



## **Retention, Progression, and Graduation at UNA - Spring 2009**

Institutional Research, Planning,  
and Assessment

## About the Author

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**Table of Contents**

Executive Summary.....	1
Introduction .....	2
Retention.....	4
Progression.....	9
Graduation.....	11
Recommendations for Further Study and Research.....	13

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Retention, progression, and retention are important components within an institution's overall enrollment management plan. This report summarizes the outcomes of freshman to sophomore retention from the 2007 cohort, reviews the four- and six-year graduation rate, and addresses progression rates of UNA students. The following are areas of concern:

- Freshman to sophomore retention rate has been declining for the past two years. While part of this decline can be attributed to the decrease in enrollment of some international students, domestic retention is also declining.
- Over 100 freshmen, who maintained a good UNA GPA and who were academically prepared, did not return to UNA.
- Out of those students who earned a UNA GPA of less than 2.0, almost 34 percent had adequate college preparation based on high school GPA and ACT scores.
- The progression of sophomores to juniors declined over 7 percent during a five-year period and is the largest area of decline within classification.
- While UNA's four-year graduation rate has taken a slight decline, six-year rates are showing an increase over the past five years. Furthermore, UNA's six-year graduation rate is higher than the CSRDE average for less selective schools.

### 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 makeup of the freshman cohort was defined by the US Department of Education many years ago, and is also used to track progression and graduation rate.

**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 class 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 US Department of Education measures graduation rates after the fourth and sixth year of college for a given freshmen 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 less selective institution.

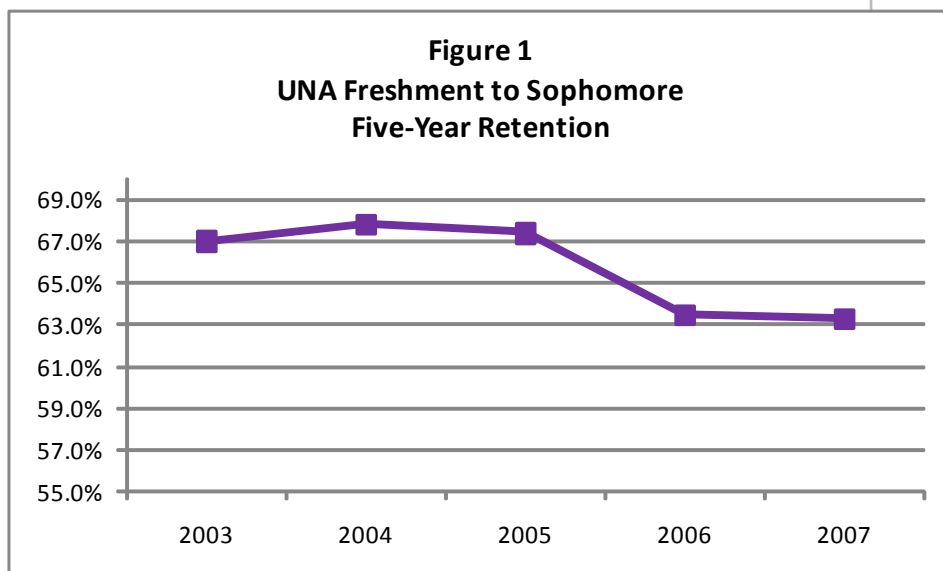
It is not the purpose of this report to identify methods of improvement or change in RPG. Rather, the sole focus of this report is to statistically pinpoint areas of concern regarding RPG in order to formulate hypotheses, induce discussion, and engage in more significant research of problems that may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

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

## RETENTION

During the cohort years from 2003 to 2007, freshman to sophomore retention has decreased at UNA 3.7 percent with the most significant decline occurring during the 2006 cohort year. According to **Figure 1**, retention increased slightly from 2003 to 2004, but started declining thereafter. Females demonstrated a higher average retention rate (64.9 percent) than males (61.5 percent), and White students had a higher retention rate (66.2 percent) than Black students (60.9 percent), but not as high as Hispanic students (80 percent). In this first-time, full-time freshman cohort, it should be noted

CSRDE freshman to sophomore retention is 70 percent which is higher than UNA's rate of 63.3 percent



that there were only 13 Hispanic students as compared to 133 Black students and 654 white students.

According to CSRDE data, the first-time, full-time retention rate of less selective institutions is currently at 70 percent, which places UNA's rate of 63.3 percent below the CSRDE av-

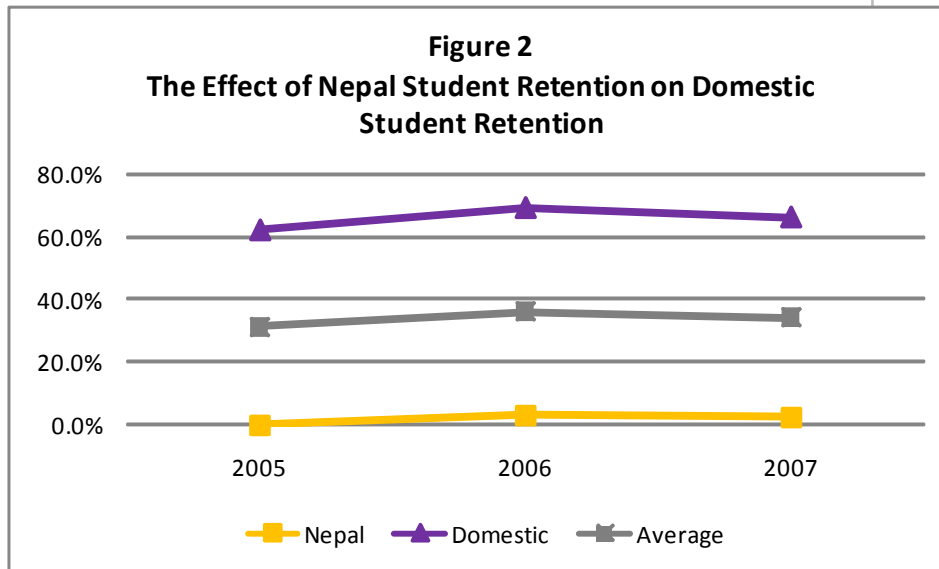
erage. CSRDE data also indicated that Females demonstrated a higher average retention rate (72.5 percent) to males (67.6 percent), and White students had a higher retention rate (70.2 percent) than Black students (68.6 percent), but not as high as Hispanic students (71.1 percent). In this first-time, full-time freshman CSRDE cohort among the less selective institutions, the average headcount for Hispanic students was 14,616 as compared to an average headcount of 40,582 Black students and 48,552 white students.

While most Nonresident Alien students demonstrated higher retention rates than domestic students at UNA, part of the overall decline in freshmen to sophomore retention can be attributed to the effect of Nepalese student migration into UNA. During the past three years, a large number of Nepalese students entered UNA as first-time, full-time freshmen. Most of these (97 to 100 percent) did not return for their sophomore year. According to US Department of Education mandate, all first-time, full-time students must be used in the graduation/retention cohort no matter if they are domestic or international students. The effect of the low Nepalese retention rate on domestic retention can be seen in **Figure 2**. During the past three years, domestic retention has averaged about 66 percent while retention of the Nepalese students averaged about 2 percent.

The significant difference between the Nepalese and domestic retention rate is demonstrated in the US/Nepalese retention average. This average clearly indicates that domestic

“...part of the overall decline in UNA freshmen to sophomore retention can be attributed to the effect of the Nepalese student migration into UNA.”





retention is diminished when combined with the Nepalese students. However, there was a commensurate decrease of domestic to Nepalese student retention rate in 2007, indicating that the lower overall retention rate was, in part, attributed to the decrease of both domestic and Nepalese students.

When retention is compared to college preparation (i.e. high school grade point average and ACT tests 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 had a higher return rate than did students who earned a UNA GPA of less than 2.0.

The difference of retention rate among the two groups of students is not significant, however. For example, out of the students who earned a GPA of at least 2.0, 74.9 percent returned as compared to 71.6 percent of the students returning who earned a GPA of less than a 2.0. Of special interest is one group of students who are considered in good academic standing at UNA. Out of those students who maintained a UNA GPA of at least 2.0, main-

“...students who earned a 2.0 or higher GPA at UNA had a higher return rate than did students who earned a UNA GPA of less than 2.0”

Figure 3					
Freshman Retention Compared to UNA GPA, HS_GPA, and ACT Scores					
		Returned	Not Enrolled	Transferred	Total
UNA GPA $\geq$ 2	HS_GPA $\geq$ 2 and ACT $\geq$ 16	439	24	86	549
	HS_GPA $<$ 2 and ACT $<$ 16	48	52	4	104
	HS_GPA $\geq$ 2 and ACT $<$ 16	19	0	5	24
	HS_GPA $<$ 2 and ACT $\geq$ 16	19	4	1	24
	Total for UNA GPA $\geq$ 2	525	80	96	701
UNA GPA $<$ 2	HS_GPA $\geq$ 2 and ACT $\geq$ 16	74	73	36	183
	HS_GPA $<$ 2 and ACT $<$ 16	17	28	6	51
	HS_GPA $\geq$ 2 and ACT $<$ 16	9	9	8	26
	HS_GPA $<$ 2 and ACT $\geq$ 16	22	21	18	61
	Total for UNA GPA $<$ 2	122	131	68	321
	Total	647	211	164	1,022

tained a high school GPA of at least 2.0 and scored at least a 16 on the ACT, a total of 110 (20 percent) either did not return or transferred to another institution. These numbers may support findings from the recent National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) survey that was given to UNA freshmen and seniors. According to one finding in that survey, freshmen students believed that they were not being challenged enough in the classroom.

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 a 16 on the ACT, a total of 109 (34 percent) either did not enroll at UNA or transferred to another institution. This number is significantly higher than the number of students who were less than prepared for college.

“Out of those students who maintained a UNA GPA of 2.0, maintained a high school GPA of at least 2.0, and scored at least a 16 on the ACT, a total of 110 (20 percent)...did not return...”

A total of 34 students (11 percent) who earned less than a 2.0 UNA GPA, earned less than a 2.0 high school GPA, and who scored less than 16 on the ACT either did not return or transferred to another institution.

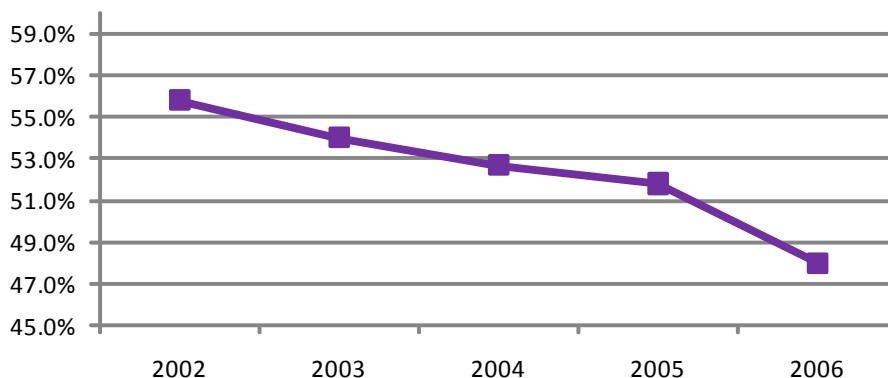
The significantly higher number of students who were more academically prepared but who earned a UNA GPA of less than 2.0 could be attributed to many factors including over-confidence about college-level work as compared to high school work, lack of sufficient college-preparatory skills, and/or high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

## 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 deals only with the rate that first-time, full-time freshmen advance to sophomore status; progression takes these same freshmen cohorts and determines how many of those students who advanced to sophomore status, advanced further to juniors and seniors.

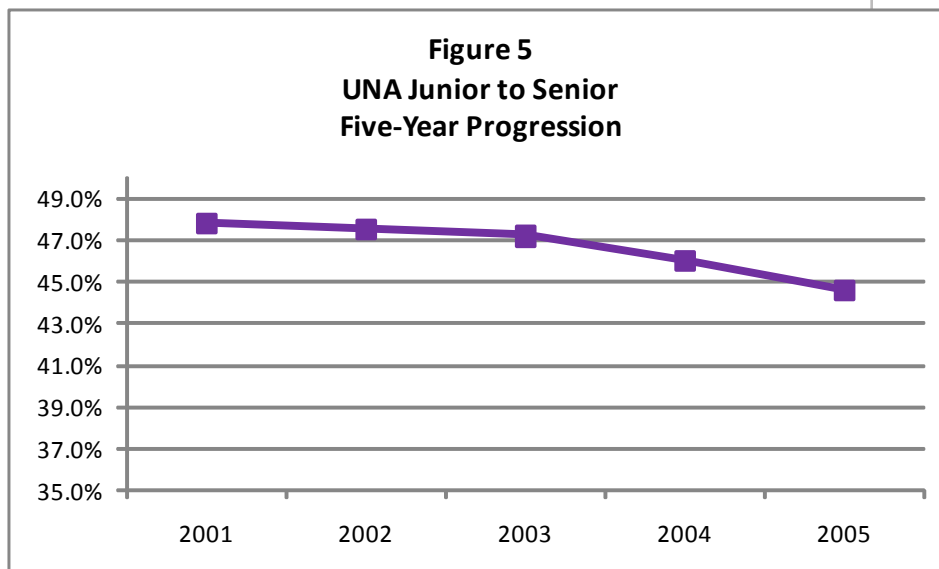
Referring back to the freshman-to-sophomore retention rate on **Figure 1**, UNA saw an overall decrease of 3.7 percent in retention over the past 5 years. Decrease in sophomore to junior progression, however, is significantly more dramatic.

**Figure 4**  
**UNA Sophomore to Junior**  
**Five-Year Progression**



As show in **Figure 4**, from 2002 to 2006, sophomore to junior progression has steadily declined, generating a 7.8 percent loss over the five year period.

While the junior to senior progression rate is less dramatic than the sophomore to junior rate, it still indicates a steady decline over the past five years. According to **Figure 5**, junior to senior progression declined 3.2 percent during the five year period. In general, however, 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 57 percent of sophomores return for their junior year as compared to 44 percent of UNA sophomores. The CSRDE data did not address junior to senior retention rates.

While progression has steadily declined for freshmen, sophomores, and juniors, the sophomore to junior progression rate decline is the most significant and should be immediately addressed.

“In general ... UNA loses a lesser percentage of juniors moving to seniors than freshmen moving to sophomores or sophomores moving to juniors.”

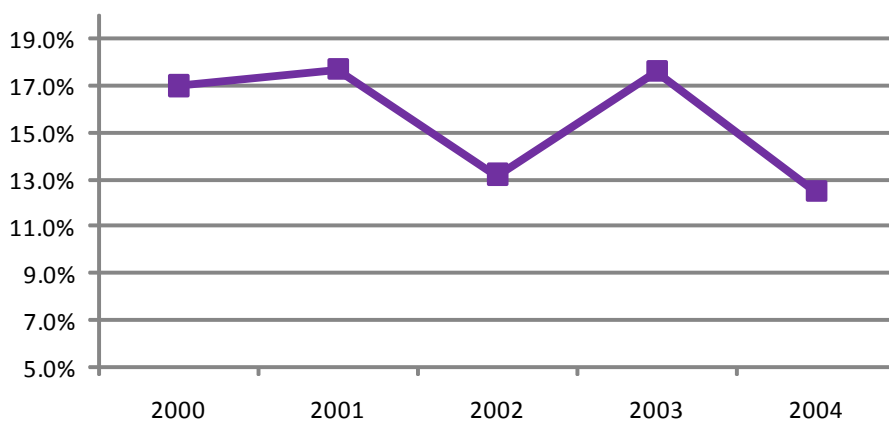
## GRADUATION

The U.S. Department of Education tracks both four- and six-year graduation rates. At UNA, four-year graduation rates have decreased 4.5 percent over the past 5 years. While the 2003 rate recovered from the previous year, these gains were subsequently lost in 2004.

The average CSRDE four-year graduation rate for less selective schools is 15.4 percent. **Figure 6** indicates that, while UNA's five year average of 15.6 percent is comparable to CSRDE's current year average, UNA's current year rate of 12.5

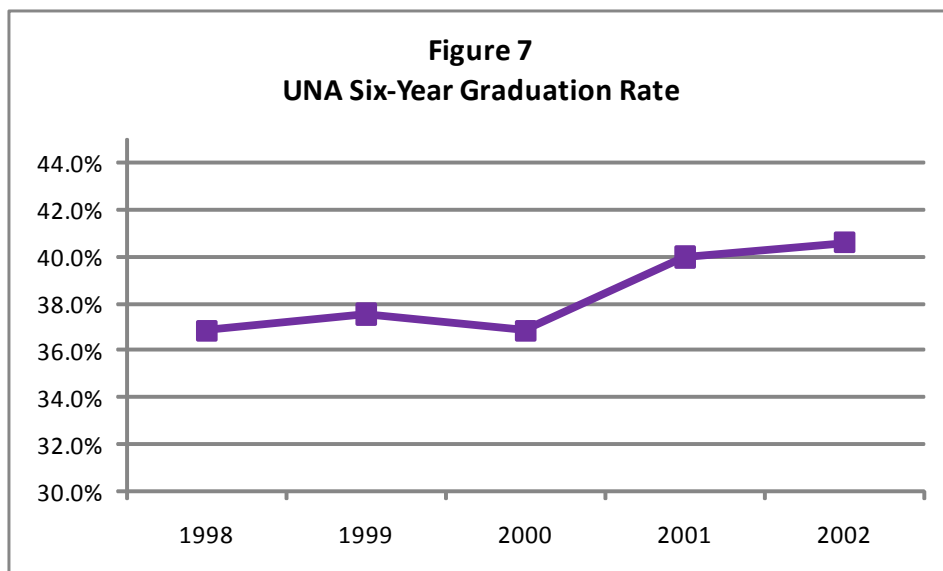
“Over the five-year period, graduation rates have seen an overall increase of 3.7 percent.”

**Figure 6**  
**UNA Four-Year Graduation Rate**



percent is much lower.

As **Figure 7** indicates, six-year graduation rates have seen a steady increase. Over the five-year period, graduation rates have seen an overall increase of 3.7 percent with the only decrease occurring in 2000. More significant is UNA's six-year graduation rate as compared to the CSRDE rate. For less selec-



tive institutions, the CSRDE six-year graduation rate is 39 percent, while UNA's six-year rate is higher at 40.6 percent. This is the second consecutive year that UNA's six-year rate was higher than the CSRDE rate.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND RESEARCH

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 16 or higher) earned less than a 2.0 at UNA. At this point it is assumed that these students either did not return or transferred to another institution because of their low UNA GPA.
3. Determine why the sophomore to junior attrition rate is significantly higher than the freshman to sophomore or junior to senior rate.
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.