

Retaining Students Enrolled in New Century College, PAGE and Linked Courses

A One-Semester Report Card

Introduction

George Mason University has always attempted to be a leader in innovative educational programs with a goal of improving the entire college experience for its students. Currently, over one-quarter of GMU's students participate in three innovative general education curricular options including New Century College (NCC), the Planned Alternative to General Education (PAGE), and the linked courses program. These programs attempt to build community among students and foster interactive and multidisciplinary learning. This report examines the retention of freshmen students at GMU from fall semester 1995 to spring semester 1996 within these programs and across the entire freshmen population. It should be emphasized that the retention rates reported here are for one semester and only a snap shot. These data are too preliminary to suggest any pattern or trend at the institution. These students will be followed throughout their GMU career to determine if these programs are associated with longer term retention.

An earlier volume of In Focus (March, 1996; Vol. 1, No. 2), summarized the demographic characteristics of students enrolled in NCC, PAGE, and linked courses. PAGE and linked courses were more likely to enroll freshmen with undeclared majors and BA rather than BS students. Further, PAGE attracted the greatest proportion of women (66%) and linked courses attracted African Americans (16%) at greater rate their proportion in the freshmen student body.

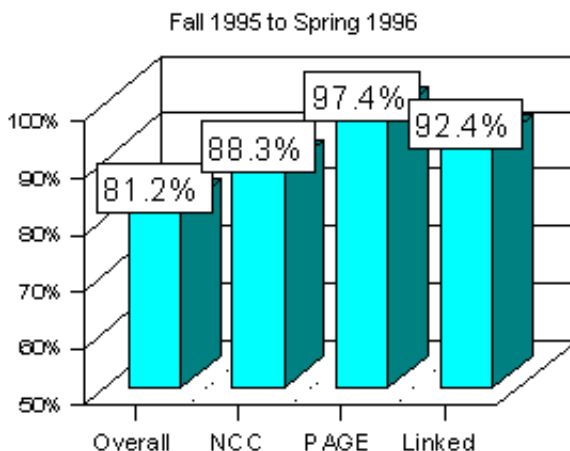
Overall Findings

Freshmen who enrolled in NCC, PAGE, or linked courses in the Fall of 1995 were more likely to return to campus for the spring semester than were other GMU students. Nearly all the PAGE students (97%) and linked courses students (92%), and a high number of NCC students (88%) returned for the Spring, 1996 semester. This compares with an overall rate for the freshmen student body of 81%. This data does not suggest why students in these three programs return to campus at a higher rate than other GMU students, but students enrolled in the linked courses suggested the following in their end of fall 1995 semester evaluation.

"The linked program really helped me my first semester at college."

"...I think that the link courses really helped me in my first semester at college."

% of Freshmen Returning to GMU by Program



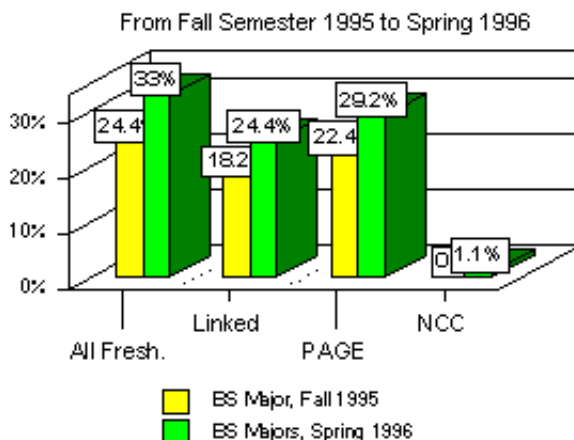
Degree Comparisons

It was reported in In Focus, Vol. 1, No. 2 that in Fall 1995 the proportion of undeclared majors enrolled in both PAGE (47.4%, n=55) and the linked (53.3%, n=161) courses was greater than the proportion of undeclared students within the freshmen population (42.4%, n=960). NCC students (99%) tend to declare their major as a BA in Integrative Studies.

As might be expected, by spring 1996, fewer freshmen students were undeclared. Freshmen enrolled in PAGE and linked courses, however, continued to be undeclared at a rate higher than those in the freshmen population. For example, 44.4% (n=124) of linked students and 38.1% (n=43) of PAGE students were still undeclared compared to 33.2% (n=611) of the freshmen population. Within NCC, 6 students changed their majors; 4 selected BA majors and 2 switched to an "undeclared" status. Further, an examination of the proportion of undeclared students who selected various majors revealed that those enrolled in linked courses (35%, n=13) and PAGE (58%, n=7) were more likely to select BS majors than those in the freshmen population (16%). It is not known why greater proportions of PAGE and linked students who are undeclared choose to major in BS fields compared to the proportion who do so in the freshmen population.

Retention Examined via Gender

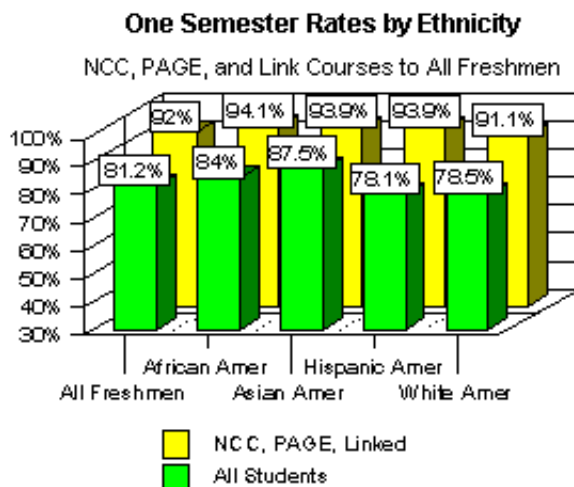
Increase in Proportion of BS Majors by Program



There seems to be little difference in the pattern of retention in various demographic categories. Most notably in the gender category, NCC, PAGE, linked courses, and the overall student body retained equal percentages of men and women.

Retention Examined via Ethnicity

The retention rates for the combined NCC, PAGE, and linked courses' students differed little across all ethnic categories (91% to 94%). In comparison the overall student body retained relatively more African Americans (84%) and Asian Americans (87.5%), and relatively fewer Hispanic Americans (78.1%) and White Americans (79%) than the overall retention rate (81%).



Since nearly all of the students in NCC, PAGE, linked courses were 23 years or under, it was not possible to make comparisons with the overall freshmen population, which includes a wider range of ages, including those over 35 years old.

Summary

As shown in previous retention studies conducted by Institutional Assessment (University Topics; May 1994, Vol. 6 No. 3), many factors can influence a student's decision to remain in school. to spring retention of freshmen students at GMU. This report revealed that that students who had an undeclared major when they entered GMU, but had declared a major by the second semester, chose to pursue a Bachelor of Science degree. Finally, there appears to be little if any difference in one semester retention rates across many demographic categories. Although this data cannot provide conclusive evidence that NCC, PAGE, and the linked courses program support higher retention rates over the long term, it does suggest they are on the right track.

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