

Testimony before the United States Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

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A decade ago, the chances that Georgia State University would someday be invited to provide testimony at a hearing on student success seemed very remote. Georgia State's institutional graduation rate stood at 32% and underserved populations were foundering. Graduation rates were 22% for Hispanics, 29% for blacks, and 18% for black males. Pell students were graduating at rates far below those of non-Pell students.

The demographic and economic changes of the past decade did nothing to improve the prospects for a turnaround. As Atlanta and Georgia were being hit hard by the Recession, Georgia State lost tens of millions of dollars in state appropriations while simultaneously doubling the number of at-risk students that it enrolls. Our student body of 32,000 students is now 63% non-white and 59% Pell eligible. This makes Georgia State not only one of the most diverse public research universities in the country, but also an institution at the leading edge of demographic trends that are facing our entire nation.

Under the leadership of President Mark Becker, we made a public commitment to develop a model that would allow students from all backgrounds to succeed at high rates. Using data proactively, we identify critical obstacles to our students' progress, pilot innovative interventions, and scale the approaches that prove most successful. Scale is the key. As I visit other campuses, I often hear of promising programs that benefit only a small number of students. Fifty or even a hundred more graduates will not create the results that we need as a nation. At Georgia State, we seek to identify programs that are both cost effective and truly transformative—programs that impact thousands and even tens of thousands of our students every semester.

Two examples will help to illustrate our approach.

Just a few years ago, Georgia State was dropping 1,000 students every semester from their classes because the students could not cover all of the costs of their tuition and fees. These were the last students that we wanted to drop. Disproportionately low-income and first-generation, many were seniors who were only a semester or two away from graduating but who had exhausted their eligibility for aid. With balances as little as \$300, dropping these students was heartbreaking—and made no sense.

In 2011, we created Panther **Retention Grants** as a response. The program awards one-time, micro grants to cover the balance between what students can pay and the costs of their tuition and fees. We use analytics to ensure that the recipients have unmet financial need and are applying themselves academically. From modest beginnings in 2011, we have now brought 5,300 students back into their classes via the program. Among the senior recipients, more than 60% have graduated within two semesters of receiving the grants. And because the funding goes exclusively toward tuition and fees, 100% of the grant monies come back to the university, making the program not only the right thing to do but financially sustainable, as well.

Our **Graduation Progression Success (GPS) Advising** system addresses another major problem that hits at-risk students particularly hard: bad academic decisions and wasted credit hours. Using ten years of Georgia State data and over 2.5 million grades, we have created predictive analytics to identify when our students make decisions that put them off track for graduation. Similar to high-tech medical screening, the system is designed to identify individuals who are at risk when a problem first surfaces, not after it has become debilitating.

We are now tracking more than 30,000 students every day for 800 different risk factors, ranging from students who register for classes that do not apply to their degree programs to those who underperform in prerequisite courses. When a problem is identified, an alert goes off and the advisor assigned to the student reaches out to help—typically within 48 hours. Last year at Georgia State University, we had 43,000 one-on-one meetings between advisors and students that were prompted by alerts from our GPS Advising system.

In many ways, such interventions are merely common sense. Through them, we help students navigate the many complicated academic and financial decisions that graduating from college requires—decisions which low-income and first-generation students are often ill prepared to make.

While simple in approach, these and other similar interventions have made a big difference. Georgia State University now graduates 1,700 more students annually than it did just five years ago and **confers more bachelor degrees to African Americans than any non-profit college or university in the nation**. Our graduation rate has climbed 22 percentage points overall, with the biggest gains being enjoyed by the student populations that once struggled the most. Black and Latino graduation rates have improved by more than 30 points each. Rates for black males are up 40 points, and **all achievement gaps based on race, ethnicity and economics have been eliminated**.

The impact has been so transformational that, this coming January, we will be consolidated with the largest two-year college in the state of Georgia, Georgia Perimeter College, with the goal of leveraging our new programs and technologies to benefit an additional 22,000 students.

Even prior to consolidation, Georgia State was committed to sharing the lessons that we have learned and the approaches we have developed. Georgia State has worked enthusiastically to exchange insights and practices as part of groups such as Complete College America and the

Coalition of Urban Serving Universities. We are a founding member of the **University Innovation Alliance**, a coalition of eleven large public research universities dedicated to improving student outcomes, especially for low-income students. Through such collaborations, we are working with peer institutions from across the U.S. to accelerate the pace by which innovative best practices are adopted from one campus to the next.

This is an area where we need your help.

1. First, amid the highly competitive, rankings-conscious world of higher education, **we need to find new ways to incentivize collaboration**. At times, our efforts to work across state lines and through the sharing of data are limited by the very policies that are designed to help students. Similarly, federal grant programs are rarely set up to accommodate such alliances of universities, and the grants are too often awarded based on what is tried and true rather than what has the potential to truly transform.
2. Second, we need to **find new and more nuanced ways to determine when and how students are given access to federal aid**. The current rules surrounding Satisfactory Academic Progress are a blunt instrument that do not reflect today's advances in student analytics. At Georgia State, we are required at times to award federal aid to students we know are poor risks while cutting off funding to students who may be a semester or two away from graduating. We need to rethink SAP so as to empower rather than restrict campuses that are using data intelligently to target aid more effectively. I believe we also should resist proposals to limit Pell funding to eight semesters—another idea that is far too blunt and that would have devastating consequences on working students like those at Georgia State.
3. Third, we need to continue to **crack down on the predatory institutions and lenders that target low-income students and their families**. Georgia State is the largest transfer recipient school in Georgia. This fall, among the 2,500 new transfer students that we will enroll, more than 600 will arrive on campus with debt of \$20,000 or more. Two students will arrive with debt over \$100,000. Such students often have little useable credit and may be still years away from attaining their bachelor degrees. If we are serious about raising completion rates for low-income students, we cannot allow such predatory practices to continue, nor can we create policies that de-incentivize more responsible universities from taking on such students and the debt that they bring with them.
4. Finally, **financial counseling and financial literary training work**. At Georgia State, we now require such training of all freshmen and all Panther Grant recipients, and we have seen significant declines in the poor financial decisions that student are making. Unfortunately, right now we must try to induce students to participate in such programs by coaxing and with little support from federal policies, which too often grant students federal aid without regard to their readiness to use it intelligently.

Georgia State University's story is improbable, to be sure. That is precisely why it matters. Georgia State still has much work to do, but its progress in recent years demonstrates that significant improvements in student success outcomes can come through embracing inclusion rather than exclusion, and that such gains can be made even amid a context of constrained resources. It shows that low-income and underrepresented students can succeed at the same levels as other students and that, even at large public universities, we can provide all students with personalized support at reasonable costs. It shows that we can put rankings aside and accelerate change through meaningful collaboration across institutions.

I look forward to a day when such progress is no longer labeled improbable but becomes the accepted norm for all American universities.

Timothy Renick

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Despite demographic shifts that have doubled the number of at-risk students enrolled and steep cuts to its state appropriations, Georgia State University in Atlanta has transformed its student success outcomes over the past decade. Georgia State's graduation rate has climbed 22 percentage points, with the biggest gains being enjoyed by the at-risk student populations that once struggled the most. The university now graduates 1,700 more students annually than it did just five years ago and confers more baccalaureate degrees to African Americans than any non-profit college or university in the nation. **Georgia State has eliminated all achievement gaps based on race, ethnicity and income level.**

Under the leadership of President Mark Becker, Georgia State made a public commitment to develop a model that would allow students from all backgrounds to succeed at high rates. Through the proactive use of data and a willingness to scale interventions so that they benefit thousands of students, the university has pioneered a series innovative and highly impactful student success programs.

Panther Retention Grants fund small gaps between the costs of tuition and fees and the resources that students have. For as little as \$300, students are brought back into classes instead of being allowed to drop or stop out. From modest beginnings in 2011, the program has now restored 5,300 students to their classes. For the recipients who are seniors, more than 60% have graduated within two semesters of receiving their grants. Because the funding goes exclusively toward covering tuition and fees, 100% of the grant monies come back to the university, making the program not only the right thing to do but sustainable, as well.

GPS Advising is a tracking system that uses predictive analytics to identify in real time when students go off course for graduation. Using ten years of historical data and more than 2.5 million Georgia State grades, the system tracks 30,000 students every day for more than 800 risk factors such as registering for the wrong course or underperforming in prerequisite classes. Last year, there were 43,000 one-on-one meetings between Georgia State advisors and students that were prompted by alerts from the GPS Advising system.

Georgia State's student success efforts, both as an individual institution and as part of collaborations such as the **University Innovation Alliance**, would be assisted by: (1) Identifying ways to incentivize student-success collaboration across institutions through federal policies and grants; (2) Rethinking Satisfactory Academic Progress to empower rather than restrict campuses that are using data intelligently to allow them to award federal aid more effectively to the students who will benefit the most; (3) Curbing predatory institutions that target low-income students and create devastating levels of transfer debt; and (4) Supporting universities in their efforts to require financial literacy training so that more students who receive federal financial aid will be equipped to use it intelligently.

Timothy Renick is Vice President for Enrollment Management and Student Success, Vice Provost, and Professor at Georgia State University in Atlanta. Since 2008, he has overseen the university's enrollment and student success programs. During this time period, the university has set records for the number and percent of underrepresented (63%) and Pell (59%) students enrolled, and it has increased graduation rates by 11 percentage points overall and by 18 points for underrepresented students. Georgia State now ranks first in the nation in bachelor degrees conferred to African Americans and is conferring 1,700 more degrees every year than it did in 2008. Prior to serving as Vice President, Dr. Renick served in roles including Chair of Religious Studies and Director of the Honors Program at Georgia State. Dr. Renick has been principal investigator on grants from NSF, Educause, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Lumina Foundation. His work in student success has been featured in the *New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Atlantic* and cited by President Obama. A Phi Beta Kappa, *summa cum laude* graduate of Dartmouth College, Dr. Renick holds his M.A. and Ph.D. in Religion from Princeton University.