

a. **Institutional description:**

Kent State University is a four- year public, research institution located in Northeast Ohio. This eight campus system is home to 37,903 students (27,264 Kent campus), who are spread out into one of ten colleges. Kent State students come from all 50 states and over 100 countries. With an intuitional goal of raising our retention and six year graduation rates to 85% and 65% by the year 2020 (current rates: 82.2% and 54.5%), Kent State is making remarkable strides in providing a quality education and degree to all students.

b. **Program development and description:**

The University Degree Completion Program started in January 2014 to address a question regarding a data report showing 1500 senior level students (90 or more earned hours) who were in good standing had stopped attending. The questions followed: Who are these students? Why did they stop out? What resources are available at Kent State to assist them in returning? What resources are needed? How can Kent State provide student outreach?

We began by completing curriculum evaluations for these students to discover not only where they were in their major prior to stopping out, but also have there been any curriculum changes that would benefit these students today. Specifically, there were three curriculum changes that would benefit returning students: (1) a decrease in the number of credit hours required for a degree from 121 to 120; (2) more online courses offered; and (3) three majors that have been created to offer maximum flexibility. What was discovered is that based on the above criteria, 10% of the 1500 students could complete a bachelor's degree without taking any additional coursework. In addition, 42% could complete a bachelor's degree with 15 or less credit hours and these courses can all be taken online. Based on this information, university leadership supported the initiative by creating an Assistant Director for University Degree Completion Program, which is housed in the University College.

The next step was to research existing degree completion programs and best practices. A thorough web search was completed to identify existing programs focusing on online adult learners. In addition, a literature review was conducted to gather knowledge concerning adult, online learners and the barriers they encounter. Finally, 15 programs exhibiting best practices were identified and their directors were interviewed regarding their program structure, successes, struggles, and their ideal program to aid their students. It was determined, the adult student population would benefit greatly from a program that provided financial assistance, flexible majors, online course options, advising with expertise in adult and online learning, and an elimination/decrease in the institutional "run-around." Because of this, a "one stop shop" model was implemented.

As a one stop shop, the University Degree Completion Program works with students from initial inquiry to graduation. In order to make this successful, the University Degree Completion Program had to develop relationships from all aspects of the University community including admissions, registrar, college advising offices, faculty, University Marketing and Communication, financial aid, transfer center, Graduation Planning Office, and even the University archives. With institutional support, office liaisons were established between the above areas and the University Degree Completion Program. All of the above offices collaborated together to share resources and ideas, with the goal of eliminating student barriers to returning and completing their bachelor's degree. In the end, a process was developed that allowed the student to access one office to obtain all needed resources, paperwork, and advising services. Today, several more offices have been added to the University Degree Completion liaisons list including career development and exploration, Blackboard support, and Institutional Research.

Over the last three years, the University Degree Completion Program has worked through a variety of problems and concerns. One such problem involved the organization structure of the program. The University Degree Completion Program is housed in the University College; however, the program is advising on majors in three separate colleges. This has created several complications to work through. The first concern with this structure was the concept of "ownership" or to whom did the student belong. Because Kent State has a decentralized advising model, it was difficult for advising offices to give up some of their control over these specific majors and students. Through a lot of discussion, mock examples, and just trial and error, the advising offices and the University Degree Completion Program have been able to develop a communication plan and, more importantly, a degree of trust when addressing these students' needs. In addition, each of the three majors has evolved over the past three years. This evolution has provided, depending on the major, more or less flexibility for the University Degree Completion student. For example, the Integrative Studies major added a required senior capstone course, which added 3 credit hours to all potential students. This has required a great deal of team work, communication, compromise and problem solving on a case by case basis in order to best serve the students.

The second hurdle to work through involves how to track the students re-entering the university through the University Degree Completion Program. Due to the structure of the program and each student re-entering in one of three different majors and colleges, a tracking mechanism has not been easy to establish. Simply put, the University degree Completion Student is coded into banner, which is then combined with a recently established reporting mechanism that enables student recruitment, process development, and graduation data to be viewed. The major problem with this system is that on the front end, all student data codes must be entered in manually.

As the University Degree Completion Program has grown and become more established, it is also experiencing new concerns, responsibilities, and opportunities. Through the data obtained in student

surveys, the need for more career services and development has become apparent. The University degree Completion Program is currently working with the Office of Career Development and Exploration to establish online resources focusing on the adult student and marketing one's general studies/liberal arts degree. Additionally, the program is now encountering more students who have a past balance on their accounts. Because of this, the program has created a close working relationship with the Bursars' Collections Coordinator. This person has been able to help students work through their prior term balance by removing any interest gathered on their prior term balance and communicating with the State of Ohio's Collection agency to decrease some of the amount due.

As the University Degree Completion Program has evolved, it has also begun to fill the need of the academic "fixer" for all students. Due to the expertise held within the program and the relationships that have been established, the University Degree Completion Program is in a perfect setting to help advocate and walk students through the institutional bureaucracy. So far, in the role of a fixer, the University degree Completion program has aided students in successfully appealing their dismissal, changing their major, and removing barriers that were originally in place that were blocking a student from graduation.

The University Degree Completion has a budget of \$187,011 over the last three years. The actual budget breakdown includes staff salaries of \$61,137 (1 full time and 1 part time) and a marketing budget of \$1,400. In addition, over the past three years, \$109,000 has been given away in the form of Degree Completion Scholarships. When looking at the return on investment, The University Degree Completion Program generates \$396,000 in student income (money per graduate); therefore, making a total return on investment \$99,389.

c. **Goals and objectives:**

The University Degree Completion program's goals and objectives are directly linked to four of Kent State University's five priorities in their strategic plan: (1) Students First; (2) A Distinctive Kent State; (3) Global Competitiveness; (4) Regional Impact; and (5) Organizational Stewardship (<http://strategicroadmap.kent.edu>). Our overall goal is to help former students return and finish what they started. We do this by putting students first (Priority #1) and eliminating all institutional barriers. Through this initiative we strive to help individuals, their families, and communities enhance their quality of life (Priority # 4). Thus, providing a more educated workforce for the Northeast Ohio economy. Moreover, through our research we discovered the need to create a space enabling our students to obtain all services through one point of contact; therefore creating a one stop shop, concierge model. This innovated approach (Priority #2) to approaching a student population allows Kent State to provide

an efficient, collaborative resource aimed to continuously improve the experience of our students (Priority #5).

e. **Procedures used in program evaluation:**

Three procedures are utilized to evaluate the University Degree Completion Program: recruitment data, graduation numbers, and survey responses. Twice a year, the University Degree Completion Program completes a three tiered marketing initiative. This initiative is comprised of a personal letter, email, and phone call. The program then tracks the response rate and enrollment numbers of each of these contact methods. The second evaluation procedure used is graduation rates. Based off of our recruitment lists, we are able to track how many students graduate through the University Degree Completion Program, as well as how many students return to their original major. Finally, the students who returned our surveyed. This survey has continued to evolve as the program has grown and includes both qualitative and quantitative responses. In September 2015, all students in the program and recent graduates were surveyed (N= 80). The results of this survey brought forth several changes. Mainly, the need to break the survey into two parts: (1) Pre-Survey- to gain insight into each students' initial college experience and their time spent away from college; (2) Post-Survey- to gather information on each students' experience returning to college and their future expectations. Both of these surveys were first administered in September 2016 and again in March 2017. Currently, the Degree Completion Program is in the process of developing an Alumni survey designed to see if students' initial expectations have been met.

f. **Results/Outcomes:**

University Degree Completion Program results are based off of three key areas: (1) recruitment data; (2) graduation numbers; and (3) survey responses. Since 2014, the University Degree Completion Program has marketed to 1,558 former students. All students met the parameters of 90 or more earned hours, 2.0 or higher GPA, and had stopped attending for two or more years. 415 (26.6%) former students have responded to the marketing campaign. Of this, 213 (51.3%) have re-started classes (note: 16 [7.5%] of these students have stopped taking classes again). The second result area is the graduation numbers. To date, the University Degree Completion Program has helped 116 students (54.4%) graduate through the program with an additional 22 students (10.3%) graduating in their original program. In addition, an unforeseen outcome, the program has also had 23 students complete their associate's degree. The final method used to measure results and outcomes is the student surveys. The initial survey distributed in September 2015 yielded an 80% response rate. The following year, the pre-survey received a 56% response rate, while the post-survey received a response rate of 48%. Demographically, the responders are 55% male and 45% female, between the ages of 26-68. In addition, 35% of responders identified as a first generation college student who began college as a traditional student. Two key results were observed in the data: 53% reported feeling anxious about their ability to time manage, whereas, 43% indicated they did struggle with time management; and, more than 40% of students were motivated to return to school in order to enhance their career and/or career opportunities. Both of these results have contributed to future programmatic changes.

The University Degree Completion Program is showing results in helping former students return and finish their bachelor's degree. Students like the one-stop shop model and having someone to support them through their final coursework. Here are a few samples of the student responses:

- o "I actually have gotten a raise and a promotion at work! I feel better about myself as well...more accomplished"
- o "This is a great program. The advising has been very helpful and thorough. I get personal satisfaction and achievement from completing my degree. It will also open the door to better career opportunities."
- o "It will allow me to pursue opportunities where a degree is required. I have decades of relevant professional experience, but that requirement has excluded me from the selection. I think (hope) that it will give me more self-confidence and allow me to reconnect with my original classmates from Kent who would never believe this story."

At the institutional level, Kent State has recognition of its effort via articles in the Crain's Cleveland Business magazine, Northeast Ohio Boomers and Beyond, and the Akron Beacon Journal. In addition, the state of Ohio has tied university funding to graduation rates. Based on this financial model, Kent State receives approximately \$4,000 per graduate; therefore, the University Degree Completion Program has generated an income of about \$552,000 for the university.

g. Potential for adaptation by other institutions

In order for other institutions to adapt a similar model, the institution would need to have institutional buy-in both from a financial perspective as well as an administrative perspective. The institution would need to dedicate at least one staff member to focus solely on this initiative and be willing, if possible, to provide some financial aid support to returning students. However, more importantly, the institution would need to be willing to adjust some of their procedures and policies to allow for flexible adult friendly programs and a concierge, all-inclusive office combining resources from admissions, registrars, bursars, financial aid, and individual college advising offices.

If an institution is unable to provide this type of support, there are still aspects of the model that can be implemented. Institutions can provide a report of students who had stopped out earning 90 or more hours and in good standing with the institution. Advisors can be trained on their institutions general/liberal arts degree options. In addition, advisors can reach out to these former students

providing a curriculum evaluation that takes into account degree flexibility, evening, weekend and online course options.

3. Upload: Additional Nomination Material/Appendices