



UNIVERSITY OF
ARKANSAS™



Increasing Graduation Rates
University of Arkansas
Quality Initiative Proposal

2014 – 2017

Overview

The flagship campus of the University of Arkansas has shown dramatic improvement in graduation rates over the last 12 years. From 2000 to 2012, the Fayetteville campus of the University of Arkansas increased its six-year graduation rate from 45% to 60% for first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students. While we celebrate this improvement, we recognize that based on the demographics of our entering students, our six-year graduation rate should be equal to or exceed 67% (*US News and World Report, 2014 ed*). We believe our lower than predicted graduation rates reflect an area of underperformance for our institution and they are in need of attention. Thus, of the 15 goals set forth in the university's strategic plan, *Providing Transparency and Accountability to the People of Arkansas*, we have focused our Quality Initiative Project on **improvement of undergraduate retention and 6-year graduation rates**. This focus echoes goals that the chancellor and his administrative team have set forth in the university's strategic plan: a 66% graduation rate by 2015 for first-time, full-time degree-seeking students and a 70% graduation rate in 2021.

Efforts to Date and Formation of the Steering Committee

The 15% increase in graduation rates over the past 12 years is the result of focused efforts to improve this important metric. Some examples of these efforts are the revamping of summer orientation, the creation of a centralized academic support center, the use of technology to capture shared advising notes, piloting an early alert system, expanding FYE classes and other programming for freshmen, expanding the library collection to over 2 million volumes and almost 54,000 current serials, adding study areas in the main campus library, revising foundational English, reading, and mathematics courses, and increasing the number of faculty. The provost also appointed a task force in 2009 to “identify barriers to and strategies for improving six-year graduation rates.” As a result of this study, registration holds and drop deadlines were adjusted, changes were made in the student information system to enhance advising, and a graduation analyst was hired to mine data and examine patterns.

To build on this foundation and to meet or exceed the expected graduation rate, in January 2013 the provost appointed a ‘Quality Initiative Project Steering Committee,’ which consists of 10 faculty, 3 staff members, and 3 senior administrators representing all areas of the university. The committee met almost weekly for five months during which time they did an extensive evaluation of retention data and campus programs, reviewed professional literature on student success and retention, and examined retention models from other universities. Based on this review of data, existing policies, and feedback from all constituents, the Committee believes that the most productive areas of emphasis for a Quality Initiative Project focusing on retention and graduation at the University of Arkansas are (1) a technical and communication component; (2) a student support component, and (3) a learning centered component.

- ❖ I. **Technical and Communication Component to graduation/ retention** – Because the university recognizes the importance of quality advising, it has just purchased Starfish as an advising and retention tool (called UASuccess on our campus). We will form an ongoing faculty and advisor users group to help develop an implementation and assessment plan for using the software effectively. Phase 1 will involve training professional and faculty advisors as well as other support personnel to use the software to help students along their Student Success Path. The users group will communicate back to the technical team, recommending any changes that need to be made to improve functionality for advisors and the students they serve. Phase I will also involve the Fall 2013 faculty who are teaching the 70 sections of college algebra and who have volunteered to pilot the early alert progress surveys to raise flags on students not attending class and/or not performing well or give kudos for those who are performing well. These faculty will

be able to suggest changes to the technical team and will be available to help train additional faculty across the university to use the system.

- ❖ **II. Student Support Component to graduation/ retention** – Based on data from our peer institutions whose graduation rates exceed their predicted rates, we need to increase our fall-to-fall freshman cohort retention rate from 83% to at least 85%. As one major focus of this goal, the university started a new class Fall 2013 required of all new freshmen entitled *University Perspectives: Destination Graduation*. Building on this support for students as they transition into a university, this second component will be designed to develop support at other transition points along the pathway from college preparation to college graduation, such as changing majors and/or colleges or being within thirty-five credits of completing a degree. An assessment of the current advising systems on campus will be part of the implementation of this component and new approaches devised as needed to help students at these crucial transition points.

- ❖ **III. Learning Centered Component to graduation/ retention** – Given the importance of faculty to student learning and retention, we have developed action items that focus on and enhance teaching, learning, and student mentoring. Topics chosen include but are not limited to expanding the focus on faculty excellence and success in teaching, supporting department chairs in promoting the effective distribution of faculty strengths by incentivizing and evaluating teaching and mentoring, providing additional resources to enhance preparation for teaching for TAs, new faculty, and adjunct and clinical faculty, and providing ongoing professional development for all instructional staff.

Scope and Significance

The Quality Initiative's Relevant and Significant Impact on the Flagship Campus of the University of Arkansas

University of Arkansas Chancellor David Gearhart has said students are “the lifeblood of our work”-- our reason for being. If we commit to these students by enrolling them, then we must commit to helping them to find their way to graduation and to develop into independent learners. In turn, their academic, professional, and personal successes will signal that the University of Arkansas enjoys a quality student body nurtured by quality faculty and staff. An enhanced reputation will attract additional students to the university who will seek out our quality academic programs and opportunities for growth. Because the university aspires to be a top public research and teaching institution, this evolving reputation will prove significant to achieving this goal.

This Quality Initiative is also important to the state of Arkansas. Only 19.6% of Arkansans hold bachelor's degrees (2010 census). US Census Bureau data demonstrate that there is a correlation between educational attainment and per capita personal income. If, therefore, the University of Arkansas can help increase the number of Arkansans with bachelor's degrees, then it will also help improve economic development in the state along with perceptions of the state by outsiders.

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The Quality Initiative's Alignment with the Mission, Vision, and Strategic Plan of the Flagship Campus, University of Arkansas

The mission of the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, is as follows:

The mission of the University of Arkansas is to provide an internationally competitive education for undergraduate and graduate students in a wide spectrum of disciplines; contribute new knowledge, economic development, basic and applied research and creative activity; and provide service to academic/professional disciplines and society, all aimed at fulfilling its public land-grant mission to serve Arkansas and beyond as a partner, resource, and catalyst.

The vision of the University is:

By 2021, the University of Arkansas will be recognized as one of the nation's top 50 public research universities with nationally ranked departments and programs throughout the institution.

In 2021 the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, will celebrate its sesquicentennial year as a public land grant university. Educational access and the need for public universities to respond to critical needs within American society are as critical today as they were in 1862 when President Lincoln signed the Morrill Act which allotted to the then-western states land to be sold in order to build public institutions to serve the citizens of these states. Our mandate as a public land grant institution continues to be to provide quality education to the people of Arkansas and the nation.

Quality education also involves quality teaching and quality faculty. As Astin (1977, 1993) and other researchers have pointed out, the educational context created by faculty and the faculty's interaction with students has a great bearing on retention because faculty provide significant relationships with students, both the human and the professional link to college life. Another component of our Quality Initiative, therefore, is to strengthen the learning-centered culture of the campus, both in teaching and in support of teaching.

As an institution aspires to move to a Top 50 public research university, scholarship is an integral component of a quality education. This scholarship is also important relative to retention. The university prides itself on being able to offer to undergraduates as well as graduate students high quality research opportunities. Undergraduate research further connects students with quality faculty, exposing them to the intellectual rewards of discovery, and engages them in campus activities, all hallmarks of retention.

Purpose and Goals of the Initiative

The university's strategic plan calls for a 66% graduation rate by 2015 for first-time, full-time degree-seeking students and a 70% graduation rate by 2021. The purpose of the Quality Initiative Project is to develop and implement action items within the three identified critical components in order to meet these graduation goals.

Cornerstone of the Initiative- Office of Retention and Graduation

To initiate, implement, and review these three components and to make substantive sustainable changes at the University of Arkansas, an institution-wide catalyst will be the establishment of an **Office of Retention and Graduation**. Working closely with the Office of Institutional Research, the **Office of Retention and Graduation** will oversee the implementation and assessment of the action items in the Quality Initiative Project. The director of this office will be charged with leading a continuing campus-wide dialogue intended to solicit ongoing feedback on graduation and retention efforts, engage stakeholders in identifying promising new initiatives for the office, and serve as an ambassador for rallying support among staff, students, and faculty for improving retention and graduation. Several members of the original Strategic Initiative Task Force – along with other select students, faculty, and staff – will serve as an advisory body to the **Office of Retention and Graduation**.

The director of the new Office of Retention and Graduation will coordinate with the Provost/ Vice Provosts, colleges/ schools and Registrar to enhance communication and facilitate graduation efforts. The Office of Retention and Graduation will enhance/ coordinate the following three emphases in the Quality Initiative:

I. Technical and Communication Component to graduation/ retention

1. **Build a stronger bridge between the technologies that support student advising and instructing (ISIS, UASuccess, and Blackboard) and the end users (i.e., faculty, advisors, and students).**
 - a. Improve the accuracy, accessibility and timely availability of data that support students and their advisors in making effective decisions about the students' academic paths.
 - b. Create a mechanism for integrating the work of these three technology teams (ISIS, UASuccess, and Blackboard) that overcomes any barriers to change or sharing information.
 - c. Create a Users Group to serve as a conduit for sharing questions and ideas from the faculty and staff for the technology teams to consider and for sharing opportunities and limitations of the existing technology back to the faculty and staff.

II. Student Support Component to graduation/ retention

1. **Assess and address advising needs on campus** to make sure that every student has access to quality advising and to caring college personnel who can answer questions, listen to student concerns, and provide them with the personal face of the institution.

- a. Charge the colleges to investigate their advising processes and audit their results (i.e., retention and graduation rates) to determine need for additional advisors or advising procedure modifications and a plan to phase in additions where needed.
- b. Develop advisor training that includes information about the crucial role of advising in retaining students and strategies for advising for retention.
- c. Develop a broader outreach for advising, including taking advising to the students in places across campus such as the Union and the residence halls.
- d. Identify students exhibiting high-risk behaviors, such as not attending class, and intervene appropriately.
- e. Develop and implement an automated academic advising report.

2. Provide special support to students as they transition into a university setting

- a. Develop and implement a required one-credit class for all entering freshmen not already in a special freshman program
- b. Expand, as feasible, freshman mentoring on campus
- c. Market campus services for all students – especially new students – and encourage usage.
- d. Explore different types of learning communities to encourage engagement, learning outside the classroom, and university involvement.

3. Provide additional support to students at crucial junctures along the path to graduation

- a. Develop a complete list of all transition points that students in all majors face (gatekeeping courses, prerequisites, changing majors).
- b. Develop and implement interventions for each of these transition points, including pre-graduation checks.
- c. Examine course scheduling to see if it is meeting the needs of the students at particular junctures (e.g., intersession classes, second 8-week classes) and make changes as warranted.
- d. Working with the eight-semester degree plans as a baseline, develop additional course sequencing plans and add needed skill and knowledge prerequisites for each degree path.
- e. Hold majors/careers open house to share information about degree and career paths with UA students, especially with those undecided about a major.
- f. Share UA Graduation degree paths with community colleges so that transfer students can transition smoothly onto their intended path to graduation.

- g. Explore needs of most 'at risk' students (1st generation, Pell grant eligible, etc) to determine how existing programs can be strengthened.

4. Examine and make recommendations about current academic policies that may be impeding students' progress toward graduation/degree completion.

Such policies include, but may not be limited to:

- a. The "D" rule
- b. Grade forgiveness
- c. Course substitutions
- d. Class attendance
- e. Withdrawal policies
- f. Time of graduation check

III. Learning Centered Component to graduation/ retention

1. Leverage existing resources to celebrate and enhance teaching across the university.

- a. Expand the focus on faculty excellence/success in teaching, research, and/or service by building on the model of the Teaching Academy. Founded in 1988, faculty who have demonstrated excellence in their departments and colleges are nominated for election as fellows into the academy.
- b. Provide opportunities for faculty leaders to discuss management techniques that recognize teaching excellence and promote vitality and engagement in teaching
- c. Provide resources and support to develop programs for teaching assistants that help prepare these new instructors for the classroom experience.
- d. To further enhance instructor preparation, provide resources and support to develop programs for new teaching faculty, including the increasing number of adjunct and clinical faculty.
- e. Extend the outreach of the Teaching and Faculty Support Center so as to include more topics and a broader participation rate through a combination of webinars and faculty luncheons.

Assessment

As is the case with any long-term campus project, assessment and evaluation are paramount. With this in mind, the University of Arkansas will engage in a continuous review of the quality initiative that is designed to:

- ❖ measure our pace towards the ultimate goal of improving graduation and retention rates;
- ❖ understand, to the extent practicable, the value added of the various components of the initiative; and
- ❖ provide a quick turnaround of data analysis that allows for modifications in the initiative that will better support student success, to keep “closing the loop” as we progress

Purpose

The purpose of the evaluation will be to analyze data collected for the Quality Initiative Project and evaluate the results in relation to the following questions:

1. Is the initiative being implemented as planned?
2. Should the initiative be modified?
3. Is the initiative effectively moving the university towards its retention and graduation goals?
4. What is the broader impact of the initiative on improving the overall quality of the student experience, teaching, and learning?

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection and analysis of the Quality Initiative will be an on-going process throughout the evaluation period. The **Office of Retention and Graduation** serves the role of representing the needs of faculty, advisors and administrators in communicating with the Office of Institutional Research about what data mining and analysis are needed and then making data available in a timely and helpful way for those in a position to affect student learning and success. The value of these assessment efforts relies heavily on the university's current data gathering infrastructure. As we move forward the university will explore what other elements of our data-gathering infrastructure would need to be improved to effectively carry out this assessment plan.

Throughout the assessment tables below, *engagement* is referred to as a potential measure of how well the initiative is being implemented. While there may ultimately be several indicators that support an operational definition of *engagement*, the university is primarily focused on participation and utilization. It is not only important to understand how many people participate in the programming made available to promote student success but also to understand how diverse the population is that is participating and how broad the reach of the programming is – in other words, if these programs continuously draw new participants and avoid a pattern of only serving a core group of faculty and staff. The university is also interested in knowing how these programs are eventually implemented to support student success through improved teaching and advising. The tables that follow provide sample metrics for assessing the progress and success of the Quality Initiative Project.

Research Questions	Sample Metrics	Data Sources	Offices Responsible
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<p>Is the initiative being implemented as planned?</p>	<p>Engagement of faculty and teaching assistants in professional development on campus</p> <p>Engagement of department chairs in developing management skills to recognize and promote teaching</p> <p>Level of focus on promoting faculty excellence in teaching and learning-centered research and service</p> <p>Accuracy and accessibility of student data for advisors</p> <p>Participation of freshmen in <i>University Perspectives</i></p> <p>Usage patterns of new advising tools</p> <p>Attendance of students in critical transition point programs</p> <p>Student and faculty satisfaction with the Office of Retention & Graduation</p> <p>Student usage patterns of campus resources</p> <p>Frequency of advising</p> <p>Student satisfaction with advising</p>	<p>Institutional data</p> <p>Student surveys</p> <p>Faculty/staff surveys</p> <p>UASuccess data</p>	<p>Office of Retention and Graduation</p> <p>Teaching and Faculty Support Center</p>
<p>Should the Initiative be modified?</p>	<p>Student retention data analytics and predictive modeling that indicate shifts in at-risk and persistence characteristics of students</p> <p>Feedback from students not retained through exit surveys or interviews</p> <p>Student feedback on</p>	<p>Institutional Data</p> <p>Student surveys</p> <p>Faculty/staff surveys</p> <p>Learning assessment</p>	<p>Office of Retention And Graduation</p> <p>Institutional Research</p>

	<p>efficacy of <i>University Perspectives</i> class a year after completing course</p> <p>Faculty feedback on UASuccess</p> <p>Faculty feedback on how strategies learned in professional development are being applied in classroom</p>	of students in University Perspectives	
Is the Initiative effectively moving the university toward its retention and graduation goals?	<p>Undergraduate enrollment credit hour reports</p> <p>Retention rates</p> <p>Graduation rates</p> <p>Retention success rates with freshmen identified as at-risk through UASuccess</p> <p>Persistence rates for undeclared and change-of-major students before and after implementation of Initiative</p>	Institutional data	<p>Office of Retention and Graduation</p> <p>Institutional Research</p>
What is the broader impact of the Initiative on improving the overall quality of the student experience, teaching and learning?	<p>Amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities.</p> <p>How institution deploys its resources and organizes the curricula to get students to participate in activities that research shows are linked to retention.</p> <p>How learning outcomes and other student data differ between students who were retained and those who were not</p>	<p>National Survey of Student Engagement</p> <p>Collegiate Learning Assessment</p>	<p>Office of Retention and Graduation</p> <p>Institutional Research</p>

Commitment and Capacity

A university initiative of this magnitude requires commitment from the institution’s senior leadership, faculty, and staff. Detailed below are the commitments these groups have made to the university’s Quality Initiative.

Commitment of senior leadership: As stated in the university's strategic plan, the administration has set several goals related to student success, such as putting students first, reducing obstacles to student success, nurturing intercultural understanding, and improving graduation rates. As also noted in the strategic plan and as stated in the university's Vision Statement, the university aspires to be a Top 50 public research institution, an aspiration that requires an increase in our retention and graduation rates as evidence of student success. To provide movement toward this goal, the Provost appointed a 16-member committee representing all areas of the university and charged them with developing a Quality Initiative Proposal to increase retention and graduation rates. A draft of this plan was submitted to and approved by the Quality Initiative steering committee (see Appendix I).

Commitment of key groups in implementing plan: To carry out this significant, strategic initiative, multiple departments and offices will be involved. Commitments to the success of this Quality Initiative and thus to the success of our students include in addition to senior administrators the staff of the Office of Institutional Research, leadership of the Teaching and Faculty Support Center, the deans of the undergraduate colleges and schools, the technology teams on campus, the advising offices, the Career Planning Office, the Academic Advising Council, staff members in the Division of Student Affairs, the registrar's office, etc.

Sufficiency of Resources and Alignment with Implementation:

The Office of the Provost has made these commitments of resources to the Quality Initiative Project:

- ❖ Formation of an **Office of Retention and Graduation**.
 - The director will be a 50% faculty line. The office when fully phased in will also have a program coordinator and an administrative assistant. Funding will include money and resources for specific initiatives.
- ❖ Signing of a three-year contract with Starfish Retention Solutions
 - Starfish powers our new UASuccess initiative, an online appointment scheduling and retention tool for faculty, staff, and students. The commitment to UASuccess also comes with a commitment to compensate a coordinator and to hire additional professional advisors.
- ❖ Support of the design and teaching of *University Perspectives: Destination Graduation*, a class required of all first-time, full-time degree-seeking freshmen. The projected annual commitment for this initiative is over \$500,000.
- ❖ Provision of resources to support an expanded focus on excellence/success in teaching and learning (TFSC, library). These resources will be used to develop programs for teaching assistants, to enhance professional development of new teaching faculty including adjuncts, and to allow the Teaching and Faculty Support Center to extend their outreach to include more topics for a broader audience through a combination of webinars and faculty luncheons.

Defined Plan for integrating the initiative into the ongoing work of the institution and sustaining the results

A new **Office of Retention and Graduation** is in the planning stages. This office, similar to those models at the University of Oklahoma, Florida State, and Florida International University, will implement, monitor, and assess this initiative, will serve as a conduit of information about all activity on campus related to retention and graduation, will partner with ASG to sponsor a student committee on

graduation, will share information on current research about retention and graduation, and will partner with the office of Institutional Research to provide and interpret data related to retention and graduation.

Understanding and Preparing for Potential Challenges

The University of Arkansas is in the process of evolving as a major American research university. Its student body is also growing rapidly. Therefore, the overarching challenge is to “grow well,” and in a way that balances graduate student enrollment and undergraduate student enrollment. In meeting this challenge, recruiting plans have been designed with many factors in mind, including the proportion of in-state students to out-of-state students. Additionally, considering the university’s “Very High” research classification, emphasis has also been placed on growing graduate programs concurrently.

The success of new initiatives to improve retention and graduation rates is largely dependent on the support of faculty and staff. Traditionally, performance evaluation for faculty has included the triad of teaching, research, and service; this often leaves little room for an initiative that does not fit nicely into one of these categories. Changing the culture and attitudes of some that would suggest that retention efforts might translate to grade inflation can be perceived as daunting. In facing these challenges, it will be most important to involve all of the stakeholders, as is practical in policy development and implementation of new programs. Outreach to the university community will start with deans internalizing specific practices for their colleges. Department heads and chairs should then find ways to interweave faculty workloads and rewards for retention efforts.

Perhaps most challenging is the very nature of student retention itself. Although there are common transition points among most students, such as first-year adjustments, whether or not a student persists is very individualized. The retention and graduation enhancement model in this document is therefore very complex on purpose: what works for one student may not work for another. The success of trying out all these interventions will depend on the data analyzed by the **Office of Retention and Graduation**. That which does not work will have to be discarded and those financial and human resources reallocated to an intervention that does work.

Timeline

The university is on the Open Pathway cycle of accreditation with its next comprehensive campus visit scheduled for 2016-2017. The Quality Initiative part of accreditation must take place between years 5 and 9 of this 10-year cycle. The Quality Initiative steering committee has developed the following timeline for the action items described in this document in order to complete at least one phase of each item by Spring 2016. This will give the Office of Retention and Graduation time to 1) analyze data and “close the loop” on many of these items and 2) begin institutionalizing those changes that are making a positive difference in the lives of our students.

Spring 2013

- Form steering committee for QIP
- Form technology team in preparation for UASuccess

Fall 2013

- Begin phasing in UASuccess on campus
- Pilot taking general advising to the students
- Launch University Perspectives class for new freshmen

Spring 2014

- Charge the Academic Advising Council with being a conduit for information sharing between technology teams and faculty/staff/students
- Charge colleges to do an audit of their advising programs
- Develop and offer advisor training that focuses on how advisors can help retain students
- Examine scheduling of classes to see if schedule is meeting student needs
- Hold first majors/careers open house
- Complete list of critical transition points for students with suggested interventions
- Allocate resources for Office of Retention and Graduation

Fall 2014

- Expand focus on faculty excellence/success in teaching using the Teaching Academy model
- Provide opportunities for faculty leaders and department chairs to discuss management techniques that recognize teaching excellence
- Follow-up planning on the results of the advising audit
- Offer professional development in teaching excellence for adjunct and clinical faculty
- Compile list of mentoring programs on campus and develop action plans for individual colleges
- Expand use of UASuccess to include opening up progress surveys for more classes
- Begin Phase I of interventions at end of freshman and sophomore years
- Explore different types of learning communities and their roles in student retention

Spring 2015

- Develop UA Graduation pathways for each major
- Begin Phase II of transition interventions: after orientation and year before projected graduation
- Hold Phase II of Majors/Careers Fair incorporating UA Graduation pathways
- Expand Office of Retention and Graduation as needed

Fall 2015

- Share UA Graduation pathways with community college colleagues
- Apply for membership in the Association of Research Libraries
- Continue professional development opportunities for adjunct and clinical faculty

Spring 2016

- Measure and evaluate effectiveness of freshman course, University Perspectives

Steering Committee

The Quality Initiative Proposal presented to the Higher Learning Commission is the product of a working committee that represents the breadth and depth of the University of Arkansas. Prior to its submission, the document was reviewed by many of the university's constituents, including the executive committee, vice provosts, deans, associate deans, and individual faculty members. The Quality Initiative steering committee consists of the following:

- ❖ **Carolyn Allen**, Dean of Libraries
- ❖ **Mark Arnold**, Associate Professor and Undergraduate Coordinator, Mathematical Sciences
- ❖ **Steve Beaupre**, Professor, Biological Sciences
- ❖ **Mark Boyer**, Department Head, Landscape Architecture
- ❖ **Paul Cronan**, Professor, M.D. Matthews Endowed Chair, Information Systems
- ❖ **Norm Dennis**, Interim Associate Dean for Academic Programs in Civil Engineering and Co-Chair of Teaching and Faculty Support Center
- ❖ **Ro Di Brezzo**, Vice Provost for Academic Affairs
- ❖ **Sharon Gaber**, Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs
- ❖ **Adrienne Gaines**, Associate Director of Student Services, Freshman Engineering Program
- ❖ **Gary Gunderman**, Director of Institutional Research
- ❖ **Karen Hodges***, Executive Director of Academic Success
- ❖ **Janine Parry**, Professor, Political Science
- ❖ **Janet Penner-Williams**, Assistant Dean, College of Education and Health Professions
- ❖ **John Pijanowski***, Associate Professor, Educational Leadership
- ❖ **Lona Robertson**, Associate Dean, Bumpers College
- ❖ **Kathy Van Laningham**, Vice Provost for Planning
- ❖ **Jeannie Whayne**, Professor of History and Co-Director of Teaching and Faculty Support Center

* = co-chair of committee