Report to the Vermont General Assembly

Supporting Student Success: Boosting Retention

at the Vermont State Colleges System

and the University of Vermont

Submitted by: Tricia Coates, Director of External and Governmental Affairs, VSCS

Wendy L. Koenig, J.D., Director of Federal and State Relations, UVM

Date: December 6, 2019

Supporting Student Success: Boosting Retention at the VSCS and UVM

Contents

Vermont State Colleges System

Introduction: Why retention is an imperative?

One of the six strategic priorities of the VSCS is to improve the retention and graduation rates at our colleges. While VSCS retention and graduation rates are comparable to similar institutions nationwide, we recognize the growing body of national evidence from "game-changing" strategies that can significantly increase student success, many of which are in some stage of implementation across the System. A related strategic priority adopted by the board is to operate as an even more integrated system that provides expanded student opportunities and supports by improving the technology infrastructure and reducing transferability and course-sharing barriers.

We recognize the critical need for the VSCS to contribute to Vermont's 70×2025 attainment goal and the future social and economic well-being of our state by increasing the number of Vermonters who complete a degree or credential of value.

What do we measure?

Colleges and universities submit student data to the Integrated Post-Secondary Education Data System (IPEDS) every October 15. This national database allows for comparisons between institutions on key educational quality data points. In particular, it allows colleges to benchmark their data against a cohort of peers that share similar characteristics, like size, costs and graduation rates. IPEDS uses the following definitions of two data points key to this report:

> *Retention* -- The percentage of first-time, full-time bachelor's degree-seeking students from the previous fall term who enroll again in the most recent fall term in 4-year institutions.

> *Graduation Rates* – The percentage of first-time, full-time bachelor's degree seeking students who graduate within 150% (six years) of the time that is normally required for the program they are in.

What do IPEDS reports <u>not</u> measure?

While common definitions help colleges and universities place their own retention and graduation rates into context and provide specific targets for improvement, the IPEDS retention and graduation rate definitions can be limited in what they reveal about student success and educational quality at a particular institution. In fact, the following data points may be more significant to educational outcomes at access institutions than to more selective colleges and universities:

The number of students who transfer -- If a full-time, enrolled student transfers to another institution, their departure lowers the sending institution's first-time full-time IPEDS retention rate and graduation rates. As our recent examination of data on CCV students' success in transferring to UVM revealed, these students transfer with an average of approximately 15 credits, or the equivalent of just one semester of full-time study.

The success of students who take longer than 150% of time to graduation – Full-time enrollment in 15 credits is a best practice for timely graduation. Many students, though, cannot enroll in 15 credits every semester. Many working age adults who have successfully completed their degrees in more than 150% of time have enrolled in only several courses per semester or skipped semesters entirely.   Recently introduced IPEDS outcomes measures now look at 200% time to graduation, and include tracking of both full-time and part-time students and outcomes inclusive of transfer to other institutions. These measures may be found in the full IPEDS data reports linked below, presented in Figures 17-20.

Non-degree student success – Academic quality and success may also be measured by non-degree program enrollment and completion, programs that serve workforce needs and individual interests. IPEDS retention reports do not measure these outcomes.
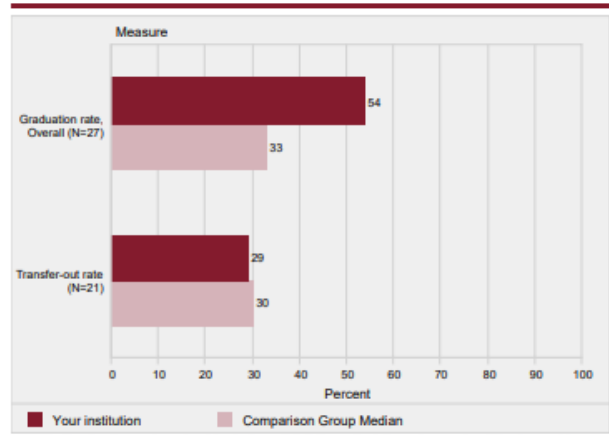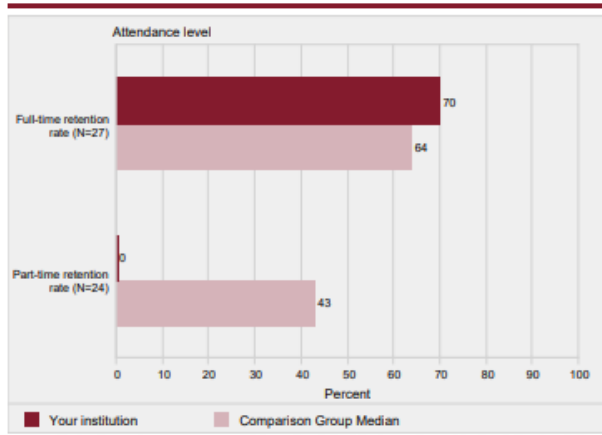
What are the retention and graduation rates for VSCS colleges and universities?

The following charts reflect data reported to IPEDS in October 2018, and reflect the academic year of 2017-2018. (Comprehensive 2018 IPEDS reports for individual colleges are linked after each chart.

VSCS First Year Retention and 6 Year Graduation Rates: 2018 IPEDS Report

	First year Retention	Graduation Rate
Castleton University	70%	54%
National peer group	*64%*	*33%*
Northern Vermont University		
Lyndon	63%	43%
Johnson	64%	38%
National peer group	*65%*	*34%*
Vermont Tech	66%	52%
National peer group	*60%*	*34%*
Community College of VT	60%	21%
National peer group	*59%*	*23%*

Castleton University First Year Retention and 6 Year Graduation Rates: 2018 IPEDS Report

Attendance level

	Your institution	Comparison Group Median
Full-time retention rate (N=27)	70	64
Part-time retention rate (N=24)	0	43

Measure

	Your institution	Comparison Group Median
Graduation rate, Overall (N=27)	54	33
Transfer-out rate (N=21)	29	30

Northern Vermont University – Johnson First Year Retention and 6 Year Graduation Rates: 2018 IPEDS Report

Attendance level

	Your institution	Comparison Group Median
Full-time retention rate (N=26)	64	65
Part-time retention rate (N=23)	0	44

Measure

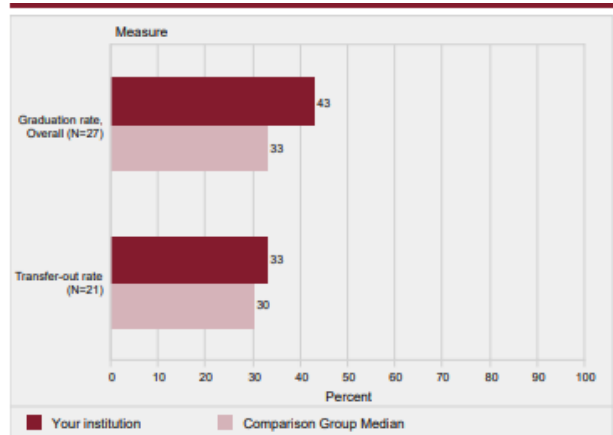|	Your institution	Comparison Group Median
Graduation rate, Overall (N=26)	38	34
Transfer-out rate (N=20)	36	31
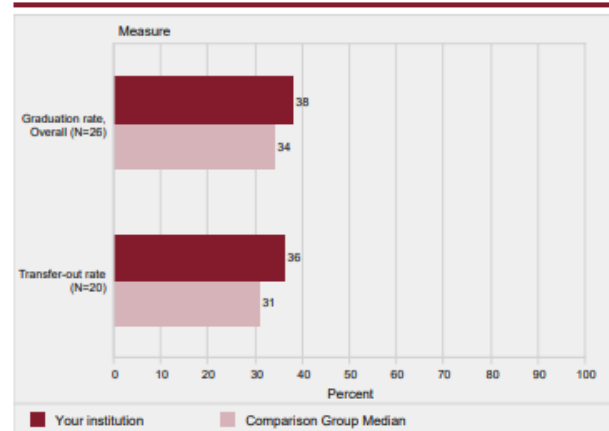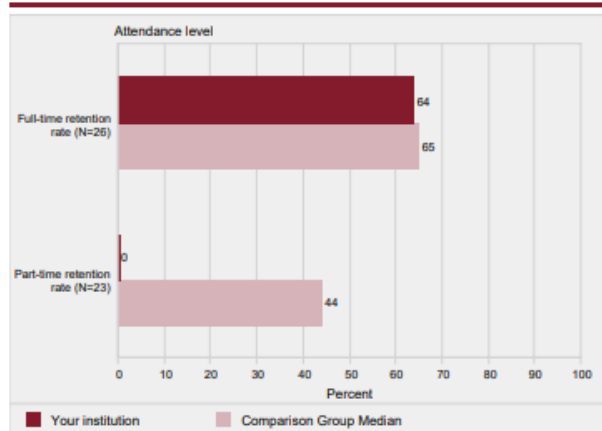
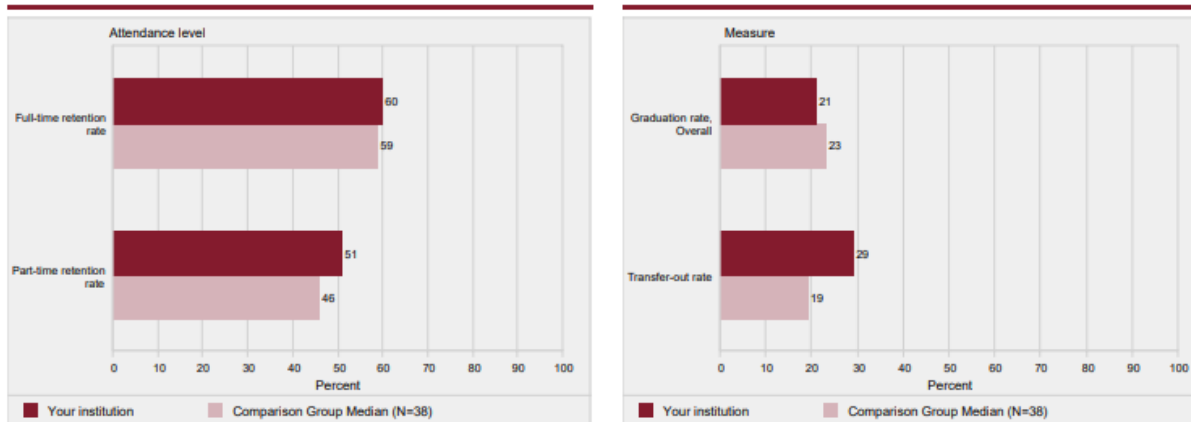Northern Vermont University - Lyndon First Year Retention and 6 Year Graduation Rates: 2018 IPEDS Report
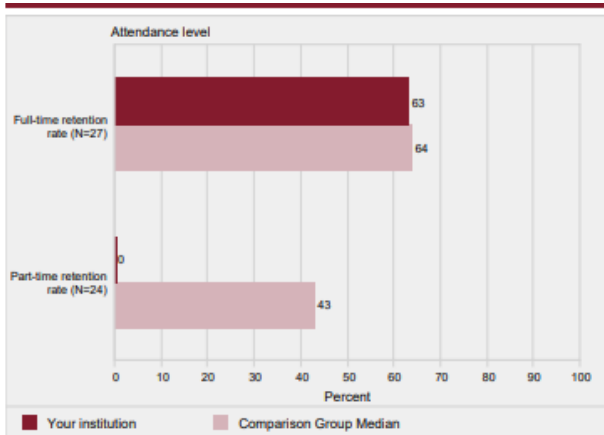
Vermont Technical College First Year Retention and 6 Year Graduation Rates: 2018 IPEDS Report

Community College of Vermont First Year Retention and 6 Year Graduation Rates: 2018 IPEDS Report
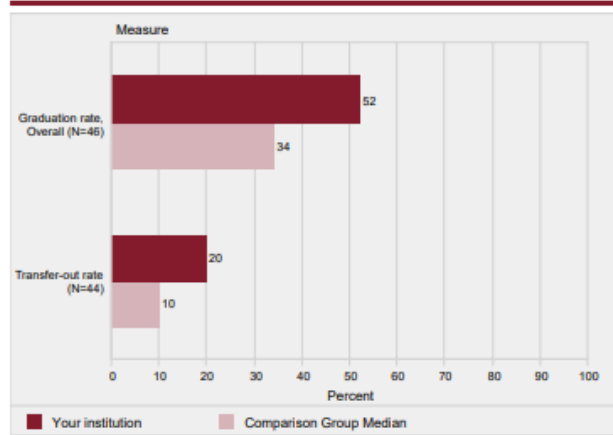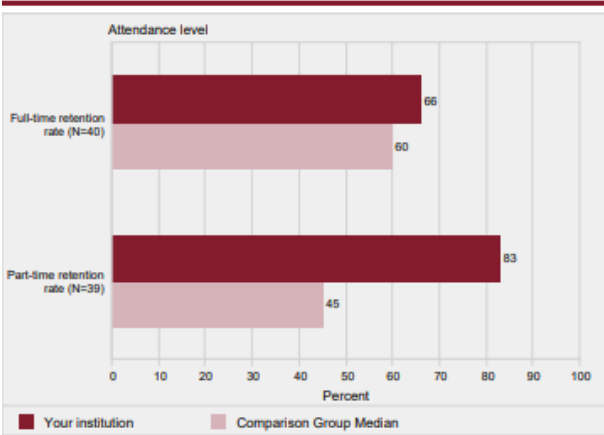

What factors influence VSCS retention rates?

Better supporting student success is a strategic priority for the VSCS Board of Trustees and for every VSCS institution. While we implement new strategies and learn from best practices relevant to our college peer cohort, we must consider the most important influences over student persistence semester-to-semester.

> *Preparedness for college* – The preparation level of an incoming first-year college class can be measured by average high school GPAs, standardized test scores, etc. The selectivity of a college's admissions process is determined by how heavily these factors are weighed. Access institutions have less selective admissions policies, and so our students reflect a wide-range of academic preparation. Preparation for college level work is a key retention driver. As access institutions, a balance must be struck between opening doors to all students and supporting development from their current achievement level *and* counseling unprepared students into alternative pathways for learning.

Northern Vermont University Johnson – Admission Rates
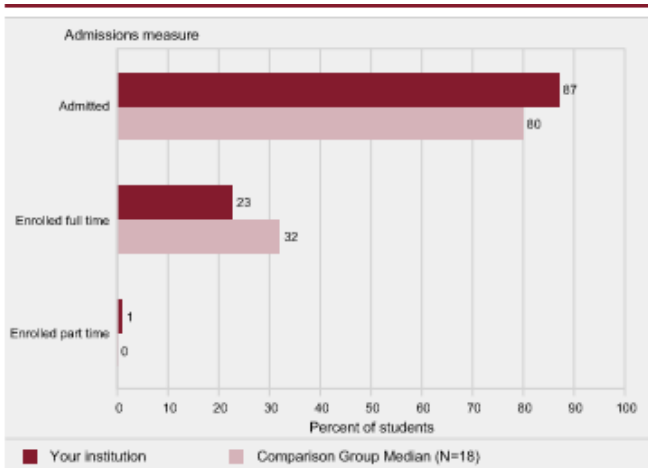
Low income/first-generation status – The majority of VSCS students are low-income and/or first in their family to attend college. To be Pell-eligible, a student must come from a family with income of $50,000 or below.

	% of Pell-Eligibility	% of First-Gen Students
Castleton University	40%	49%
NVU-Johnson	52%	50%
NVU-Lyndon	47%	45%
Vermont Tech	39%	37%
CCV	46%	62%

Even with Pell Grants, VSAC State Grants, and institutional aid, financial support is not often enough to cover student expenses like room and board, textbooks, or transportation. Significantly, for individuals in poverty, unanticipated events like car repairs, a health issue, or a child care issue can easily derail academic progress. Affordability is a significant challenge for current and prospective students of the VSCS.

Working age students. VSCS institutions play a unique role in providing education for Vermonters hoping to advance in their careers or pursue an academic interest. As a result, the average age of our enrolled students is higher.

Percentage of students over 25 years of age:

Castleton	8%
NVU (Combined)	24%
Vermont Tech	37%
CCV	41%

Significantly, working age students juggle college courses, jobs and family life. This affects their ability to enroll in 15 credits, to enroll in consecutive semesters, or to complete their degree at all.

Part time college-going -- The cohort of public colleges and universities considered to be access institutions often enroll a significantly higher percentage of part-time students than others. The VSCS is no exception.

% of students attending part time

Castleton University	5%
NVU	14%
Vermont Tech	22%
CCV	70%

Full time enrollment significantly boosts student persistence, and important dynamic for retention and graduation. The "15 to Finish" campaign recognizes the role of enrolling in 15 credits per semester as a way to reduce the overall cost of a degree and the likelihood of graduation. On-time graduation gets students into the workforce to begin earning sooner. Part-time students are more likely to have their education disrupted by life events or work demands. Additionally, as part time students they have less access to federal grants and are more likely to confront challenges with affordability.

High cost/affordability— In 2018, 41% of VSCS students were Pell-eligible, a federal benchmark that indicates those student's families earned $50,000 or less. And, in that same year, resident student tuition rates at each of our institutions were among the very highest in the nation. VSCS institutions do not have significant resources to devote to student aid. While high cost is suppressing the college-going rate in Vermont, it is also impacting the ability of many students to persist once they are enrolled. Affordability is a key factor in enrollment and student success at the VSCS.

VSCS initiatives to boost retention and graduation rates

In 2016 the VSCS Board of Trustees adopted improved retention and completion as strategic priorities for the system. Since then, each college has incorporated these imperatives into its own strategic plan. *Start to Finish* is our focused, systemwide initiative to make student success a priority in all aspects of our work. Our goals for *Start to Finish* align with national best-practices for retention and degree completion:

> *Implement degree maps to create clear curriculum paths to graduation* -- Degree maps being completed by every VSCS college and university are providing clear guidance to students about what courses they should take to complete their degree on time. Degree mapping has also supported more streamlined academic programming.   Mapping has been well-served by the approval of a common general education core across the system, supported by a new learning management system.

> *Improve access and use of data and advising technologies* – A new institutional research (IR) office at the system level is increasing data and reporting capacity, including system-wide first-year student success data that informs retention efforts.

> *Develop multiple delivery models for degree completion, including online, connected classrooms, flexible schedule options* – Increasing the flexibility by which our colleges and universities deliver courses and degree programs will better meet the diverse needs of our students. The growing use of telepresence classrooms at NVU, CCV and Vermont Tech is expanding the number of courses available to students and facilitating statewide delivery of allied health programs. The system is also refining and expanding new competency-based pathways for students.

> *Continue to increase comprehensive and strategic approaches to student support services* – As part of the *Start to Finish* initiative, the VSCS is implementing a new advising dashboard software to inform intensive advising and timely feedback to students who may be struggling.

> *Incentivize improvements in graduation rates* – The VSCS Board of Trustees revised the formula through which it allocates the state appropriation to, in part, incentivize boosts in the number of degrees granted by institutions.

> *Helping stopped out students cross the finish line* – Using data and coaching, the VSCS is employing new technology to bring stopped out students back so they can finish their degrees.

How might FY20 one-time funds support continued improvement in retention?

In the FY2020 budget, the Legislature approved $500,000 in one-time funds for the VSCS "which is intended as bridge funding to permit the Vermont State Colleges in collaboration with the University of Vermont to develop comprehensive strategies to increase retention and graduation rates…"

This investment will support professional development, course redesign and advising changes crucial to our retention efforts. The Chancellor is currently prioritizing the following possible investments:

- *Improve instructional design to increase data available for real-time retention and academic success interventions.* This investment would support "training the trainer" professional development for faculty on the student intervention aspects of the System's new learning management system.
- *Redesign high-enrollment, lower-division courses with low/no cost textbooks (open educational resources).* This investment in faculty stipends would support work to develop access to free or low-cost textbooks, addressing a key affordability and retention issue for VSCS students.
- *Professional development on the use of predictive analytics to support academic advising and student support interventions.* Our annual faculty retreat, supported with these funds, will provide focused development on the best use of the System's new advising technology, AVISO, to support effective, intensive advising.
- *Adopt system-wide standards for gateway math courses leading to aligned degree programs and develop corequisite support models for each.* The successful partnership between the VSCS, VSAC and AOE with the E=MC^2 math bridge course is preparing high school students for college math courses. Funds could support new VSCS faculty involvement in this project to build pathways from the E=MC^2 course to more college degree programs. It would support the development of a corequisite support program within relevant college courses to boost student success.
- *Professional development for student success, retention strategies, and process development consulting.* Funds could support the attendance of the VSCS *Start to Finish* team at Complete College America's annual professional development conference, in addition to funding a consultant to work with each institution to develop evidence-based process model based on their unique student population and retention data.

University of Vermont

Introduction

As President Garimella wrote on the first day of the fall 2019 semester, "Our success as a community is measured by our students' success." That success is measured in part by undergraduate student retention and graduation rates.

The University of Vermont has maintained retention and graduation rates well above the national averages for four-year, public institutions. However, even as our rates of retention and four-year graduation outperform national statistics, the university continues actively to further improve our current first-year retention rate of 87% and four-year graduation rate of 69%.[1]

National retention research and practice reveal that increases in retention and graduation rates require a "web of interlocking initiatives" (Kuh, 2005) that connect and integrate with overarching institutional goals and values. Meaningful change is the product of a network of comprehensive, sustained efforts that enrich the educational experience and take in to account the diversity of students served by the University.

Frequently when we talk about why students persist at an institution, we look to the 10 known factors that impact student retention. The factors are broken in to two categories: student characteristics and institutional experiences.

Student Characteristics	Institutional Experiences
Academic prep	Level and quality of engagement
Residency	Integration (academic, co-curricular and social)
Gender	Academic challenge
Motivation/Grit	Supportive campus environment
Financial	
External (family, behavioral)	

---

[1] Students who leave UVM usually transfer to another institution for a variety of personal or financial reasons; they do not drop out. For the 2012 cohort, our six-year graduation rate was 76%, but an additional 10% had graduated from another institution with a bachelor's degree and 1% graduated with a associate's degree.

Fundamentally, a student bases their decision to stay or to leave on a complex set of factors comprised of unique costs and benefits. From an institutional point of view, if we are to be strategic, we must identify factors that are shared by many students and over which our institutional activity can have influence. Then, we must develop or improve upon systems to exert that influence.

Some of the factors outlined above are unchangeable and/or determined before a student arrives. As an institution, we act through our recruitment and selection processes to determine the makeup of pre-college factors and how they affect entering students. We can also impact how pre-college factors affect a student's success by providing interventions designed to augment or lessen those factors.

The overall on-campus experience is influenced by the choices and functioning of the student within the environment. We gather information about the nature and quality of students' experiences and to review and alter campus systems that we know to be critical to students' satisfaction as well as those that are known to cause difficulties. Ultimately, all of the factors, which encompass a student's academic, social and cultural integration in the university environment, serve as key determinants in their overall rate of retention.

University of Vermont Retention Rates

First-Year Retention by Residency

Cohort Year	Retained Academic Year	Vermont	Out-of-State
2016	2017	90.3%	85.1%
2017	2018	91.7%	85.1%
2018	2019	90.9%	85.8%

First-Year Retention by Gender

Cohort Year	Retained Academic Year	Female	Male
2016	2017	86.8%	83.5%
2017	2018	86.1%	87.4%
2018	2019	88.2%	84.7%

Pell-Eligible Student Retention by Residency

Cohort Year	Retained Academic Year	Vermont	Out-of-State
2016	2017	90.3%	83.0%
2017	2018	87.4%	75.5%
2018	2019	88.7%	83.5%

University of Vermont Graduation Rates

Four-Year Graduation Rates by Residency

Cohort Year	Graduating Academic Year	Vermont	Out-of-State
2013	2017	66.8%	63.5%
2014	2018	64.7%	63.3%
2015	2019	73.8%	68.4%

Six-Year Graduation Rate by Residency

Cohort Year	Graduating Academic Year	Vermont	Out-of-State
2011	2017	83.1%	71.6%
2012	2018	79.3%	74.9%
2013	2019	80.8%	74.9%

UVM implemented Degreeworks, a web-based, degree-auditing and tracking tool, in 2017. The tool enables student and advisors to evaluate academic progress towards graduation, and it helps students to quickly and easily identify which requirements have been satisfied and which are outstanding. In addition, Degree Works can be used to perform a "what-if" analysis to determine how current coursework on a student transcript would be used if a different major was selected.

UVM Retention and Progression Initiatives

Fully Implement EAB's Navigate Advising and Retention Software and Mobile Application

- Navigate links administrators, advisors, deans, faculty, other staff, and students in a coordinated network designed to help schools proactively manage student success.
- This includes linking interactions that students have with advising, tutoring, study abroad meetings and other student success offices so that faculty and staff have a 360 degree view of the student's academic performance and progress.
- The tool include robust analytics to track interventions and strategies that are impacting student success.
- The Navigate mobile application, designed for use by students, helps to provide guidance at the most pivotal moments students encounter in college, simplifying and structuring their journey to completion.

Initiated strategic, personalized communications and interventions with students who:

- Do not register in a timely way during the course registration period
- Submit requests for academic transcripts
- Attempt to drop their last class during the add/drop window of each fall/spring semester
- Experience a drop in their semester GPA of more than .7 (even if in good academic standing)
- Do not register for 12 or more credits.
- Note an interest in high impact practice involvement, i.e. research or internships.

Expansion and Integration of First-Year Experience Efforts

- Analyzed and provided data from the 6-week survey from First-Time-First-Year students ("FTFY"), transfers and sophomores to the campus-community and implement strategies for improvement.
- All FTFY students live in learning communities.
- New students meet with their academic advisors in the first six weeks and prior to registration for spring courses.

Provide support for students who are struggling, and recognize students who are achieving by:

- Developing individualized plans for students who have a semester GPA of a 2.0 or lower, with regular check-ins on their progress.
- Sending congratulatory letters from the Dean to FTFY students who achieve a 3.0 GPA after their first semester. Host a reception for FTFY who achieve a 3.5 or above GPA after the first semester
- Completing outreach to students who improve their GPA significantly in one semester.

Learn from students who leave prior to graduation

- UVM proactively requests information from students who indicate that they do not plan to return in a future semester. We use this information to help inform actions we can take to further increase our retention and graduation rates.

Potential VSCS-UVM collaborations under consideration:

- CCV Pathways to UVM (articulate 2+2 pathways, and provide a simplified application, and guaranteed admission to UVM once CCV coursework is completed with a 2.8 GPA.

- Explore reverse transfer articulation. Students who begin at CCV but transfer to UVM prior to receiving an AA degree, can still earn that credential.

- Consider a joint conference for VSCS and UVM faculty on retention best practices.