



VALDOSTA STATE UNIVERSITY Graduation and Retention Improvement Plan November 2005

I. Analysis of Retention and Graduation Rates

Introduction

In the September 2005 report of its national Graduation Rate Outcomes study, *Student Success at State Colleges and Universities: A Matter of Culture and Leadership*, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) asserts

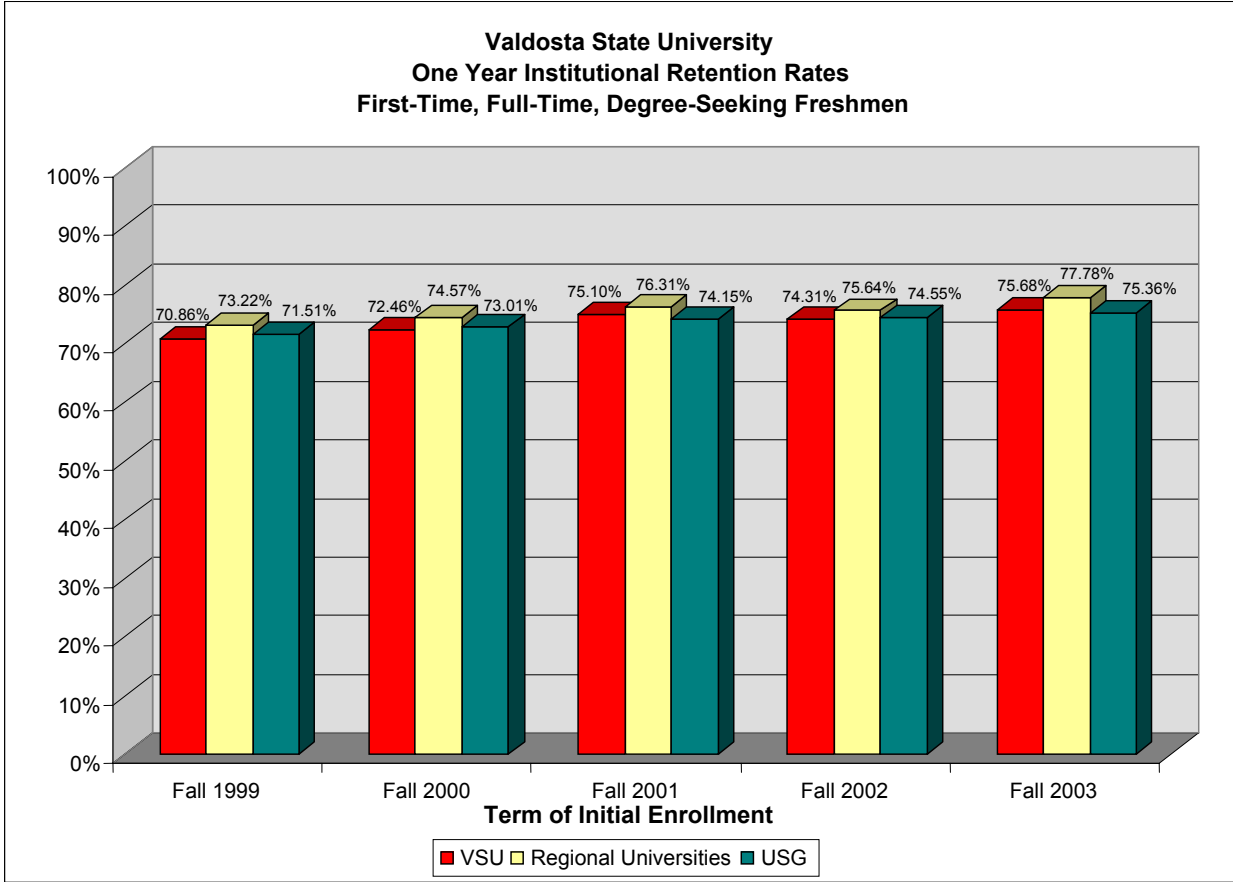
“University leaders have a fundamental choice to make if they want to increase graduation rates. On the one hand, they can take the traditional path of increasing selectivity. . . But it does not embody exemplary leadership for an AASCU institution. . . The more courageous and difficult choice, which study institutions illustrate (though some have increased selectivity as well), is to succeed with the students we have.”

AASCU concludes that Presidents can take strategic actions to lead their institutions to increased levels of student retention and graduation. One strategic action step involves the use and timely dissemination of sound data. Many institutions that have fostered exceptional student success, as measured by sustained high or greatly increased levels of retention and graduation, have built this visible “culture of evidence.” They have developed a solid “information infrastructure capable of simultaneously monitoring progress and providing detailed feedback about what is working for which student populations.” The AASCU team visiting one such campus commented on the emphasis placed upon “widely disseminating information rather than leaving people in the dark and sitting on the data.”

Valdosta State University is committed to helping our students succeed. As one of the USG institutions that sent a representative to serve on an AASCU study team, VSU conducted a self assessment of the programs and strategies we have employed to increase student success. This study highlighted the need to conduct more intense research that will better inform the university community’s understanding of the impact of various policies and programs and help guide future retention efforts. It concluded by identifying key questions about the retention and graduation rates of various student populations. The following information represents an initial response to those research topics, and further studies continue.

What are our retention and graduation rates?

Retention: Over the past five years, VSU’s institutional Fall-to-Fall retention rate of first-time, full-time freshmen has increased from 70.9% to 75.7%. Despite this important increase averaging slightly over one percentage point per year, VSU’s institutional retention rates are below the regional university averages for each of those years, beginning with the percentage of Fall 1999 freshmen who returned in Fall 2000. VSU’s institutional retention rates also are below those of the University System as a whole, except for the percentage of students retained from Fall 2001 to Fall 2002 (75.1%) and those returning in Fall 2004 (75.7%). These rates are displayed in Chart 1 below.



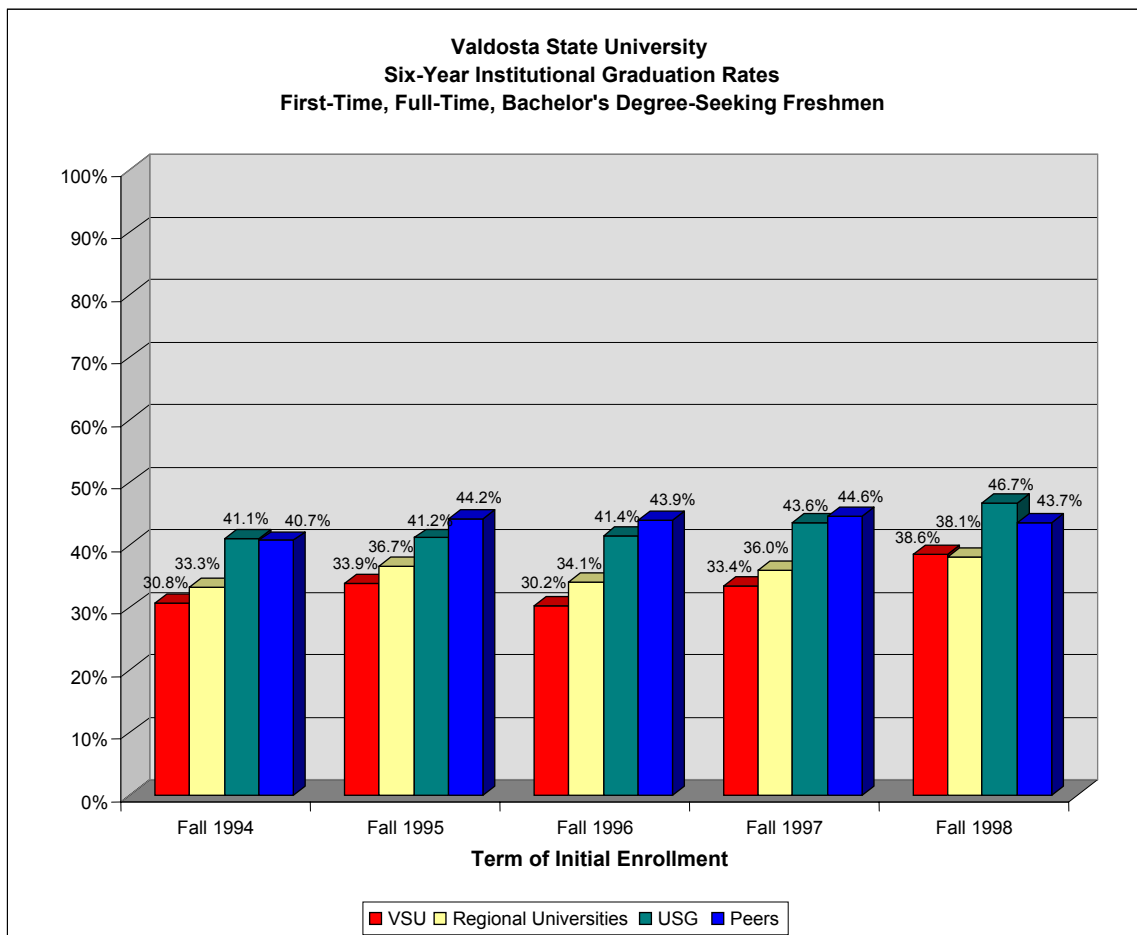
Institutional retention rates for both male and female students have risen since Fall 1999, with the rate for males showing the greatest increase. Retention rates for males increased from 67.7% for those entering in Fall 1999 to 76.1% for those entering in Fall 2003. During the same time period, retention rates for females rose from 72.8% to 75.4%. However, retention of female students has decreased slightly in the past two years, with the rate for females below that of males for the first time for the cohort entering in Fall 2003.

When analyzed by race/ethnicity, retention rates for VSU’s minority student population are above those of white students for four of the past five years. For the cohort who entered in Fall 2003, 75.3% of white students were retained compared with 77% of all minority students. This same trend occurs when considering rates for the African American student population alone; the retention rate for that group was 76.7% for students entering in Fall 2003.

The retention rates of African American females have equaled or exceeded those of white females in the past three years; for those who entered in Fall 2003, 76.8% of African American females were retained compared with 74.8% of white females. African American males were retained at the rate of 76.5% from Fall 2003 to Fall 2004 compared with 75.8% for white males. The numbers of male and female students in other minority groups are too small to lend themselves to accurate comparison.

Valdosta State University's system-wide Fall-to-Fall retention rate of first-time, full-time freshmen has risen from 79.8% for students who entered in Fall 1999 and returned in Fall 2000 to 84.2% for students entering in Fall 2003.

Graduation: VSU has experienced tangible increases in both the six-year institutional and system-wide graduation rates for first-time, full-time freshmen since the 1999-2000 academic year. Of those students entering in Fall 1994, 30.8% graduated by 2000, compared with 38.6% of the Fall 1998 cohort who graduated by 2004. As shown in Chart 2 below, VSU's graduation rates are below the regional university average, the USG average, and the average of our 10 peer institutions for all but the most recent year. For the 1998 entering cohort, VSU's graduation rate (38.6%) surpassed that of the regional university average (38.1%). According to the Education Trust data based on the 1997 entering cohort (the most recent cohort for which the data are published), VSU's graduation rate (33.4%) was lower than those of all 10 benchmark institutions. The figures for this set of peers ranged from a high of 61.2% at Appalachian State University to a low of 35.4% at Stephen F. Austin State University.



Analysis of the institutional graduation rates for male and female students reveals a pattern opposite to that of the retention rates. Significantly higher percentages of female students are graduating within six years (42.6% of the Fall 1998 cohort compared with 33.1% for males). This pattern is true for each of the past five years.

Somewhat higher percentages of white students graduated within six years when compared with African American students in all but the most recent year. For African American students who entered in 1998, 44.4% graduated compared with 37.6% of white students. This trend also holds true for minority students as a whole, whose Fall 1998 cohort graduation rate was 41.2%. Further examining these figures by race/ethnicity and gender, African American female students had the highest graduation rate of the major student groups entering in Fall 1998 (48.6%). This compares to 42.1% for the cohort of white females, 36.7% for African American males, and 32% for white males. It will be important to monitor this pattern in subsequent years since the Fall 1998 cohort was the first one in which the African American females exhibited the highest graduation rate. Until that time, the percentage of white females graduating was higher.

For Fall 1998 first-time, full-time freshmen, graduation rates for all categories of students from the Valdosta MSA were above the overall University average (38.6%). Conversely, the rates for males were below the University average for all groups except those from the Valdosta MSA. With some exceptions, students from the Southwest economic development region, African American students, and females tended to graduate at higher rates than the University average.

The six-year system-wide graduation rates increased from 41.3% for the cohort entering in 1994 to 48.3% for the 1998 cohort who graduated in 2004.

Why are our retention and graduation rates at their current levels?

The progress in overall retention and graduation rates 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 these increased levels of student success include: (1) An increase in the minimum SAT scores required for admission (10 points each on the verbal and mathematics sections in Fall 2004); (2) Inception of a Freshman Year Experience program in Fall 1998; (3) Enhanced advising practices; and (4) Specific programs that offer individualized attention such as continual communication regarding the academic performance and attendance of student athletes. These programs and policies directly support Goal 3 of VSU'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.* Integration of these features occurs through the close working relationship of the Divisions of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs that was recognized with a USG Best Practice award in 2004.

However, as the comparison with peer institutions clearly indicates, much remains to be accomplished. A primary challenge for the University is to continue this momentum and build upon the gains that have been realized by implementing the proactive intervention strategies outlined in the enclosed plan. This will require even more in-depth research, data analysis, and continued assessment. The University has benefited from its culture of individualized attention, caring faculty, and relatively small class sizes to overcome retention challenges in the past. Retaining the personalized focus on the student and close sense of community will be particularly critical as the University's enrollment continues to grow. The groundwork for maintaining 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. We also must

critically examine our degree program offerings and the times at which these programs are scheduled to identify options that will contribute to enhanced student success.

The recent National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) results add greater depth to the analysis. Both first-year students and seniors are generally pleased with their overall educational experience, and the vast majority report that they would “probably” or “definitely” attend VSU again if they could start over. Both groups also reported levels of student-faculty interaction that are comparable to the results for other Master’s institutions and nationally. VSU’s freshmen perceive the campus environment as supportive. Conversely, their perceptions of academic advising fare less well compared with other Master’s institutions and national norms. The University will participate in the NSSE study again during 2005-2006 to see if these patterns remain consistent. This will alternate with other standardized national instruments in future years. We also are examining methods for distinguishing specific groups of students who are at-risk for various reasons (academic, social integration, motivation, etc.) in order to implement targeted intervention strategies that may help them achieve greater success.

All of these crucial success elements are directly addressed through specific goals and action steps defined in the Graduation Plan (Section III). As the AASCU study so clearly outlines, the single most important lesson from effective institutions is the importance of institutional culture in shaping the day-to-day behavior of faculty and staff in their interactions with students. The Plan that follows is intended to engage the campus in a collective vision for a student-centered culture.

II. Program Evaluation

A subcommittee of the Enrollment Management Council was charged with the responsibility of evaluating Valdosta State University’s current retention and graduation activities and programs. After a thorough analysis of existing efforts, the subcommittee decided we could achieve the greatest impact by concentrating initially on academic activities. The subcommittee’s findings are as follows:

First Year Transition Program. VSU’s first year transition program for undecided majors, Freshman Year Experience (FYE), has been very effective in improving retention rates of this “at-risk” group of students. FYE gives students continuous contact with their academic advisor who also serves as their instructor in the college success course – VSU 1101. FYE also integrates career services, intervention strategies, and learning cohorts as part of the program. Some variation of the FYE program for undecided majors should be expanded to include students who have declared a major.

Academic Advising and Intervention. While academic advising is mandatory on the VSU campus, this area should and can be improved. Very little academic intervention occurs on the VSU campus outside the already established FYE program. It is critical that intervention become an integral part of the freshman advising process and occur very early during the academic probation period for students with unsatisfactory grades.

Learning Assistance Programs. Several programs provide learning assistance for students such as the Writing Center, the Mathematics Tutoring Center, the Foreign Language Learning Center,

and Oasis for Learning Support Courses. These programs all operate separately with little or no coordination. A centralized Student Success Center coordinated by one individual or one administrative office with additional academic and counseling support will enhance our ability to foster the academic potential of our students.

Internal Policies. We continue to review internal policies and procedures that have an adverse effect on retaining and graduating students. Several areas of concern are being addressed to better serve our students. Scheduling of classes, additional programs, core curriculum offerings, and night programs are just a few areas that are under review. Faculty and staffing issues are impeding our ability to offer enough seats for students in core curriculum courses and several upper division programs. This has been an on-going area of concern that is being addressed.

Orientation. Our new student orientation program is on solid ground. However, we could enhance the student's experience by implementing a password protected virtual orientation on our web site which could include additional information, a survey instrument, interest match with student organizations, placement testing, etc.

Shared Responsibility. Retention and graduation rates have improved recently, but we are confident that we can improve by making this an institutional priority. We have a commitment and a mandate to succeed from the highest level. Responsibility must be shared by all. The existing Enrollment Management Council will oversee and implement the Plan outlined below. We look forward to the challenge.

III. Plan for Retention and Graduation Improvement

Valdosta State University's retention and graduation rates have increased in recent years, primarily as a result of higher admission standards. We are encouraged by our progress but are not content to remain at this level. We know we can do even better and are committed to improving the success of our students.

In addition to completing the above evaluation of existing programs and activities, the Enrollment Management Council subcommittee reviewed key research literature on this subject to assist in formulating VSU's Plan. These studies include AASCU's recent national Graduation Rate Outcomes report titled *A Matter of Culture and Leadership* and two ACT research reports, *What Works in Student Retention* and *The Role of Academic and Non-Academic Factors in Improving College Retention*. The University's Plan to improve retention and graduation rates is designed around three high-impact strategies that ACT reported as making the greatest difference in *What Works in Student Retention*. These strategies include first year programs, academic advising, and learning support.

Raising the level of student success is a continuous process that involves implementation, assessment, and shared responsibility. The strategic goals and action steps for retention and graduation improvement that are summarized below are concepts that will be studied and implemented on campus as appropriate. We fully expect that the University's initial Plan will evolve and expand to meet the ever-changing needs of our students.

Will strive to improve the advising process and implement an intervention strategy.

- A. Develop an institutional advising manual
- B. Implement Curriculum Advising and Program Planning (CAPP) module of Banner
- C. Require advisor and CAPP training of all undergraduate advisors
- D. Select and train a core group of faculty to advise transfer students
- E. Require advisors to intervene with students who have unsatisfactory in-progress grades (midterm grades)
- F. Require academic deans or their designees to intervene with students who are placed on academic probation

Expand VSU's First Year Transition Program (Freshman Year Experience) to freshmen who have declared a major.

- A. Give academic departments ownership of their freshman majors from the outset
- B. Establish "majors only sections" for introductory courses within given majors
- C. Have the instructor for the course serve as the advisor for the class where feasible
- D. Integrate career services as part of the course where feasible
- E. Have academic departments share in the responsibility for retaining their majors

Establish a Student Success Center to support learning on the VSU campus.

- A. Define role and scope of the Student Success Center
- B. Acquire sufficient space for the Center
- C. Fund and staff the Center
- D. Move existing learning support services to the Student Success Center
- E. Train staff
- F. Open and advertise the Center

Identify and attempt to provide additional academic resources and delivery methods necessary to improve retention and graduation rates.

- A. Find the necessary financial resources to increase core curriculum seats in areas needed by 10% for Fall 2006 and upper division seats where needed and supported by sound data
- B. Explore and implement alternate methods of course delivery
- C. Develop additional degree programs offered at night
- D. Consider adding new degree programs to the curriculum

Evaluate and attempt to change policies and procedures that may impede retention and graduation.

- A. Will consider changes in the VSU core curriculum in Areas B and D as part of the required comprehensive program review of general education
- B. Will consider a student friendly textbook policy
- C. Will attempt to identify academic practices that do not encourage retention and take corrective action where possible

Develop a “virtual orientation” on the web to enhance the existing new student orientation program.

- A. Assign personnel to the project
- B. Establish architecture and content of the proposed site
- C. Develop the site with appropriate content
- D. Test the site
- E. Implement the site for use by students accepted for admission

Promote retention and graduation as a positive institutional cultural change to students, faculty, and staff.

- A. Encourage the “cultural change” as a shared responsibility
- B. Develop subtle messages that promote graduation
- C. Profile successful graduates
- D. Endorse and support the concept of retention and graduation
- E. Give positive incentives for departments and individuals who make a difference

Measure and assess the progress of our retention and graduation rates.

- A. Establish data and information needed at the departmental, college, and institutional levels to provide optimum feedback
- B. Office of Strategic Research and Analysis is charged to compile and analyze relevant information and to share it across the campus
- C. Use data and information to continuously assess, measure, and improve retention and graduation rates
- D. Use results of student survey data, such as the *National Survey of Student Engagement*, to assist and improve our retention efforts

IV. Retention and Graduation Targets

The comprehensive analysis of graduation and retention rates in Section I revealed very positive recent trends in the success rates of VSU’s minority student population, including African American males and females. Their success levels were above VSU’s overall average for the most recently reported cohorts. As a result, the University is initially focusing its efforts for minority students on providing access through initiatives such as the recently-funded HEROES Institute. We will continue to monitor retention and graduation trends for various major student subpopulations (including race/ethnic and gender cohorts) as the Plan is implemented and make any necessary adjustments and updates for specific groups over time. Another crucial factor that will be closely monitored is the impact of changing HOPE Scholarship requirements on the overall targets as well as on the success rates for specific groups of students.

| USG Retention Rate Targets | | | | | |
|---|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Valdosta State University | | | | | |
| Rate | 2005-06* | 2006-07* | 2007-08 | 2008-09 | 2009-10 |
| Institution-Specific | 76.0% | 77.0% | 78.0% | 79.0% | 80.0% |
| Disaggregated Institution-Specific | | | | | |
| White, Non-Hispanic | | | | | |
| African-American or Black, Non-Hispanic | | | | | |
| Hispanic | | | | | |
| American Indian or Alaskan Native | | | | | |
| Asian or Pacific Islander | | | | | |
| Multi-racial | | | | | |
| Unknown** | | | | | |
| Male | | | | | |
| Female | | | | | |
| Other Groups | | | | | |
| System-Wide | 85.0% | 86.0% | 87.0% | 88.0% | 89.0% |
| Disaggregated System-wide | | | | | |
| White, Non-Hispanic | | | | | |
| African-American or Black, Non-Hispanic | | | | | |
| Hispanic | | | | | |
| American Indian or Alaskan Native | | | | | |
| Asian or Pacific Islander | | | | | |
| Multi-racial | | | | | |
| Unknown** | | | | | |
| Male | | | | | |
| Female | | | | | |
| Other Groups | | | | | |
| * Use these columns if you need to adjust existing targets. | | | | | |
| ** Race/ethnicity unknown is not currently collected by the USG SIRS. However, if you have large numbers of race/ethnicity unknown students, you may set targets here. Do not prorate unknown students into the other groups. | | | | | |

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**USG Six-Year Bachelor's Graduation Rate Targets
Valdosta State University**

| Cohort and Rate | Entering Cohort | | | | | |
|---|------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 |
| | Rate by FY05 | Rate by FY06 | Rate by FY07 | Rate by FY08 | Rate by FY09 | Rate by FY10 |
| Institution-Specific | 39.0% | 40.0% | 41.0% | 42.0% | 43.5% | 45.0% |
| Disaggregated Institution-Specific | | | | | | |
| White, Non-Hispanic | | | | | | |
| African-American or Black, Non-Hispanic | | | | | | |
| Hispanic | | | | | | |
| American Indian or Alaskan Native | | | | | | |
| Asian or Pacific Islander | | | | | | |
| Multi-racial | | | | | | |
| Unknown* | | | | | | |
| Male | | | | | | |
| Female | | | | | | |
| Other Groups | | | | | | |
| System-Wide | 49.0% | 50.0% | 51.0% | 52.0% | 53.5% | 55.0% |
| Disaggregated System-Wide | | | | | | |
| White, Non-Hispanic | | | | | | |
| African-American or Black, Non-Hispanic | | | | | | |
| Hispanic | | | | | | |
| American Indian or Alaskan Native | | | | | | |
| Asian or Pacific Islander | | | | | | |
| Multi-racial | | | | | | |
| Unknown* | | | | | | |
| Male | | | | | | |
| Female | | | | | | |
| Other Groups | | | | | | |

*Race/ethnicity unknown is not currently collected by the USG SIRS. However, if you have large numbers of race/ethnicity unknown students, you may set targets here. Do not prorate unknown students into the other groups.

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