving institution (i.e., HBCU or HSI):  
Valdosta State University is not an HBCU or HSI.
5. Barrons Admissions category  
Competitive
6. Carnegie classification  
Master's I
7. AY 2002 undergraduate population  
7931
8. AY 2002 all student population  
9230
9. FY 2002 revenue from appropriations, tuition and fees  
Appropriations: \$49,349,784  
Tuition and Fees: \$20,600,693
10. FY 2002 revenue from all sources (i.e. total budget)  
\$105,576,982
11. Other relevant descriptive information as determined by the study visit team

### C. Interactions with Constituencies: Individuals Participating in Focus Groups at VSU

Jason Adams	VSU Student/ SGA Representative
Hemming Atterbom	Department Head and Professor, Kinesiology and Physical Education
Chet Ballard	Professor, Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminal Justice
Myrna Ballard	President, Valdosta-Lowndes County Chamber of Commerce
Jim Baxter	Department Head and Professor, Chemistry
David Boyd	Professor, Mathematics and Computer Science
Andy Brovey	Associate Professor, Curriculum and Instructional Technology
Pat Burns	Department Head, OASIS: First Year Programs, Freshman Year Experience, and Advising
Jeanna Clinkscales	VSU Student
John Gaston	Dean, College of the Arts
Martha Giddings	Director, Division of Social Work
Kimberly Godden	Acting Director, Access Office for Students with Disabilities
Sheri Gravett	Assistant Vice President for Academic Affairs
Phil Gunter	Dean, College of Education
Arlene Haddon	Instructor, College of Nursing
Charles Harmon	Director, University Relations
Phyllis Holland	Department Head and Professor, Management
Chuck Hudson	Registrar
Kurt Keppler	Vice President for Student Affairs
Jane Kinney	Assistant to the Department Head and Professor, English
Danielle Lehman	Director, Compliance and Academic Services and Life Skills Coordinator
Louis Levy	Vice President for Academic Affairs
Rust Mast	Dean of Students
Joe Mattachione	Director, Housing and Residence Life
Mike Meacham	Associate Professor, Division of Social Work
Kent Moore	Associate Dean, College of Business Administration
Michael Noll	Associate Professor, Physics, Astronomy, and Geosciences
Walter Peacock	Director, Admissions and Enrollment Management
Jim Peterson	Department Head and Professor, Political Science
Eneida Pugh	Assistant Professor, Spanish
Herb Reinhard	Athletic Director
Deborah Robinson	Associate Professor, Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminal Justice
Ruth Salter	Interim Director, Institutional Research
Doug Tanner	Director, Financial Aid
Maggie Viverette	Acting Assistant to the President for Equal Opportunity Programs and Multicultural Affairs
Ellen Wiley	Professor, Curriculum and Instructional Technology
Christy Coons-Yates	Organizational Development Specialist, Organizational Development and Training

### D. Documents, materials, web pages reviewed [Omitted per AASCU instructions]

**V. Campus Identified Features** *(Programs, Services, Activities) Identified as Contributing to Success in Retention and Graduation. Section A provides an Overview of the Feature; Section B offers an Assessment of the Difference the Feature has Made; and Section C outlines Plans to Continue the Feature.*

**Freshman Year Experience Program:**

- A. VSU's Freshman Year Experience (FYE) program was initiated during 1998-99 and was expanded to its present form during 1999-2000. The Freshman Year Experience is a year-long set of courses and projects that focus on helping students achieve excellence in their academics. The major program components are the Freshman Seminar, Learning Cohorts, and Learning Assistance and Supplemental Instruction. The primary student population currently served through FYE consists of entering freshmen who are undecided as to their major. By helping these students connect with the institution, faculty and staff, and their peers from the outset of their university experience, the program creates a supportive and welcoming environment and, thus, includes elements that are directly linked with increased retention. Students have an early opportunity to experience involvement and success. This purpose has remained constant since the inception of FYE. The collaboration between the Divisions of Academic and Student Affairs that led to the creation of this program was recognized as a "Best Practice" by the University System of Georgia in 2004.

Approximately 250 to 300 entering students enroll in FYE each year. This number represents about 20% of all entering freshmen, and it is estimated that another 400 entering freshmen are undecided as to their major. The Office of Academic Student Instructional Support (OASIS) in the College of Arts and Sciences coordinates the Freshman Year Experience Program. OASIS includes seven faculty members, six advising staff, a peer advisor, and two secretaries. The students enroll as a cohort in three common classes, including VSU 1101 ("Freshman Seminar") which provides an introduction to college life and skills necessary for success. (Each cohort consists of approximately 25 students.) The faculty member teaching the Freshman Seminar course also serves as the advisor for that cohort, offering continuity and many opportunities for interaction. Students are in constant contact with their advisor and are required to share their midterm grades with their advisor as one basis for discussing their progress and future plans.

The two other core courses in which FYE students enroll are English and either History or Political Science. In addition, they enroll in College Algebra in one of two formats: a "traditional" three-day a week class or a class that meets four days a week and also includes a required study group session. Another key element is that many of the FYE students live in close proximity to each other in a newly renovated residence hall that includes a classroom and open spaces for informal interaction and study.

The FYE program falls within the College of Arts and Sciences and integrates with the Liberal Arts Studies (LAS) advising center within that College. The Director of Advising for FYE also works with other undecided students (for example, sophomore level students) within the College of Arts and Sciences. The one-year retention rate for undecided students in 1998 (before implementation of the FYE program) was 57%. Preliminary analyses (based on an unofficial cohort) indicate that the rate is now 81% (compared with the overall university rate

of 75.6%). A new study initiated in late 2004 (based on standard IPEDS cohorts) is currently analyzing official retention and graduation rates of students who have participated in FYE. If the results indicate that the rates for students who take part in FYE cohorts are above those of other undecided students and of the university as a whole, an unmet need could be implementation of this program for a greater percentage of first-year students. This would increase the overall pervasiveness and impact of the program.

- B. Based on the statistics cited above, the Freshman Year Experience does appear to make an important difference in the retention outcomes of the students served. Although the longitudinal trend data are not yet available, increases in the six-year graduation rates for this group also are anticipated. The standard cohort data that are currently being examined will offer further insights into the changes that have resulted from this program.
- C. Yes, VSU will continue to offer the FYE program at least at its current level. Given its apparent effectiveness in facilitating student success, additional cohort groups or “learning communities” have been created for students in specific majors such as political science, computer information systems, critical thinking/humanities, education, and nursing.

#### **Centralized Advising:**

- A. Major changes have occurred in VSU’s approach to student advising since 1996. With the implementation of the BANNER student information system in 1997-98, the university instituted the practice of required advising. The Colleges of Business Administration and Education have implemented centralized advising systems for the students majoring in those disciplines, and the College of Arts and Sciences has a Liberal Arts Studies Advising Center for students who are undecided. These advising centers have been in place for approximately six years. (The Liberal Arts Studies Advising Center has the longest history – approximately ten years.) Their purpose is to offer comprehensive, consistent student advising through specially trained faculty/counselors and peer mentors, a philosophy that has remained consistent over time. Caring advisors who provide accurate guidance and information play a significant role in student success and retention. The websites of the respective colleges provide a good, readily accessible overview of the resources available through these Centers.

The Advising Center in the College of Education serves freshmen and transfer students with fewer than 45 hours who are prospective education majors. The Center includes two counselors, one graduate assistant and eight peer advisors, and twenty faculty members from all departments of the College of Education advise students. Students remain part of the Advising Center until accepted for admission by the College of Education. The student is then assigned an advisor within his/her chosen education major.

The Advising Center in the College of Business Administration advises all freshmen, sophomore, and first semester transfer students who express interest in obtaining a business degree. The Center maintains academic records for all COBA students (undergraduate, non-degree, and MBA students), counsels students in career planning, and provides study skills classes for COBA students that focus on note-taking, time management, and test taking strategies. The fifty-minute classes meet once a week for four weeks during spring semester. Two professionals staff the Advising Center.

The OASIS Office referenced above under the “Freshman Year Experience” feature serves as the focal point for centralized advising in the College of Arts and Sciences, and it serves 700-800 students who have not yet declared a major.

These Centers all fall within the purview of the Vice President for Academic Affairs. The OASIS Office integrates with the “Freshman Year Experience” program. Anecdotally, campus conversations suggest that centralized advising may have an important positive impact on the retention and graduation of students based on the elements of personal attention, consistent guidance, and well-prepared and motivated advisors. However, it is important to quantify the extent of the impact, and this is one area which has been identified for research in the immediate future. Once the University understands this impact, unmet need can be determined more accurately. Given the number of undecided majors advised through the Liberal Arts Studies Advising Center, an expanded advising corps might be recommended. As the number of undergraduate students attending VSU continues to grow (projected to be at least four percent per year), the Centers will need additional personnel resources to continue to provide the same level of individualized attention.

- B. While centralized advising appears to have a positive effect on retention and graduation rates of VSU students, quantitative research must (and will) be conducted to assess the true significance of this feature.
- C. The Advising Centers which have been profiled above are projected to continue their operation. If the research reveals that they have had a significant impact on student retention and graduation, they may serve as models for other colleges or disciplines within the university.

### **Internships/Cooperative Education Program**

- A. The Cooperative Education Program has existed at Valdosta State University since 1984. This program enables students to develop job skills and engage in experiential learning opportunities while working on their undergraduate degree. It also offers a competitive edge after graduation. This aim has remained consistent through the years. Active involvement in productive programs of this type encourages students to remain enrolled and complete their degree requirements. Fifty-five to sixty students are involved in Co-op experiences each semester, and thirty-three employers currently partner with VSU in this program. Three individuals staff the University’s Co-op Office. Cooperative Education is an integral component of the Division of Student Affairs. Based on a recent Student Government Association survey, 67% of the students responding described experiential opportunities such as internships and practica as offering the “best activity for professional development.” The university does not appear to have conducted targeted studies of the retention or graduation rates of Co-op Education participants, and the extent of its direct impact is uncertain. As a result, this area offers fertile territory for analysis. Following this analysis, the unmet needs may be more clearly defined.
- B. The Cooperative Education program is productive for students and stimulates the development of solid community partnerships. However, the extent of its relationship to student retention and graduation has yet to be identified and merits further study.

- C. Valdosta State University plans to maintain the Cooperative Education program at least at the current level. Additional student and employer participants are welcome.

### **Feedback to Student Athletes**

- A. The graduation rates and GPAs of Valdosta State University's student athletes as a group exceed those of the overall student body. The Director of Compliance and Academic Services communicates with faculty members and requests mid-term evaluation sheets that address attendance and performance for each student athlete. The Director then communicates with the coaches and, in some cases, the Athletic Director regarding individual athletes, and they initiate appropriate follow up actions (e.g., tutorials, conferences, etc.) with the student. The Director of Compliance constantly monitors athletes' academic performance and class attendance, and she relies heavily on faculty to provide valuable feedback. Freshman athletes also participate in learning communities known as "Champs Life Skills" where they meet other freshman athletes and develop cohesiveness as a group. These features have been in place for at least the past five years with the aim of ensuring the athletes' academic success and, ultimately, their graduation. Such individualized attention is closely linked with increased achievement. The Director of Compliance manages this process for the nearly 300 student athletes and involves all coaches and the Athletic Director.

The "Champs Life Skills" course is comparable to the "Freshman Seminar" offered through FYE, reflecting some integration with that program. Evidence of success is found in the overall higher graduation rate and GPAs of athletes. Two hundred thirty student athletes had 3.0 or better grade point averages in 2003-04. During Fall 2004, the cumulative GPA of student athletes was 2.92. Nevertheless, when analyzed by sport, the retention and graduation rates for some athletic teams are higher than those for other teams. Thus, one unmet need is to continue to raise the retention and graduation rates so that all sports are more comparable.

- B. This individualized attention and monitoring definitely appears to make a significant difference in the retention and graduation rates of student athletes, given the data cited above.
- C. The campus plans to continue these activities for student athletes with the goal of further increasing the overall graduation rates for athletes as well as for individual teams.

### **Strategic Planning for Improved Student Facilities**

- A. A strategic planning retreat in March 2002 identified a major university-wide goal which focuses on "Excellence in Student Learning and Retention": *VSU encourages continuous enhancement of curricula and research opportunities, resulting in highly informed graduates and increased student retention and graduation rates.* Specific action steps identified the development of new student housing as the highest priority for the campus. New residence halls had not been constructed at VSU since 1969, and the current residence halls were in need of renovation. With increasing enrollment (and projections of continued growth at four percent per year), the campus could accommodate only 17% to 18% of its student population. Residence halls promote student interaction and a heightened connection with the campus and, thus, play a vital role in increasing retention. To address this situation, the President, VSU Foundation Board of Directors, key administrators, and University System Board of Regents began a process in Fall 2003 that led to the construction of a 518-bed residence hall complex.

Construction of the first building in that \$35.6 million complex was completed by January 2005 when 350 students moved into the exceptional new apartment-style facility. This new hall creates a living-learning environment because it includes classroom space, computer laboratory space, and music practice rooms in addition to the student apartments and recreational areas. One other residence hall was renovated and reopened in Fall 2004; a second is currently undergoing renovation, and a third will be renovated later this year. All will offer the same living-learning environment designed to connect academic and out-of-classroom activities. These living-learning environments are integrated with the FYE program and learning communities described above. The new facility is adjacent to a state-of-the-art student recreation center that opened in 2002 and provides further opportunities for student activity and engagement on campus. Additional new residence halls are needed as the university's enrollment continues to grow, and plans are underway for future construction.

- B. No data are yet available as to the effect of these new and renovated facilities on student involvement, retention, and graduation. However, students have reacted enthusiastically to the outstanding facilities, and positive outcomes are anticipated.
- C. Plans are currently progressing toward the development of additional student residence halls and for continued enhancement of the living-learning environment in conjunction with VSU's Strategic Plan and Master Plan.

**New Feature: Emerging Leaders Program**

- A. During 2003-04, VSU implemented a new LeaderQuest program comprised of three components: Emerging Leaders, Existing Leaders, and Experienced Leaders. Each program is designed to give students an opportunity to become involved in leadership opportunities appropriate to and corresponding with their collegiate experience, emphasizing a prime factor in student success and retention. The first phase of the program, Emerging Leaders, was initiated with approximately 70 freshmen entering in Fall 2003. Students who participate in this program are assigned to learning communities (cohorts) and enroll in at least three common core classes taught by faculty from the College of Arts and Sciences. One of these is a new core course, "Perspectives on Leadership." A unique aspect of the Emerging Leaders Program is its depth and breadth. Students arrive on campus before the residence halls officially open to attend an overnight retreat designed to build high performance teams within each cohort. Both faculty and staff attend the retreat to help facilitate team building activities and enable students to become acquainted with their instructors before classes begin. The retreat also lays the foundation for curricular and co-curricular programming. Each Emerging Leader cohort participates in a monthly cultural outing (e.g., attending plays, art exhibits, community service, and dining at international restaurants) in addition to their coursework. Integration with other programs occurs as some of the Emerging Leaders live in the same residence hall as FYE students.

Student Affairs staff teach the leadership development classes, and faculty from Academic Affairs provide instruction for the paired courses (e.g., English, math, history, and political science). Furthermore, Student Life and Campus Recreation staff are directly involved in providing resources for student involvement in community service projects and group outdoor recreation programs. A new cohort of Emerging Leaders began in Fall 2004, and the first class

of Emerging Leaders moved into the “Existing Leaders” program. One element of the latter program was the development (by Existing Leaders) of a successful day-long leadership conference consisting of keynote and concurrent sessions held on a Saturday for the Emerging Leaders and other interested students.

- B. The university is tracking and will analyze data for these student cohorts to determine the impact their involvement in this program has on retention. However, the studies have not yet been completed since the program is only in its second year.
- C. VSU plans to continue this three-component program and to implement the final phase, “Experienced Leaders,” as students advance through their academic career.

#### **New Feature: Fifth-year Scholarship for Athletes**

- A. Recognizing that some student athletes fail to graduate after completing their athletic scholarship eligibility, the university instituted a partial scholarship program in Fall 2004 that would provide some financial assistance and encourage these students to complete their degree. Many needed several classes or an additional semester of study to graduate. In return, the students work on campus. The Athletic Director describes this as a “win-win” situation for all involved. This feature continues the individualized focus and proactive work with student athletes described above. It directly furthers the goal of increasing graduation rates for this group of students. This initiative is so new that its impact remains to be assessed. However, early signs are promising. If the data indicate that this program is, indeed, an effective means of helping students complete their degrees, additional funds may be needed in the future.
- B. As soon as sufficient data are available, they will be examined to determine the significance of this initiative in encouraging student athletes to complete all requirements for their degree.
- C. The university will continue this initiative at least at the current level if it proves successful. Depending upon the number of students and level of need, additional resources may be considered in the future.

#### **VI. Integration, Leadership, Campus Culture, Context**

**A. Context** - *Are there unique aspects of campus context that influence retention and graduation such as location, community resources, campus history, etc? How do these influences operate?*

Several major events occurred during 1997 and 1998 that have had significant implications for student retention and graduation at Valdosta State University. During that period, the university converted from a quarter to a semester-based system. At the same time, admission standards (minimum SAT scores required for admission) were raised, and the university eliminated developmental studies for traditional students. Increasing the minimum required SAT verbal and mathematics scores by 10 points each raised the average SAT score for entering students from 965 in Fall 1997 to 993 in Fall 1998. Another apparent result of these actions is the five percent increase in graduation rates evidenced from the Fall 1997 to the Fall 1998 first-time, full-time freshmen cohorts (from 33.29% to 38.32%). The minimum SAT verbal and mathematics scores were raised again by 10 points each for the Fall 2004 entering class, and it will be important to monitor the continuing impact of this change.

As noted above, the advising process also experienced significant changes during the same period, including implementation of a new requirement that students meet with their faculty advisor before registering for the next term and the issuance of mid-term grades for all lower level (1000 and 2000) classes.

Georgia's HOPE scholarship, instituted in early 1990s, also may affect retention and graduation rates, although the exact impact for VSU remains unclear. Approximately 85% of the university's first-time freshmen are HOPE recipients. However, this figure declines to approximately 47% of the undergraduate student body, indicating that a number of students lose HOPE eligibility based on academic standards or other factors. Further analysis is recommended to illumine patterns and identify relationships between HOPE funding and retention.

Valdosta State University offers programs that promote transfer to other institutions. For example, students enrolled in VSU's pre-Engineering program in conjunction with Georgia Institute of Technology attend VSU for two years and then transfer to Georgia Tech to complete their degree. (VSU does not offer a four-year degree in Engineering.) Consequently, VSU's overall graduation rate increases by ten percentage points when degrees earned by students who have transferred to other University System of Georgia institutions are factored into the analysis.

The campus is witnessing an important demographic change in its class of entering students. Over the past six years, an increasing number of freshman students are being drawn from the metropolitan Atlanta area. While the recent growth in enrollment from the university's service area has averaged less than one percent per year, the average increase in enrollment from metropolitan Atlanta has been 12.8%. In Fall 2004, thirty-five percent of all freshmen were from the Atlanta region compared with twenty-five percent in Fall 2000. This major demographic shift will have critical implications over time.

Several extremely positive aspects of Valdosta State University's culture emerge through conversations with constituents. First, the campus is open to – and welcomes – change. New processes are being implemented such as a feature to provide academic departments with better feedback on students who did not graduate due to issues found during the degree audit process. The CAPP automated degree audit module in BANNER is being initiated to provide a more efficient and consistent analysis. Second, the campus is constantly working to create a more student friendly atmosphere through programs such as the “Partners for Campus Excellence.” Finally, students generally describe the academic environment and their opportunity to interact with faculty in positive terms. A recent student survey developed and sponsored by the Student Government Association indicated that the opportunity for “faculty interaction” was the feature students like best about VSU. Faculty are described as “caring” and “approachable.” With a total enrollment of 10,400, the university is still able to offer the individualized attention and small classes that make a significant difference in the educational environment.

**B. Integration** - *How are specific campus features integrated and coordinated? Who is responsible for integration? Historically, how did integration occur (e.g. how/why did the linkages get put into place, who led these efforts)? What are the problems with integration?*

Integration of specific campus features occurs primarily through the close interaction of the Divisions of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs. For example, many of the students participating in the Freshman Year Experience program (based in Academic Affairs) and the Emerging Leaders program (based in Student Affairs) are housed in one of the newly renovated residence halls that offers an environment conducive to fusing academic and co-curricular activities. Constant communication at all levels and across all departments is required for this integration to occur smoothly.

VSU's President recently appointed an Enrollment Management Committee chaired by the Director of Admissions and including representatives of Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, Financial Aid, the Registrar's Office, Residence Life, Orientation Program, OASIS, Business and Finance, Strategic Planning, Institutional Research, Information Technology, Auxiliary Services, and Graduate Admissions. This committee is expected to play a key role in integrating various activities aimed at student retention, given the number of offices represented and the opportunity for candid discussions focusing on critical issues. The Enrollment Management Committee convened for the first time on February 8, 2005.

**C. Leadership** [Omitted per AASCU instructions]

**D. Campus Culture** [Omitted per AASCU instructions]

## **VII. Summary and Evaluation of What was Learned**

**A. Study team evaluation of the most important aspects of the campus that contribute to retention and graduation.**

The most important contributors to retention and graduation at Valdosta State University appear to reflect a combination of new policies and programs that have been instituted since 1997-98. These elements include: (1) An increase in the minimum SAT scores required for admission; (2) the Freshman Year Experience program; (3) Required and more consistent advising practices; and (4) Specific programs that offer individualized attention such as the continual communication regarding student athletes. These features directly support Goal 3 of the university's Strategic Plan which focuses on "Excellence in Student Learning and Retention": *VSU encourages continuous enhancement of curricula and research opportunities, resulting in highly informed graduates and increased student retention and graduation rates.*

Some exciting and potentially promising features have been initiated in the past two years, including new apartment-style residence halls that promote an integrated living-learning environment, the LeaderQuest Program, and fifth-year scholarships for athletes. These programs, and others like them, merit thorough study to identify their impact on student retention and graduation. If they do, indeed, prove successful, these features can serve as models and may be expanded or adapted to reach other student populations.

## **B. Reasons for the evaluation.**

The graduation rate of Valdosta State University's Fall 1998 entering student cohort (38.32%) was five percentage points above that of the Fall 1997 cohort. This was the time period during which admission standards were raised and developmental studies courses were discontinued for traditional age students. The Freshman Year Experience Program and more consistent (centralized) advising practices were implemented several years later. Some preliminary data exist indicating the effectiveness of FYE, and additional research on FYE cohorts is currently being conducted to produce a thorough, data-informed analysis of the impact. The findings of this research and of additional recommended studies targeting advising practices and various student groups (see section E below) will offer invaluable insights into next steps for increasing student retention and graduation at VSU.

## **C. Key challenges for the study campus in achieving success in retention and graduation (historical and future).**

The key challenge for any campus is for all faculty, staff, and administrators to focus their full attention on these critical issues. As noted above, VSU has recently experienced some success with increased student retention and graduation rates. However, it is essential that the reasons underlying this success be fully understood in order to maintain – and increase – the important momentum that has developed through initiatives that are underway. Thus, a key element is to identify and conduct the solid research that will inform the university community's understanding of the impact of various policies and programs and help guide future efforts. (See section E below for an initial list of potential studies generated through the constituent conversations.) Retaining the individualized focus on the student and close sense of community will be particularly critical as the university's enrollment continues to increase.

## **D. Key strategies used by the study campus for overcoming retention and graduation challenges.**

The university has built upon its culture of individualized attention, caring faculty, and relatively small class sizes to overcome retention challenges in the past, and it can effectively utilize these elements in the future. As the campus continues to grow, it will be especially important to find ways to retain these personalized features within a larger environment. The groundwork for continuing to provide such individualized attention is in place with the living-learning environments of the new residence halls, student "learning communities," leadership programs, and other activities that will help students connect more closely with each other and with the campus.

## **E. Other comments as useful.**

A number of excellent recommendations for further study emerged as a result of the constituent conversations. Some of these areas for research include:

1. Identify the entering freshmen who plan to transfer to another institution after one or two years and track these students. How many, in fact, transfer? How many remain? Why?

2. Do retention and graduation rates differ for freshmen who experience centralized advising centers (College of Education, College of Business Administration, and Liberal Arts Studies) compared with those assigned to individual departmental advisors?
3. What are the retention and graduation rates for students who are not admitted to the College in which they originally planned to major due to GPA requirements or the College's limitation on enrollment?
4. What are the retention and graduation rates for students who visit faculty during office hours compared with those who do not?
5. How do retention and graduation rates differ among the five colleges?
6. How do retention and graduation rates differ among programs?
7. What are the retention and graduation rates for students who have jobs (with further analysis of those working full-time compared with part-time and those working on-campus compared with those working off-campus)?
8. How do retention and graduation rates differ for students who live on campus compared with those who live off-campus?
9. How do retention and graduation rates differ for students from various regions of the state (e.g., metro Atlanta, the Valdosta-Lowndes County MSA, VSU's 41-county service region, etc.)?
10. How do retention and graduation rates differ for students in "learning communities"/cohort groups such as FYE, Emerging Leaders, Athletes, etc.?
11. Do retention and graduation rates differ for HOPE scholarship recipients (and for those who lose the HOPE scholarship after the first year) when compared with the rates for other students?
12. Do retention and graduation rates differ for students with disabilities when compared with the rates for other students?
13. Do retention and graduation rates differ for members of sororities and fraternities when compared with rates for students who are not members of the Greek community?
14. Do retention and graduation rates differ for first generation students when compared with the rates for other students?
15. Do retention and graduation rates differ for non-traditional students when compared with the rates for traditional students?
16. What is the predicted graduation rate for Valdosta State University?