2017

Risk Factors and Interventions Associated with Sophomore Retention at a Small, Private Institution

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Consultancy Project
Executive Summary

Organization: Wingate University

Project Title: Risk Factors and Interventions Associated with
                             Sophomore Retention at a Small, Private Institution

Candidate: Michael Reynolds

Consultancy Coach: Dr. John Balls

Defense Date: July 10, 2017

Authorized by: Dr. Heather Miller
                             Vice-President for Enrollment Services and Marketing

Acknowledgements

Abstract

Risk Factors and Interventions Associated with Sophomore Retention at a Small, Private Institution. Reynolds, Michael Patrick, 2017, Consultancy Project, Gardner-Webb University, Digital Commons/Retention, Sophomore

Analyzing the "sophomore slump" has plagued researchers for decades. This consultancy project analyzed some quantitative and qualitative data from a small, private university and developed key recommendations to help address sophomore attrition. The analysis contained a quantitative component which led to the collection of student profiles that were used to examine specific phenomenon from a more qualitative perspective. Through the process, the project underwent constant revision but maintained the initial scope and boundaries. Work plans, financial assessments, and risk mitigation plans were developed throughout the lifecycle of the project and communicated to key stakeholders. Several challenges included the collection of qualitative data as well as waning support from the university administration concerning the effectiveness of retention planning. The resulting recommendations included (1) reexamining the pre-nursing pathway and academic advising, (2) releasing non-scholarship athletes from all the requirements of scholarship athletes, particularly while out of season, (3) reevaluation of words like "home" and "family" as part of university marketing, (4) releasing additional discretionary financial aid sums to target sophomores, and (5) reinvesting in personnel and infrastructure for the Office of Student Success.

Table of Contents

1   Introduction

1.1   *Project Purpose*

On the national landscape of higher education, retention has become a marker social, political, and economic issue. Politicians use retention and graduation rates as indicators of an institution's success (and ultimately, as a requirement for funding). Economists see the amount of student loan debt accumulated by students who never complete their degree and shudder to consider the economic stranglehold this level of debt will have on future spending and the health of the economy. For a variety of reasons, students find college is not what they anticipated it would be and are leaving institutions of higher education at an alarming level.

While students leave college for a variety of factors, several issues have risen to the top, as institutions seek solutions to their retention problems. In general, the "Sophomore Slump," has long been a target of researchers. For many years, institutions collectively poured millions of dollars into the first-year experience, working to address the obvious transition issues associated with moving from high school to college. Unfortunately, much of the hard-earned gains made during the first year have been mitigated by less than stellar return rates from the sophomore to junior year of retention.

In the Spring of 2014, Wingate University worked with an outside consultant, Dr. Peter Mitchell, to address the university retention rate. As a result of this trustee initiative, Dr. Mitchell produced a "Comprehensive Retention Plan" aimed at addressing retention from a variety of perspectives, using data from 2010, 2011, and 2012 (Mitchell, 2014). Part of this plan specifically identified the sophomore year as an area in which the university must invest time and energy.

According to institutional data, Wingate University compares favorably with peer institutions from a first-year retention perspective, retaining students at an approximate rate of 73-75%; however, the university loses on average another 18% of any given cohort in the sophomore year as well, bringing the overall first year to junior retention rate to 55%, which leads to an average 6-year graduation rate of approximately 45%. The table below shows how Wingate compares in overall 6-year graduation rates.

Retention and Progression Rates	2012 6-Year Grad Rate	% Full-Time 2010 Freshmen Who Returned in 2011-12	Number of Full-Time Freshmen in the 2006 Cohort	% Full-Time Freshmen in the 2006 Entering Class	4-Year Grad Rate	5-Year Grad Rate	6-Year Grad Rate	Transfer-Out Rate	% Still Enrolled
Wofford College	83.8%	87%	377	95%	79.3%	83.3%	83.8%	-	-
Elon University	83.4%	90%	1,283	93%	77.2%	82.6%	83.4%	-	0.3%
Furman University	82.9%	89%	683	93%	79.1%	82.6%	82.9%	10.2%	0.3%
Queens University of Charlotte	52.4%	70%	233	47%	44.6%	51.5%	52.4%	-	0.4%
Gardner-Webb University	45.2%	70%	407	45%	32.4%	43.2%	45.2%	-	0.5%
Wingate University	44.9%	75%	385	81%	39.5%	41.6%	44.9%	-	-

(Source: www.collegeresults.org)

In his examination of the data, Mitchell (2014) also noted, "What is particularly disconcerting is that the attrition during the sophomore year is similar for ALL students. One would expect the strongest academic students (over 3.5 HS GPA) to have higher sophomore to junior retention, but that is not the case" (p. 1).

As a result, the institution experiences a retention deficit "across the board" with sophomore students. Given the nature of the retention issue, in the statement of problem, it will be essential to make an assessment of student retention from a wide variety of areas including academic,

social, and financial. It may also follow that the "solution" to sophomore retention is not simply one or two initiatives that will impact a large number of students, rather several smaller issues that will affect smaller populations of non-returners but in aggregate will have the desired dramatic effect on sophomore retention.

The problem articulated by Dr. Mitchell is the impetus for this consultancy project. Given that the institution has a demonstrated problem with sophomore retention and given the statistically significant nature of the data, the first goal of this consultancy project will be to address the "Why." Why do so many students leave the institution after their third and fourth semesters? Given that there seem to be no single demographic issue (socioeconomic status, GPA, etc.), this analysis will seek to understand sophomore retention on a very practical level. A qualitative and quantitative analysis will address academic factors (academic advising and academic pathways, major selection and fit, research opportunities, academic performance), along with social issues (student engagement and fit, institutional environment), along with financial issues (unmet financial need, balance issues, indebtedness). This instrument will be developed for use in contacting students who have left the university during after their third or fourth semester (retroactively) and moving forward, simultaneously with their leaving the institution.

1.2   ASSOCIATED DOCUMENTS
Milestones 1-10

1.3   PROJECT PLAN MAINTENANCE
Project changes were made and approved each semester by both the project advisor, Dr. Balls, and as needed with the Site Advisor, Dr. Heather Miller.

2 Project Scope

2.1 OUTLINE OF PARTERING ORGANIZATIONS OBJECTIVES

2.1.1 Objective

The objective for Wingate University is to develop a list of credible interventions that may help encourage sophomore retention.

2.1.2 Success Criteria

Success for this project will be measured in a number of real, tangible, potential solutions with rationale contained in the summary document.

2.1.3 Risks

There are no significant risks to the partnering organization.

2.2 OUTLINE OF STUDENT'S OBJECTIVES

2.2.1 Objectives

1. This project will help Wingate University administrators gain a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to sophomore attrition through quantitative profile analysis, resulting in the production of a pre-field research assessment and Student Risk Profile.
2. This project will result in a qualitative analysis of non-returning sophomore students to determine the factors that put a student most at risk to leave the institution during their sophomore year.
3. This project will result in the production of a comprehensive report of the research findings, along with at least two recommended solutions for each major risk factor.

2.2.2 Success Criteria

1. This project will help Wingate University administrators gain a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to sophomore attrition through quantitative profile analysis, resulting in the production of a pre-field research assessment and Student Risk Profile.
2. This project will result in a qualitative analysis of at least 15 students to determine the factors that put a student most at risk to leave the institution during their sophomore year by the end of May of 2017.
3. This project will result in the production of a comprehensive report of the research findings, along with at least two recommended solutions for each major risk factor identified by the end of June 2017.

2.2.3 Risks

1. This project will result in a qualitative analysis to determine the factors that put a student most at risk to leave the institution during their sophomore year.

Area	Impact	Vulnerability	Likelihood	Final Risk
Conduct Qualitative Analysis	HIGH	LOW	MEDIUM	MEDIUM
Identify at least 25 students	LOW	MEDIUM	LOW	LOW
Identify Risk Factors	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	LOW	MEDIUM
By December 2016	LOW	LOW	LOW	LOW

RISK MITIGATION AND CONTINGENCY for MEDIUM and HIGH

OBJECTIVE	RISK FACTORS	RISK MITIGATION
Conduct Qualitative Analysis	• Poor assessment instrument • Lack of participants • Lack of Quantitative Data to inform qualitative assessment	• Identify other instruments with similar end goals • Expand pool to include sophomore attrition from previous semesters • Shift quantitative data to purely qualitative
Identify Risk Factors	• Insufficient information to draw conclusions • Non representative pool	• Expand Factor Analysis • Expand pool in systematic way to gain more heterogeneous pool

2. This project will result in the production of a comprehensive report of the research findings, along with at least two recommended solutions for each major risk factor identified.

Area	Impact	Vulnerability	Likelihood	Final Risk
Produce Comprehensive Report	HIGH	LOW	LOW	LOW
Recommend at least 2 solutions	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	MEDIUM
By May of 2017	LOW	LOW	LOW	LOW

RISK MITIGATION AND CONTINGENCY for MEDIUM and HIGH

OBJECTIVE	RISK FACTORS	RISK MITIGATION
Recommend at least 2 solutions	• Insufficient Data • Lack of conclusion • Single uniform conclusion	• Recommendation to rerun qualitative instrument in future semesters to triangulate findings • Identify additional factors through research, anecdote, statistical analysis, etc.

2.3 DEFINITIVE SCOPE STATEMENT

The scope of this project was specifically to address students who returned to the institution for their third semester but who do not plan to return for their fifth semester. Areas that lay expressly outside the scope include the following:

    a. First-year Retention
    b. W'Engage Sophomore Travel Program (Quality Enhancement Plan)
    c. Assessment of Current Strategy

3   Deliverables

3.1   TO PARTNERING ORGANIZATION

This project will result in the production of a comprehensive report of the research findings, along with at least two recommended solutions for each major risk factor. The report will contain the following:

I.   Introduction
II.   Methodology
III.   Recommendations with Rationale
     a.   Pre-Nursing Track
     b.   Non-Scholarship Athletes
     c.   Financial Aid
     d.   "Home" Marketing
     e.   System Organization
IV.   Conclusion and Next Steps

3.2   FROM STUDENT

There are no deliverables to the student.

4 Project Approach

4.1 PROJECT LIFECYCLE PROCESSES

The project was conceived approximately three years ago as a way to engage the organization in some deeper learning with regard to the experience of sophomore students. From an organizational approach, the first 2 years were spent researching sophomore retention, initiatives, and high-impact practices. Following the Spring 2016 semester, the focus of the project shifted to the quantitative information available. Profiles were developed during the Fall 2016 semester from quantitative data pulled from the Fall 2015 cohort. Those profiles were used as the basis for the development of qualitative questions used to interview students from the Fall 2015 cohort who self-identified as not returning to the institution. Throughout the process, the institution was kept abreast of activities through the form of update meetings with the site coordinator, Dr. Heather Miller, as well as other university constituents.

4.2 PROJECT MANAGEMENT PROCESSES

Project management occurred through a variety of processes, including a review each semester with the project advisor, Dr. John Balls, and the project site coordinator, Dr. Heather Miller. Each semester, new milestones encouraged the development of additional pieces of the project. Revisions were made yearly, as additional information became available. As an example, further development of the quantitative and qualitative processes was pushed back until after the Spring 2016 semester to benefit and align with the research methodology track included in the Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership curriculum.

4.3 PROJECT SUPPORT PROCESSES

The major project support process encountered during this project centered around data gathering. The two main areas of support for this include data gathered from the office of institutional research and the office of student success. The office of institutional research provided an extensive database of information, while the office of student success provided quantitative and qualitative information from non-returning students.

4.4 ORGANIZATION

4.4.1 Project Team

Name	Role
Michael Reynolds	Project Coordinator
Dr. John Balls	Project Advisor
Dr. Heather Miller	Site/Organization Coordinator
Mr. Sam Petoskey	Quantitative Analysis Consultant
Ms. Kristin Wharton	Quantitative/Qualitative Analysis Consultant
Dr. Kristen Barbee	Recommendation Consultant
Ms. Alex Finley	Recommendation Consultant

4.4.2 Mapping Between Wingate University and Student

Dr. Heather Miller,

VP for Enrollment Services and Planning

Michael Reynolds,

Dean of Campus Life

Dr. Kristen Barbee,

Director of Nursing

Ms. Kristen Wharton,

Director of the Academic Resource Center

Mr. Sam Petoskey,

Asst. VP for Research
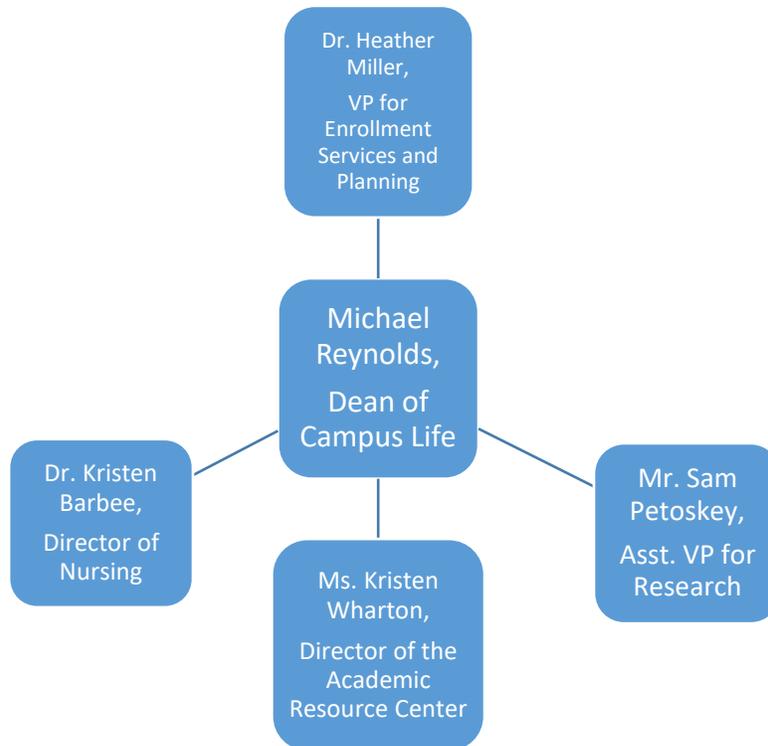
5 Communications Plan

Who - stakeholder	What info do they need	Why do they need it	When will they get it	How will they get it
Dr. Heather Miller, VP for Enrollment and Planning	Complete Summary; Ongoing project updates	Dr. Miller is the Site Coordinator	June 30th; as needed	1-1 Meeting; Hard copy
Dr. Kristin Barbee, Director of Nursing	Recommendations related to Nursing	Dr. Barbee is the Director of the Nursing Program	June 30th	1-1 Meeting; Hard copy
Mr. Sam Petoskey, Asst. VP for Reseach	Summary of Analysis ad Recommendations	To present qualitative findings	Week of June 20th	1-1 Meeting
Ms. Kristen Wharton, Director of the ARC	Summary of Analysis ad Recommendations	Ms. Wharton is currently in charge of the institutional exity survey and student success initiatives	Week of June 20th	1-1 Meeting
Ms. Alex Finley, Director of Academic Advising	Summary of Analysis ad Recommendations	Ms.Finley is currently in charge of the institutional academic advising	Week of June 20th	1-1 Meeting

6   Work Plan

Objective	Task	Sub Task	Begin date	End date
1. Produce a pre field-research risk factor assessment and Student Risk Profile template to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to sophomore retention by the end of December 2016 to gain most up to date returning data.				
	Pre-Field Assessment and Production		9/15/16	2/1/17
		Profile Development	9/15/16	10/15/16
		Develop Criteria for Profile	9/15//2016	12/1/16
		Create Profile Template	11/15/16	1/15/17
		Assess Aggregate Profile Data	11/30/16	1/15/17
		Develop Initial List of Retention Issues/Risk Factors	1/15/2017	2/1/17
		Develop Qualitative Assessment Instrument	2/1/17	2/15/17
	Initial Findings		1/15/17	2/1/17
		Develop Presentation of Initial Findings	10/1/2015	10/30/2015
2. Conduct a qualitative interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that put a student most at-risk to leave the institution during their sophomore year in May of 2017				
	Field Research		4/15/17	5/31/17
		Conduct Field Interviews (Fall 2015 cohort	5/1/17	5/31/17
3. Produce a comprehensive compilation of the				

research findings, along with at least 2 recommended solutions for each major risk factor identified by June 30th, 2017.				
	Post Research Assessment		5/1/17	6/1/17
		Identify Key Stakeholders	5/1/17	5/15/17
		Develop List of Possible Recommendations	5/1/17	5/15/17
		Solicit Feedback from Stakeholders	5/1/17	6/15/17
		Develop List of Final Recommendations	5/1/17	6/15/17
	Final Project Completion		2/6/2017	7/10/17
		Review Draft with Stakeholders	5/1/2017	6/12/17
		Complete Final Consultancy Report	5/22/2017	6/18/17
		Present Final Findings		7/10/17

7 Milestones

Milestone number	Title	Forecast date
1	Statement of Purpose	12/14/2014
2	SMART Objectives	5/7/15
3	Scope	5/7/15
4	Deliverables	7/19/15
5	Risk Assessment	12/4/15
6	Key Facts/Constraints	4/30/16
7	Project Plan	7/27/16
8	Budget	7/27/16
9	Quality Assurance	12/12/16
10	Overall Performance	4/28/17

8 Metrics and Results

The project resulted in written recommendations. They are as follows:

- Pre-Nursing Pathway
    - Rationale: Largest demographic by major of non-returners
        - Intervention 1: Revisit Pre-Nursing Program Pathway
        - Intervention 2: Aggressive Advising/Academic Support Program
- Co-curricular Student-Athlete
    - Rationale: Most non-returner athletes not receiving scholarship
        - Intervention 1: Increase involvement opportunities for NS athletes
        - Intervention 2: House NS Athletes of same sport together and target programming
- "Home" fatigue
    - Rationale: Admissions "Family" Marketing vs. Reality of Experience;
        - Intervention 1: Assess references to "home" and "family" from university marketing materials
        - Intervention 2: Refocus branding
- Financial Aid/Cost of Attendance
    - Rationale: Hard for students to get over the second-year hump, once debt has accumulated
        - Intervention 1: Create additional pools of aid to be used at Director of Financial Planning's discretion
        - Intervention 2: Give the Director of Financial Planning additional power to meet student financial need specifically in the sophomore year
- Student Success Data and Process
    - Rationale: Difficult to access information in real time
        - Intervention 1: Create an office to merge qualitative and quantitative data sources together in simplified process
        - Intervention 2: Hire a Director of Student Success to continually meet with these students on an ongoing basis

9   Risks, Constraints, Assumptions

9.1   RISKS

1. This project will result in a qualitative analysis to determine the factors that put a student most at risk to leave the institution during their sophomore year.

Area	Impact	Vulnerability	Likelihood	Final Risk
Conduct Qualitative Analysis	HIGH	LOW	MEDIUM	MEDIUM
Identify at least 25 students	LOW	MEDIUM	LOW	LOW
Identify Risk Factors	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	LOW	MEDIUM
By December 2016	LOW	LOW	LOW	LOW

RISK MITIGATION AND CONTINGENCY for MEDIUM and HIGH

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2. This project will result in the production of a comprehensive report of the research findings, along with at least two recommended solutions for each major risk factor identified.

Area	Impact	Vulnerability	Likelihood	Final Risk
Produce Comprehensive Report	HIGH	LOW	LOW	LOW
Recommend at least 2 solutions	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	MEDIUM
By May of 2017	LOW	LOW	LOW	LOW

RISK MITIGATION AND CONTINGENCY for MEDIUM and HIGH

OBJECTIVE	RISK FACTORS	RISK MITIGATION
Recommend at least 2 solutions	- Insufficient Data - Lack of sufficient conclusion - Single uniform conclusion	- Recommendation to rerun qualitative instrument in future semesters to triangulate findings - Identify additional factors through research, anecdote, statistical analysis, etc.

9.2 CONSTRAINTS

- Financial
  - Recommendations for programs will have to meet the financial constraints within the university's strategic plan. The university is currently experiencing a "budget reset" year in which new projects are put on hold. If university enrollment remains the same or stagnates, that could potentially lead to financial constraint, though a strong case could be made for significant investment in retention efforts in order to increase revenue.
- Personnel
  - Significant buy-in between departments must be achieved in order to address retention which will require significant personnel resource.
  - Various department heads must be prepared to work collaboratively to address the most complicated retention risk factors.
- Conflicting Mandates
  - Recently, Dr. Brown has indicated in several public comments that retention should not necessarily become the focus of efforts, particularly from the standpoint of developing the incoming student academic profile. Should that become more prevalent in other areas of the institution, this type of conflicting mandate could be detrimental to this consultancy project.

9.3 ASSUMPTIONS

Assumptions include the following:
- Wingate University had a demonstrated difficulty retaining sophomore students
- A critical analysis of quantitative and qualitative data will aid the University in making decisions.

10 Financial Plan

Consultancy Project Budget	Description	D	Assumption/Justification	
EMPLOYEE COMPENSATION:				
Hourly Rate	$33/Hour	200 hours	Since consultant is currently employed by Wingate University, employee compensation as consultant is made in kind.	$6,600
Employee Benefits				NA
Total Salary & Benefits				**$6,600**
OTHER EXPENSES:				
Seminars & Training			Funds used to attend Retention conference	$1,250
Computer Lease			Computer equipment purchased through Wingate University	$1,400
Office Supplies			Office Supplies purchased by both consultant and the university	$450
Software Licenses				
	AbleBits		Software used for merging and manipulating excel data	149
	SPSS		Software used for running statistical analysis	110
	Dropbox		Software used to gather and share documents	99
	Dictation		Software used to conduct qualitative data gathering	150
Total Other Expenses				**$3,608**
Total Budgeted Expenses				**$10,208**

11 Quality Assurance Plan

      I.   Plan

This project will result in the following three deliverables:

1. This project will help Wingate University administrators gain a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to sophomore attrition through quantitative profile analysis resulting in the production of a pre-field research assessment and Student Risk Profile.
2. This project will result in a qualitative analysis component to determine the factors that put a student most at risk to leave the institution during their sophomore year by the end of May of 2017.
3. This project will result in the production of a comprehensive report of the research findings, along with at least two recommended solutions for each major risk factor identified by the end of June 2017.

II.	Do

In order to be able to deliver on the stated objectives, here is a revised timeline:

Activity	Start Date	End Date	Strategies
Field Research	9/16	5/16/17	• Conduct both qualitative and quantitative research • Continue to develop and tweak instruments
Post Research Assessment	9/1/16	5/15/17	• Identify data trends through quantitative and qualitative analysis
Identify Key Stakeholders	9/1/16	10/28/16	• Develop list of potential stakeholders at the university • Identify those with interest in project • Build strategic relationships with related offices
Develop List of Possible Recommendations	1/1/17	5/15/17	• Identify 3-5 key recommendations through initial analysis
Solicit Feedback from Stakeholders	12/1/16	2/3/17	• Use list of potential stakeholders to solicit feedback and increase buy in
Develop list of Final Recommendations	1/2/17	5/15/17	• Remove extraneous recommendations that cannot be supported by university constituencies
Final Project Completion	3/3/17	6/30/17	• Begin work on final project
Compose Consultancy Report	2/6/17	4/28/17	• Complete initial draft by 4/28/17
Review Draft with Stakeholders	5/1/17	5/26/17	• Utilize initial feedback from stakeholders to further develop buy in to consultancy recommendations to aid in implementation
Complete Final Consultancy Project	5/22/17	5/26/17	• Use month of May to complete final project
Present Final Findings	6/1/17	6/30/17	• Utilize final presentation to advocate for consultancy recommendations

III.	Check

This process will be ongoing throughout the assessment process. As new findings reveal themselves through the fieldwork process of interviewing, I will be fine tuning my questions and honing in on particular strategies that will inform the ultimate recommendations that I give for retention efforts.

As well, I will utilize the "check" part of this model as a way to evaluate some of the criteria invested in this process as well as some of the ultimate recommendations.

Ensuring effective checks will help weed out the least desirable recommendations and help identify the strongest.

IV.   Act

There are two main action points. The first is the fieldwork process, to begin in December of 2016. Using the data provided by the university to locate sophomore students who began the year but have chosen to leave at the end of the semester, the fieldwork process of interviewing will be one of the action points from this point forward.

The second action point will be during the process of writing the findings and ultimately making recommendations. These recommendations will go through the process of plan, do, check, and act, to ensure that the recommendations are viable moving forward and in an attempt to ward off any extraneous issues.

12 Reflection

At the beginning of the program, I had the opportunity to pick a project, having very little idea what the end result might be and even less of an idea about how I was going to get there. As I reflect on this project and the program that helped build it, I am reminded constantly that the programmatic building blocks that support the program curriculum are the same building blocks I utilized for my consultancy project. Working with both qualitative and quantitative data, the research class provided essential knowledge to help develop my working understanding of how I needed to structure the project. The leadership classes gave me insight into some of the structural issues at play and helped inform the type of recommendations that would not only be tailored to the solution but also to the prevalent culture.

This project was an opportunity to contribute something practical, tangible, and real to the betterment of Wingate University. It is no surprise that those descriptors are also the ones I would use to describe this program. There has not been a class that I have taken in this program that has not in some way given me a greater insight into my work and the work of those around me.

Those insights have helped me develop tremendously over the last 3 years. I am consistently surprised at how many times recently a presenter or consultant will meet with university representatives and reference a speaker or book or even a TedTalk that I have already been exposed to as a result of this program. That kind of knowledge base served as the foundation for this consultancy project and every project I have attempted and completed in my time at Gardner-Webb University.

This program and project have had a transformative effect on the way I think. I have been exposed to thinking that varies widely across disciplines and have had the opportunity to test my own ideas with faculty and fellow cohort members. Practically speaking, I've gained the type of skills and knowledge that will not only help me address today's challenges but anticipate tomorrow's as well.

13 Areas of Future Study

There will likely be no shortage of opportunities for further study of sophomore retention at Wingate University or any other for that matter; however, there are several areas I think are ripe for study.

1. Reevaluation of the core curriculum as it relates to sophomore retention
2. Viability of sophomore only student housing
3. Reevaluation of sophomore retention financial aid model
4. Effect of academic advising interventions on sophomore retention
5. Effective early alert systems and interventions focused on sophomores

14 References

Mitchell, P. (2014*). Comprehensive retention strategy 2014*. Wingate, NC.