



## **Retention, Progression, and Graduation at UNA - Spring 2012**

Office of Institutional Research,  
Planning, and Assessment

## About the Authors

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Retention, progression, and graduation (RPG) are important components within an institution's overall enrollment management plan. This report summarizes the outcomes of freshman-to-sophomore retention from the 2010 cohort, addresses progression rates, and reviews the four- and six-year graduation rates of UNA students. The following are areas of concern:

- The freshman-to-sophomore retention rate has rebounded from the 2007 decline, but is still lower than the Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (CSRDE) national average for moderately-selective institutions.
- Out of those students who did not return to UNA and who earned a UNA GPA of less than 2.0, almost 67% had adequate college preparation based on high school GPA and ACT scores.
- Over 100 freshmen from the 2010 cohort, who maintained a good UNA GPA and who were academically prepared, did not return to UNA.
- Even though retention is significantly higher among students in good academic standing at UNA, almost half of the students who leave UNA are also in good academic standing.
- UNA's four-year graduation rate has decreased 27.6% over the past eight years. Furthermore, the six-year rate has declined 11.5% over the past seven years.

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is to analyze the retention, progression, and graduation rates associated with the University of North Alabama and to examine the relationship of graduation and retention to the level of college preparation. For this report, retention, progression, and graduation (RPG) are defined as follows:

**Retention:** Students who remain in school and do not drop out or transfer during their freshmen year. UNA's retention rate is the percentage of first-time, full-time freshmen who return for their second year. This make-up of the freshman cohort was defined by the U.S. Department of Education many years ago, and is also used to track progression and graduation rates.

**Progression:** Students who progress from one academic level to the next (e.g. sophomore-to-junior). UNA's progression rate is the percentage of a cohort that moves from one level to the next in a given year.

**Graduation:** Students who graduate from UNA. Graduation rate is the percentage of an entering cohort that graduates within a certain period of time. Typically, the U.S. Department of Education measures graduation rates after the fourth and sixth year of college for a given freshman cohort.

UNA's RPG data will be compared to the Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (CSRDE) which is a consortium of colleges and universities dedicated to the cooperative exchange of student retention and graduation data for the purposes of benchmarking. Currently, UNA is a contributor to the CSRDE. Reports from the CSRDE are separated by selectivity status; whereby, highly-selective institutions have average ACT Composite scores above 24, selective institutions average ACT Composite scores between 22.5 and 24, moderately-selective institutions average ACT Composite scores between 21 and 22.4, and less selective institutions average ACT Composite scores below 21. Based on this definition, UNA is considered a moderately-selective institution.

It is not the purpose of this report to identify methods of improvement or change in RPG. Rather, the sole focus of this report is to statistically pinpoint areas of concern regarding RPG in order to formulate hypotheses, induce discussion, and engage in more significant research of problems that may exist.

However, before exploring how to improve retention, progression, and graduation rates, it is important to recognize the critical role that campus culture plays in this process. According to the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), the primary emphasis for promoting persistence must be on developing a culture that is both challenging and supportive for students and that creates an environment which fosters student learning (AASCU, 2005).

“UNA's retention, progression, and graduation data will be compared to the Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange.”

The AASCU report, *Student Success in State Colleges and Universities: A Matter of Culture and Leadership*, emphasizes the vital role campus culture plays in retaining and graduating students. According to the study, AASCU selected 12 diverse public institutions that shared one major commonality: each of them had higher-than-expected graduation rates. The institutions ranged in size from 3,800 to over 13,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) students and included comprehensive and research universities, urban and rural institutions, and two historically black institutions.

The study underscored the importance of culture and strong leadership in improving retention, progression, and graduation. While many of the 12 institutions had a number of retention programs and practices in place, these programs were deemed by the study to be standard programs such as first-year experience (FYE) programs, active student advisement, and learning communities. However, it was found by the report that retention, progression, and graduation rates cannot be fixed by adding yet another isolated program or one more service, as noted in the report's preface.

The AASCU study isolated the following three critical cultural elements that can serve as the foundation for plans to improve RPG:

- **High expectations** - refers to the level of academic rigor on a campus as well as the level of student assistance to support a more rigorous curriculum. High expectations extend to faculty and staff as

“The study underscored the importance of culture and strong leadership in improving retention, progression, and graduation.”

well. There is an unusually high level of genuine concern and faculty commitment to student success on each of these campuses. Such commitment to students must not be confused with “hand-holding” or watering down the curriculum. On the contrary, high expectations that are linked to a high level of support ultimately build students’ sense of personal responsibility for their achievement.

- **Sense of belonging** - refers to the inclusive sense of “family” where students feel welcome and share a strong sense of belonging. It is fostered by faculty, staff, and other students.
- **Sense of purpose** – refers to the shared belief system on the part of faculty, staff, administrators, and students with a common sense of purpose focused on student learning. This shared sense of purpose is consciously reinforced in the hiring process. It also leads to strong collaborations between academic departments and educational support and administrative services since all units adhere to a common purpose.

Beyond these three critical elements of an institution’s culture that support higher retention, progression, and graduation rates, the AASCU report provides guidelines for how campuses choose and implement their good practices.

According to the report, four conditions increase the likelihood of success in specific student success programs:

“Such a commitment to students must not be confused with ‘hand-holding’ or watering down the curriculum.”



- **Intentional** - carefully thought out; well supported by the institution; proactive and, at times, mandatory.
- **Integrated** - programs are related rather than a seemingly random collection of interventions and practices.
- **Collaborative** – programs involving people from academic, educational support, and administrative departments.
- **Academic** – programs are integral to the teaching and learning process.

## RETENTION

Freshman-to-sophomore retention for the 2010 cohort increased to 70.9% over 65.2% the previous year. Furthermore, during the cohort years from 2003 to 2010, freshman-to-sophomore retention has increased at UNA 5.5%<sup>1</sup> with the most notable increase occurring during the 2008 cohort year. According to **Figure 1**, retention decreased from 2005 to 2006, but shows a rebound with the 2010 cohort. Furthermore, the eight-year trend indicates a slight increase in retention.

Females demonstrated a higher retention rate (74.2%) than

males

(66.2%) in

2010. These

rates in-

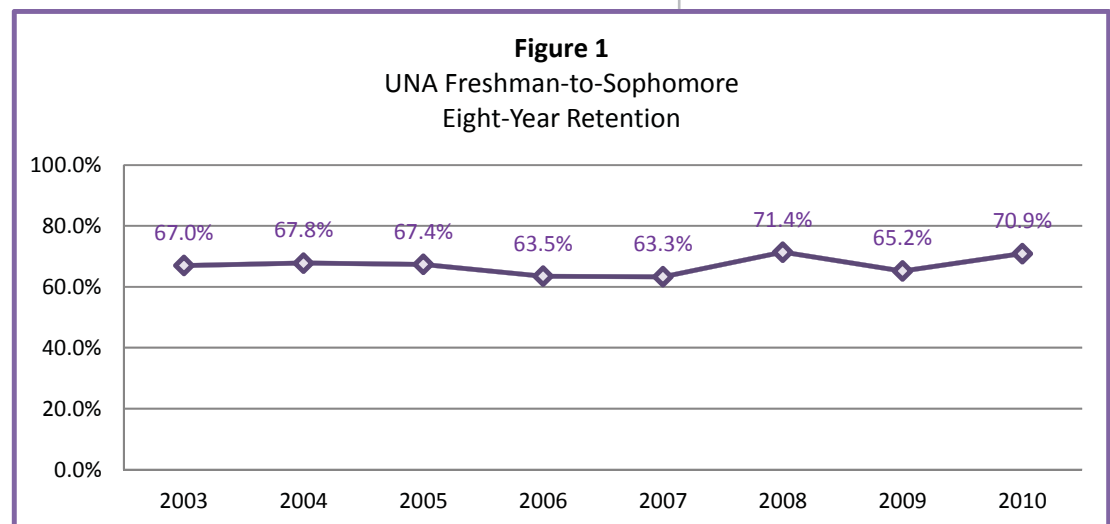
creased from

64.9% for

females and

61.5% for

males since



UNA's last RPG report (Luna, 2009). White students had a higher retention rate (73.4%) than Black students (59.9%), but not as high as Hispanic students (76.2%). Even though Black retention rate remains the same from the 2007 report, White retention rate has increased 9.8%. In this first-time, full-time freshman cohort, it should be noted that there were only 21

<sup>1</sup>Percent change = (New Value - Old Value)/ New Value \* 100

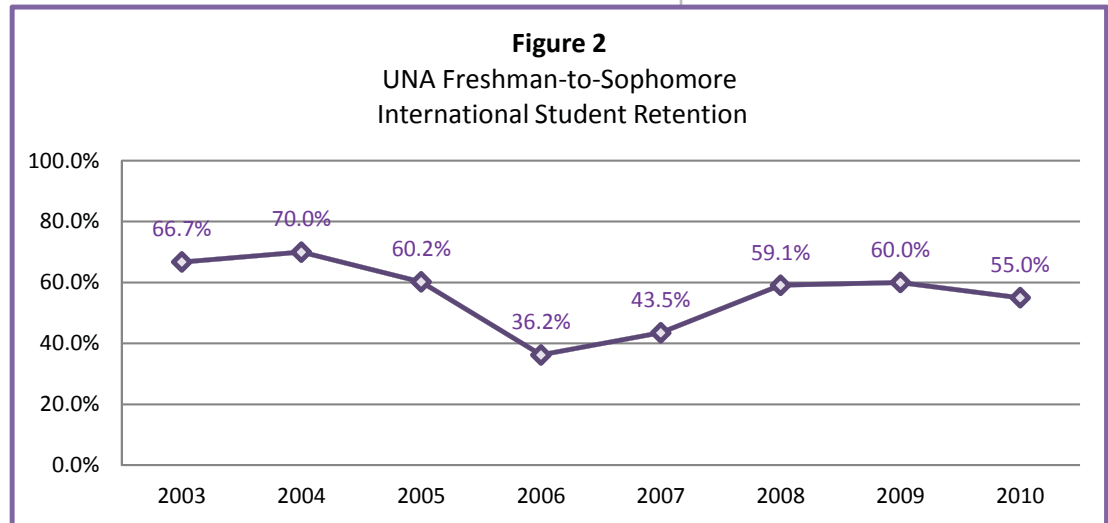
Hispanic students as compared to 137 Black students and 744 White students in the fall cohort.

According to the Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (CSRDE), the average first-time, full-time retention rate of moderately-selective institutions over the past ten years is 73.3%, which places UNA's rate of 70.9% in fall 2010 lower than the ten-year CSRDE average. CSRDE ten-year average data also indicated that females demonstrated a higher average retention rate (75.6%) to males (72.3%). When compared to UNA's data, female retention is 1.9% lower than the ten-year CSRDE national average and male retention is 8.4% lower than the national average. According to CSRDE data, White students had a higher retention rate (74.2%) than Black students (70.6%), but not as high as Hispanic students (75.4%). Furthermore, the data indicate that UNA's White retention is 1.1% lower than the national average and Black retention is 15.2% lower than the national average. Hispanic retention at UNA is 1.1% higher than the national average. In this first-time, full-time freshman CSRDE cohort among the moderately selective institutions, the average headcount for Hispanic students was 9,981 as compared to an average headcount of 13,431 Black students and 86,215 White students.

In 2007, there was concern for UNA's international cohort and their poor freshman-to-sophomore retention rates. During this time, only 44% of international students returned. This rate increased to 55% with the 2010 international cohort, but it is still significantly lower than the CSRDE ten-year aver-

age of 70.8%. The trend for international retention can be seen in **Figure 2**. The dip in 2006 and 2007 was attributed to the recruitment of a significant number of Nepalese students, with the majority of them (94%) not returning (Luna, 2007).

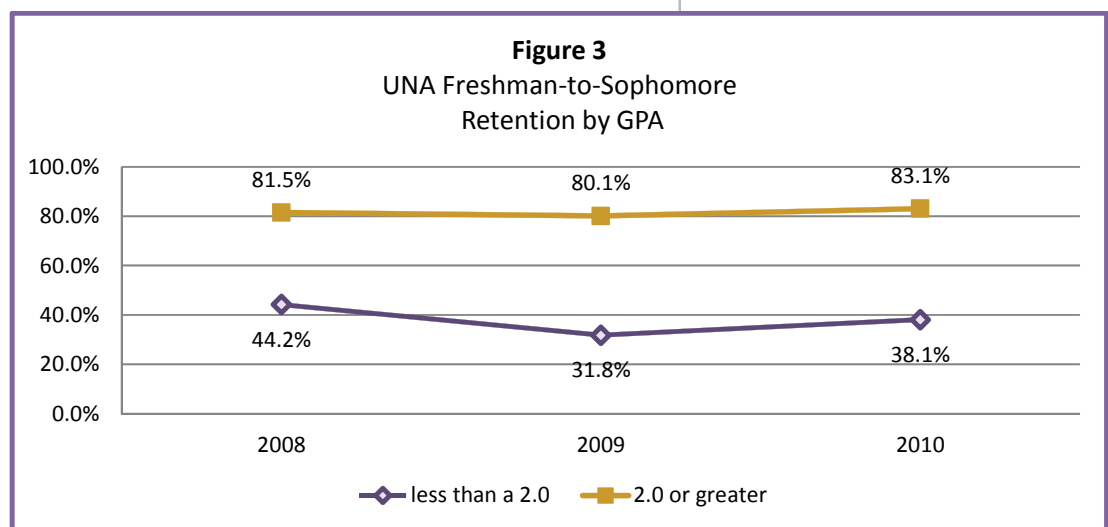
When retention is compared to college preparation (i.e. high school grade point average and ACT test



results) and UNA GPA performance, a more complete picture is established. As shown in **Figure 3**, students who earned a 2.0 or higher GPA at UNA in the fall of 2010 had a significantly

higher return rate than did students who earned a UNA GPA of less than 2.0.

For example, of the students who



earned a GPA of 2.0 or greater, 83.1% returned in fall 2011 as compared to a 38.1% retention rate for students who received

Figure 4									
Freshman Retention Compared by UNA Fall 2010 GPA, HS GPA, and ACT Composite Scores*									
Fall 2010 GPA		Returned		Not Enrolled		Transferred		Total	
UNA GPA $\geq$ 2.0	HS GPA $\geq$ 2.0 and ACT $\geq$ 18	538	77%	42	6%	61	9%	641	
	HS GPA $<$ 2.0 and ACT $<$ 18	1	0%	1	0%	0	0%	2	
	HS GPA $\geq$ 2.0 and ACT $<$ 18	35	5%	2	0%	4	1%	41	
	HS GPA $<$ 2.0 and ACT $\geq$ 18	11	2%	1	0%	1	0%	13	
	Total for UNA GPA $\geq$ 2.0	585	84%	46	7%	66	9%	697	
UNA GPA $<$ 2.0	HS GPA $\geq$ 2.0 and ACT $\geq$ 18	55	27%	53	26%	32	16%	140	
	HS GPA $<$ 2.0 and ACT $<$ 18	3	1%	6	3%	8	4%	17	
	HS GPA $\geq$ 2.0 and ACT $<$ 18	16	8%	10	5%	11	5%	37	
	HS GPA $<$ 2.0 and ACT $\geq$ 18	5	2%	3	1%	3	1%	11	
	Total for UNA GPA $<$ 2.0	79	39%	72	35%	54	26%	205	
*These figures only include the students who had reported HS GPA and ACT composite scores									

less than a 2.0 in fall 2010. **Figure 4** indicates a slight trend increase over the past three years for those students who received a 2.0 or greater their first semester at UNA. However, the percentage of students returning with less than a 2.0 their first semester has declined.

Of the students who earned less than a 2.0 GPA their first semester (F10):

- 61% did not return.
- 43% of these students transferred to another institution.
- Of those who transferred to another institution, a total of 80% transferred to a community college.
- Of those who transferred to a community college, over 36% attended Calhoun Community College with the majority of the rest going to Bevil State and Northwest Shoals Community College.

“Of those who transferred to another institution, a total of 80% transferred to a community college.”

Out of those students whose UNA GPA was less than 2.0, but who maintained a high school grade point average of at least 2.0 and scored at least an 18 on the ACT (n=140), a total of 85 (60.7%) either did not return to UNA or transferred to another institution. This number is significantly higher than the number of students who were less prepared for college. A total of 41 students who earned less than a 2.0 UNA GPA, and/or earned less than a 2.0 high school GPA, and/or scored less than 18 on the ACT either did not return or transferred to another institution.

The significantly higher number of students who were more academically prepared but who earned a UNA GPA of less than 2.0 could be attributed to many factors including over-confidence about college-level work as compared to high school work, lack of sufficient college-preparatory skills, and/or high school grade inflation.

It is also shown in **Figure 4** that, out of the Fall 2010 cohort who did not return to UNA in Fall 2011 (n=238), 53% earned less than a 2.0 GPA from UNA and 47% earned a 2.0 or greater. These percentages are similar for 2008 and 2009. This indicates that, even though retention is significantly higher among students in good academic standing at UNA, almost half of the students who leave are also in good academic standing.

“...even though retention is significantly higher among students in good academic standing at UNA, almost half of the students who leave are also in good academic standing.”

## PROGRESSION

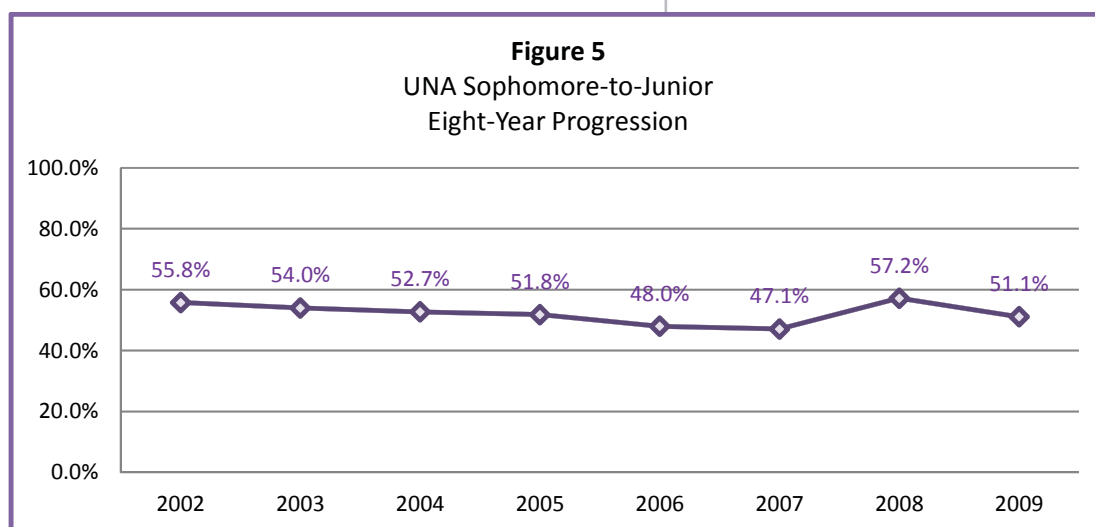
Along with retention and graduation, progression is another important component of an institution's overall enrollment makeup. While retention is defined by the federal government and concerns itself only with the rate that first-time, full-time freshmen advance to sophomore status, progression takes the same freshman cohorts and determines how many of those students who advanced to sophomore status, advanced further to juniors and seniors.

Referring back to the freshman-to-sophomore retention rate on **Figure 1**, UNA saw an overall increase of 5.5% in retention rate over the past eight years. Decrease in sophomore-to-junior progression, however, is significantly more dramatic.

As shown in **Figure 5**, from 2002 to 2009, sophomore-to-junior progression has steadily declined, gen-

erating an 8.4% loss over the eight-year period.

The junior-to-senior progression rate is less dramatic than the sophomore-to-junior rate, as it remains steady over



the seven-year period (2002-2008). As shown in **Figure 6**, junior-to-senior progression increased 6.67% during the seven-year period. In general, UNA loses a lesser percentage of juniors moving to seniors than freshmen moving to

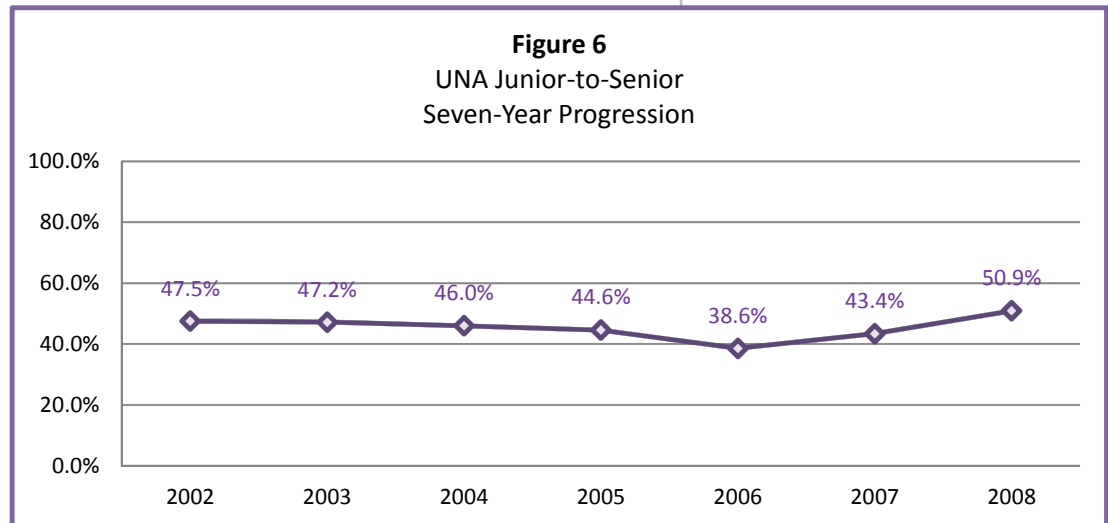
sophomores or sophomores moving to juniors.

According to the CSRDE progression rate

data, over 61%

of sophomores return for their junior year as compared to 51% of UNA sophomores in the fall 2009 cohort. The CSRDE data did not address junior-to-senior retention rates.

While progression has remained steady for juniors transitioning to seniors, the sophomore-to-junior progression rate has declined overall; however, this rate has improved as compared to the last report (Luna, 2007).

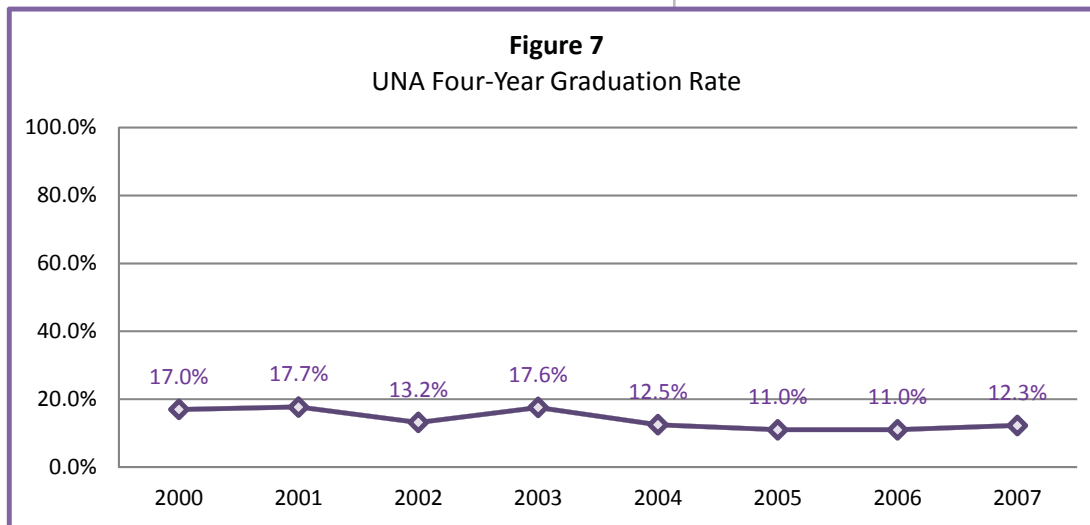




## GRADUATION

The U.S. Department of Education tracks both four- and six-year graduation rates. At UNA, four-year graduation rates have decreased 27.6% over the past eight years. While the 2003 rate recovered from the previous year, these gains were subsequently lost in 2004, leveling out thereafter.

The ten-year CSRDE average four-year graduation rate for moderately-selective schools is 22.6%. **Figure 7** indicates that UNA's eight-year average of 14% is considerably lower than the CSRDE's ten-year average of 22%, and is trending downward when compared to the 2000 rate.



As **Figure 8** indicates, six-year graduation rates have also seen a decline. Over the seven-year period, UNA graduation rates have seen an overall decrease of 11.4% with the largest decreases occurring most recently. More significant is UNA's six-year graduation rate as compared to the CSRDE rate. For moderately-selective institutions, the CSRDE ten-year average six-year graduation rate is 46.2%, while UNA's most current six-year rate is only 33.3percent. During 2001-2003,

UNA indicated a slight increase from its norm. However, this

increase is

still clearly

lower than

the CSRDE's

average. After

2003, how-

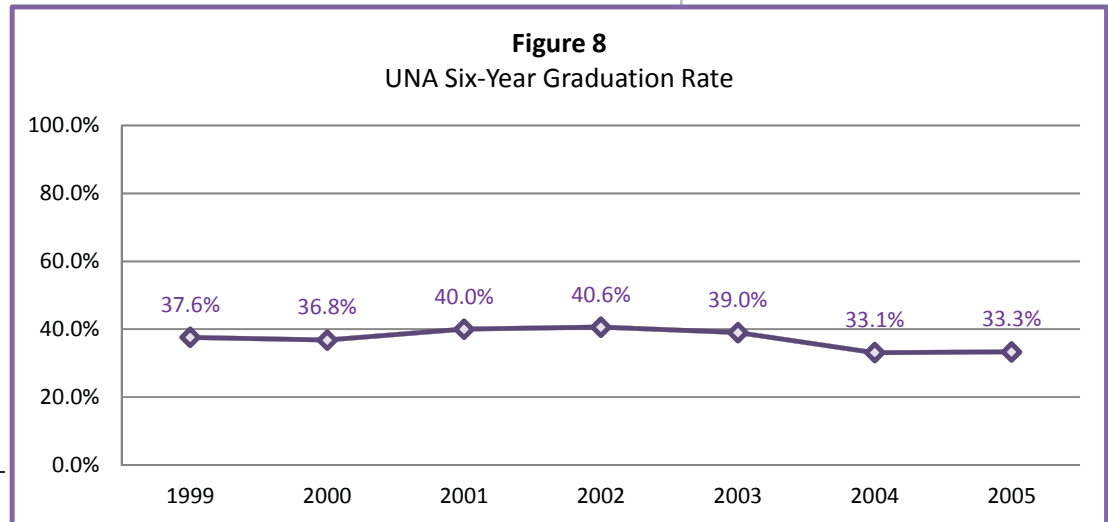
ever, UNA's

six-year gradu-

ation rate has

fallen to its current rate of 33.3% which is an 11.4% decrease

compared to the 1999 rate.



### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND RE-SEARCH

While these data point to trends and patterns of RPG at UNA, more research is needed in order to better understand what is causing these trends and, once identified, determine if the institution can enact measures to reduce attrition and increase graduation. The Office of Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment recommends that the following research be conducted:

1. Determine why students who have good academic standing at UNA are leaving.
2. Determine why students who were academically prepared for college (i.e. high school GPA of 2.0 or higher and ACT scores of 18 or higher) earned less than a 2.0 at UNA. For these students, the data indicate that many either did not return to UNA or transferred to another institution.
3. Determine why the sophomore to junior attrition rate is lower than the freshman to sophomore rate and why it is still showing a gradual decline.
4. Determine if patterns exist between why students leave and the results of other assessments.

The methodology used to gather this information can be in the form of questionnaires, telephone surveys, focus groups, and/or other qualitative and quantitative means.

## References

American Association of State Colleges and Universities (2005).

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