A 2011 Harvard Graduate School of Education study revealed that only slightly over half of American college students complete their bachelor’s degree requirements within six years. More distressing is the fact that, “among the 18 developed countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United States comes in last for the percentage of students who complete college once they begin.”

At Salem State University (Mass.), we find these numbers unacceptable—and are implementing the strategies, tools, innovative thinking, and resources to reverse the trend. We have established retention and graduation rate goals that will require significant gains over the next 10 years, and our participation in Project Degree Completion will help us achieve them.

At Salem State, our focus on retention represents a deep commitment to the students we admit—and their families. Most of those who enroll at Salem State do so with the intention of receiving a degree from our institution. Quite simply, we owe it to them to spend the time, the energy and the resources they require to help them reach that goal.

A key element of Salem State’s mission is “to contribute responsibly and creatively to a global society, and serve as a resource to advance the region’s cultural, social and economic development.” Implicit in this is a commitment to student retention—and the graduation of young men and women prepared to join the workforce. Like AASCU, we believe that degree completion is a key metric of student success.

We take seriously the goals outlined in Project Degree Completion and are implementing new initiatives in both our academic and non-academic spheres to attain them.

In the academic sphere, we begin this fall to replace our 39-year-old core curriculum with a re-visioned “General Education Curriculum.” This new curriculum represents a major step forward for the university and will provide our students with a rigorous liberal arts foundation that is tied to a 21st century world. It will also provide a greater level of flexibility and allow students to fulfill core requirements with a greater variety of courses.

Our Summer Bridge Academy (SBA) helps high school graduates develop critical skills before enrolling in college. Beyond the six-week summer program, SBA students receive guidance and participate in special events throughout their first year at Salem State to help ensure their success inside and outside of the classroom. Freshman to sophomore retention rates for SBA students can be as much as 10 percent higher than average.

In the non-academic sphere, we implemented MAP-Works (Making Achievement Possible) in fall 2012. The “early alert” system allows us to target—and provide timely outreach—to students in potential trouble; we are pleased that it is strengthening a culture of student support and success. A one-stop Student Navigation Center will open in July, allowing our students to more easily navigate the administrative and bureaucratic hoops through which they often have to jump. Based on a philosophy that acknowledges the potential favorable effects on student satisfaction and retention that can occur with increased student engagement, we are confident the Center will lead to real and measurable improvements in both areas.

Additionally, with grants from the Vision Project Performance Incentive Fund, we have established two campus living learning communities and initiated a first-year experience program for students. Our data supports the premise that significant results occur when student life and academic affairs professionals partner in the development and implementation of student success programming.

At Salem State we share the view of our sister institutions who have also signed on to Project Degree Completion: It is critical that we build bridges and promote institutional cultures that encourage and support student success—from enrollment through graduation.

Through the Project Degree Completion initiative, nearly 490 four-year public colleges and universities have pledged to boost college completion by 3.8 million students to help the nation reach the goal of 60 percent of adults possessing a college degree by 2025. Participating institutions are members of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU); their membership represents nearly all the four-year public colleges and universities in the country.

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