

Graduating Students through a Finish Line Program

NACADA Outstanding Advising Program Award Application

Institutional description

Located in a quiet residential neighborhood of Memphis, Tennessee, the University of Memphis is a major research institution and the flagship of the Tennessee Board of Regents state system. The university is committed to providing high quality educational experiences while pursuing new knowledge through research, artistic expression, and interdisciplinary and engaged scholarship. With an enrollment of approximately 21,000 students supported by a workforce of almost 2,500 including 930 full time faculty, the University of Memphis has 24 Chairs of Excellence, more than any other Tennessee university, hosts the largest Honors program in the state, and offers more than 250 areas of study.

The University of Memphis offers courses at multiple locations, including the main campus in the heart of Memphis, the Lambuth campus in Jackson, Tennessee, and eight satellite locations in the metropolitan Memphis area. In addition, more than 50 online and hybrid degree programs are available to students. In the fall 2016 semester, 17,176 undergraduates, and 4,125 graduate students were enrolled across the university's campuses and satellite locations. The university serves a diverse student population, as evidenced by fall 2016 enrollment: 48% were white, 37% were African American, 5% were Hispanic, 3% were Asian American, 1% were international students, and 6% belonged to other categories. Female students comprised 60% of the population. Approximately 83% of the students received some sort of assistance through either merit-based or need-based financial aid, while 50% of the students who enrolled full time were low-income/Pell recipients.

Program development

In 2013, the University of Memphis launched a pilot program to re-engage undergraduate students who had previously attended the institution, earned at least 90 credit hours (i.e. senior standing), but stopped attending short of earning their bachelor's degree. Previous efforts had attempted to re-engage this population of "near-completers" with messaging such as "Experience Counts" in 2012, where prior learning activities such as job training or certifications were promoted as opportunities to earn academic credit and "Back on Track" in 2011, where academic advisors conducted thorough reviews of transcripts to evaluate curriculum changes or better degree completion options for the students. Even though the results of those efforts generated interest and enthusiasm for a short period, they failed to produce long term effects in increased enrollment and graduation. It became clear that the messaging to students needed to be re-calibrated, and the institution had to address the financing issue for students who were no longer able to access federal financial aid due to changes that went into effect abruptly in 2012. For an institution where 83% of the students are dependent upon financial aid, returning to finish the degree was not a viable option unless funding concerns were addressed.

Goals and objectives

The program was initially launched within University College, the interdisciplinary, nontraditional student-focused college, with the following objectives: demonstrate a shared responsibility in degree completion for students adversely affected by the 2012 changes in federal financial aid regulations; reduce, if not eliminate, barriers (e.g. financial, prescribed degree plan challenges, internal policy issues) preventing degree completion for students with a high volume of earned credit hours; explore opportunities for support and collaboration with

internal as well as external parties; and embed experimental practices (e.g. use of open educational resources, credit by exam, experiential learning credit, academic coaching) into the program to evaluate their effectiveness, with hopes to include such practices in standard operational procedures and policy later and for a larger audience.

Program description

Initially, a list of students with 90 or more credit hours in good standing at the institution who had not re-enrolled for the fall 2013 semester and who had also reached their maximum financial aid award limit was generated by the Office of Financial Aid. Students were invited to participate in the program through an email signed by the President to return to finish their degree at minimal or no cost, and follow-up phone calls were made by an office assistant to try to reach the students who didn't respond to the email message. Interestingly, one of the first students reached by phone indicated that she did not respond to the email because the message of a low cost completion sounded "too good to be true".

Since financing was a primary concern for the returning students, Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) opportunities which were already well established at the institution became a cornerstone of the program. In addition to the standard CPL pathways like CLEP/DSST exams, departmental exams, ACE credit recommendations for military/corporate training, and an Experiential Learning Credit (ELC) portfolio program, there was a need for additional options to meet the University College degree requirements of six credit hours of thematic studies and three hours of senior project. The Saylor Academy, a nonprofit organization providing free online courses, was identified as a partner to provide the thematic studies courses. Initially, eight Saylor courses were evaluated by University of Memphis faculty members and determined to be

equivalent to three hours of upper division credit each. Academic credit from Saylor courses is transcribed through ELC at a rate of \$225 per course as compared to a rate of \$1200 for a tuition course. A similar innovative strategy was adopted for the senior project course through a collaboration with the university's Continuing Education Office. The Senior Project course content and assessments were delivered online by an adjunct instructor at a cost of \$310 per student and transcribed through the departmental credit by exam policy at the institution. The cost savings from these two strategies alone was key to attracting many of the returning students who were unsure how they would afford the tuition cost of finishing their degree. In addition, the open enrollment of both options allowed students to begin their coursework at almost any point instead of waiting for the next traditional enrollment cycle and also feel the satisfaction of completing a requirement soon after joining in the program.

The pilot program quickly awakened the campus community to the alarmingly high volume of students who had accrued an astonishing number of credit hours (not to mention debt), yet had not earned a degree. Within just a few short weeks after initial contact, three of the first twenty students contacted were approved for graduation in December 2013. One student had failed to send a transfer transcript indicating completion of a science course. Another student had completed all requirements for the Bachelor of Liberal Studies degree and only needed to complete the change of major paperwork. The final student was able to complete her remaining twelve hours through Saylor Academy courses. In addition, seven other students had re-engaged with the institution and had graduation plans for the next term. Excitement for the initiative began to reach across several departments: Information Technology designed a report to identify students meeting the initiative criteria, Financial Aid generated another report of over 70 qualified students who had, or were near, exhausted aid eligibility, the Commencement Office

provided an alternative method to file appropriate graduation paperwork, and the Degree Audit analyst provided a means to load student records back into the degree audit software, since their lapse in enrollment had “kicked” them out of the system. Also, Business and Finance provided a one time scholarship fund of \$27,500 to cover the costs of students who had exhausted their financial aid yet would have still qualified to receive it, and the Bursar’s Office agreed to temporarily lift registration holds for students with previous balances of \$200 or less.

By January 2014, the lists provided by Financial Aid and a list of qualified students generated through the report designed by Information Technology (over 2,800 students) proved to be overwhelming. Therefore, groups were prioritized as follows: students who could still graduate within their six-year graduation cohort, highest number of credit hours completed, exhausted financial aid eligibility, and lastly, those without debt/judicial holds. Communication in the form of an email message, phone call, and ultimately physical letter was initiated in groups of 20 students at a time. Messaging was simple: we noticed you left just short of graduation, come back and let us help you evaluate all paths to graduation as well as cost effective course completion strategies as low as \$100 per course. A website was established and the initiative was branded as the Finish Line Program. Fourteen additional students graduated by May 2014, and the website gave students the opportunity to self-refer to the program and provided validation for students who had received communication from the program.

As successful graduation stories of Finish Line students began to resonate across campus, even academic departments who were initially skeptical began to embrace a supportive and collaborative philosophy. Graduation analysts began referring students from lists of students who had been previously disqualified from graduation. Similarly, advisors began to “dig through” old advising files to find the students who had “gotten away”. Institutional funding was provided for

additional scholarships and permanent staff positions which included a project director and two full-time academic advisors/coaches by summer 2014. The Development Office also began to tell the success stories. After a particularly moving story from a recent graduate at a Board of Visitors meeting, a local businesswoman donated \$10,000. Subsequently, a variety of individual and corporate sources committed scholarship funding, resulting in gifts exceeding \$400,000, including a personal gift from the president of the university.

While the bulk of original graduates earned degrees from University College, a comprehensive reorganization plan in 2014 centralized Finish Line within the newly created Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning. This reorganization provided more visibility and encouraged faculty and staff across campus to embrace the program concept which resulted in students earning degrees in other areas such as Business, Health Studies, Psychology and Sociology. Enthusiasm was likewise illustrated by units willing to collaborate on the innovative practices aimed at identifying and enabling expeditious and cost-efficient access to coursework for Finish Line students such as two additional course offerings through Continuing Education for returning Sport Management students. By the end of summer 2015, 123 students had graduated including five former student athletes that helped the institution's APR (academic performance rate) with NCAA.

As the data and success stories of Finish Line students continued to grow, the innovative strategies started to transform other areas of the institution. Initially advisors were not able to access non-enrolled student records in the degree audit system which made academic advising and degree planning difficult for both the returning student and the academic advisor. The internal process was modified to accommodate Finish Line students but then expanded to benefit all returning students. Saylor Academy courses, previously reserved for Finish Line students

only, became solutions for graduating students who needed to drop a course or find a substitute for a course not offered in their final semester. Courses offered through the Continuing Education platform grew from one to eight courses. Recognizing the high volume of students that face financial struggles so close to graduation also led to institutional microgrants designated specifically for students in their final two semesters.

Procedures used in program evaluation

Ultimately, the program is evaluated by the number of students re-recruited to the institution and the number of graduates. Since Tennessee is an outcomes/performance funding state, it is critical for us as a public institution to progress and graduate students as state funding dollars are directly tied to those results. In addition, our state has embedded focus populations which provide additional premiums in the state funding formula. Currently those focus populations are adult students and low income students. 93% of the graduates are adult students, and 71% are classified as low income. With the additional premiums applied to these focus populations, the number of graduates from our program almost doubles in the state funding formula. Additionally, 68% of the graduates are underrepresented minorities and 45% are first generation students. Increasing graduation rates is important for all student populations but is particularly significant to closing achievement gaps in those groups.

Results/outcome

In less than four years, the Finish Line Program has re-recruited almost 700 students back to the institution and generated 3,200 credit hours and \$600,000 in (lost) tuition and fees for the institution. More importantly, 305 students have graduated and fulfilled their goal of earning a

bachelor's degree as of December 2016. Surprisingly, 27 graduates did not need any additional coursework to complete their degree due to curriculum changes or course/degree requirement substitutions that had not been previously considered, and 95 students only needed one course to graduate. The average enrollment lapse has been three years, and the graduates have needed, on average, only eleven credit hours to finish their degrees. A record number of 60 students are set to graduate in May 2017, and advisors are currently working with an additional 150 students in various stages of degree completion.

Due to the inventory of low cost alternatives in the program, the average completion cost per student is under \$1,800 even though the tuition cost for one 3 credit hour class at the institution is \$1,200. In fact, 70% of the credit hours awarded to date have been generated through Credit for Prior Learning for a cost savings of over \$350,000 to the students and to the program's scholarship fund. Even though the savings are noteworthy, the true value of the program is the benefits it brings to our graduates, their families, and our community. As evidenced by some of their comments below, it is the right thing for us to be doing.

“In the face of all the reasons adults want to give up, I was able to see it to the end because of the compassion and consideration of your program. For that, I cannot thank you enough.” Karin

“I start graduate school next month. None of this would have ever been possible without Finish Line. I'm so thankful and honored to have been a part of such a great program.” - Mary

“The Finish Line program has been a true blessing. I have landed a job at a prestigious brokerage firm, which has allowed me to provide for my family. ” - Kendra

Potential for adaptation by other institutions

The concept of the Finish Line Program can easily be adapted by other institutions either on a small or a large scale depending on resources. In the pilot stage, the program was housed within a small area, financed by a modest investment from the institution, and operated on a

portion of time offered by a departmental advisor and an office associate. As momentum grew, the program gained additional funding, dedicated staff, and a new home in central administration. Likewise, institutions can develop or enhance their inventory of Credit for Prior Learning opportunities like those utilized by Finish Line students to address affordability issues and to provide solutions for missing course requirements or course scheduling conflicts as students near graduation. Graduating students through programs like the Finish Line Program is replicable, scalable and definitely worth the investment for the institution and the students.