Wayne State’s retention problem: a proposal

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According to the Faculty Retention Report of May, 2008, the six year graduation rate at WSU is 32 percent. This is markedly lower than the graduation rates of comparable institutions.

Low retention rates impact the university community in various ways. To name a few:

- The proliferation of very weak students in classes they are unprepared for invariably leads to a “dumbing down” phenomenon. The university is increasingly resembling a community college in many of its services. It is looking less and less like a research university.

- The reputation of the university suffers when the retention rate is low. For example, top students may prefer to seek an undergraduate education elsewhere.

- Teaching to both prepared students and the unprepared ones at the same time is frustrating and lowers the morale of the faculty.

- It is ultimately irresponsible and possibly even unethical to take tuition money from students who are destined to fail.

- The university uses money in the form of financial aid from agencies of the federal government to cover the tuition and other related expenses of these students. This is poor stewardship of the government’s money.

State appropriations to the university’s operating budget have been reduced steadily and significantly since the 1990s, and the university has increasingly turned to tuition as its major source of revenue. Any proposed solution to the retention problem must take this state of affairs into account. One cannot just simply raise admissions standards without resolving the impact such changes would have on budgets.

In what follows, I propose a solution to the retention problem that would minimally impact the university’s budget. Before explaining my proposal, I will briefly review the admissions criteria to the university.
Current admissions guidelines

The admissions FAQ web page for the university states:

 incoming freshmen must have a 2.75 GPA and submit ACT or SAT scores, no minimum score required. If your GPA is between a 2.0 and 2.74, you are required to have an ACT composite score of 21 or better or an SAT score of 990 or better.

According to 2008 admissions data for WSU, the 25th percentile of admitted students had a composite ACT score of 17 and the 75th percentile of admitted students had a score of 23. Therefore, approximately half of all admitted students had an ACT score of 20 or less.

According to data I found on the internet, the 25th percentile composite ACT score for students admitted to four year colleges in the United States is 19.2 and the 75th percentile is 24.1. Hence there is more than a three point discrepancy between WSU and four year colleges nation-wide at the 25th percentile.

The problem of relying solely on the GPA

Grading practices can differ significantly from school to school. The GPA can tell us something about the rankings of students matriculating at a given school, but it tells us a good deal less when comparing students who attend different schools.

Incidentally, when I attended High School in New York City, there was a way to compare the performance of different schools. All students (in the entire State of New York in fact) who were in the academic track were required to take a battery of tests called the Regents Examinations. These exams measured competency in a battery of subjects (English, Mathematics, Chemistry, etc.) and the high school curriculum in the State of New York was reflected in the content of the Regents. Thus a student living in, say, Syracuse, having passed the Regents exams demonstrated the same level of minimum competency that a student living in Manhattan did.

Proposed solution to the retention problem

The solution am suggesting is based in part on my experience of teaching at WSU since 1998. Although I do not have the data to prove it, it has

\footnote{The track of study for those who wished to attend university.}
been my experience that students who survive the first two years at Wayne State have a very good chance of graduating. Moreover, by their third or fourth year of matriculation, WSU students are more-or-less comparable in strength to those at other institutions.²

My proposed solution to our retention problem is to change our admissions criteria, but in a somewhat novel way. The idea is modeled very loosely on the Penn State University System. Penn State has a main campus located at State College and nineteen branch campuses. According to Wikipedia:

Over 60 percent of Penn State first-year students begin their education at a location other than University Park. All of these smaller campuses offer a limited number of degree programs, but any student in good academic standing is guaranteed a spot at University Park to finish his or her degree if required or desired. Most students do complete their degree program at University Park (known as “change of assignment,” since Penn State campuses are not independently operated and therefore “transferring” is an inaccurate term).³

Consequently, admission to a branch campus does not guarantee admission to the main campus. However, if a student at a branch campus passes a sufficient number of “competency” courses, then the student is guaranteed admission to the main campus.

The solution I envision to the WSU retention problem is a two-tiered admissions process:

- Those applicants WSU who achieve both a composite SAT score of 20 or higher and a GPA of 2.75 or better will automatically be admitted to the university.

- Those who do not, but achieve a composite ACT of at least 16, and a GPA of at least 2.0 will not be admitted to the regular university, but to a subdivision of it (as yet to be created) which, for the purposes of this document I’ll call the WSU Entrance Academy.

The WSU Entrance Academy could be located on the main campus, but it need not be. Students admitted to the Entrance Academy will automatically be admitted to the regular university when they demonstrate a certain level competency.

²I have taught at Brandeis, Northeastern, Brown and Bielefeld.
³http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penn_State_University
How is that competency to be demonstrated? By a combination of existing courses and existing placement exams (for example, we should expect students to be competent in high school mathematics before attending the regular university, and we should also expect a certain level of literacy and the ability to write). A student who does not demonstrate this competency is not admitted to the regular university. A student attending the WSU Entrance Academy will not be permitted to enroll in courses open to regular WSU students (this is to prevent the dumbing-down phenomenon alluded to above). Most importantly, WSU’s retention rate is to be calculated only using the students attending the regular university. One expects of course that the retention rate of the students attending the Entrance Academy will be low. But at least we will not be misleading these students.

I realize that the plan outlined above, if implemented, would require a major reorganization of the university. Under the plan, half of our current incoming students would be redirected into the WSU Entrance Academy, and a change of this magnitude would likely not be palatable to the administration nor the board of governors. However, we can take steps in this direction: we can begin more modestly, say, by requiring those students who score below 18 to attend the WSU Entrance Academy and then slowly raise our standards to the ones outlined above over a suitable period of time, perhaps five years.

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