

**Wabash/Provost Scholars Report
Focus Group Summary and Recommendations**

Factors Affecting Student Success at NC A&T State University

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**Focus Group Implementation, Data Analysis, and Draft Reports
NC A&T State University Wabash-Provost Scholars**

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1. Background

The Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education

North Carolina A&T State University was selected to participate in the four-year national longitudinal Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education (Wabash National Study) in 2007-2008, one of nearly 50 institutions now participating in this study. The over-arching goals of the Wabash National Study are to “explore the extent to which students develop because of their college experiences, the conditions that contribute to this development, and ways that institutions can more readily assess and act on this knowledge to enhance their impact.”¹

The Wabash National Study is particularly useful for helping individual campuses assess the local conditions that contribute to student success by uncovering important gaps between intended and actual student outcomes and the factors that contribute to these gaps. The Wabash National Study employs a variety of assessment tools, providing a rich array of data that enables institutions to develop a unique “institutional narrative” describing the strengths and weaknesses of their students, identifying the factors that affect their students’ success, and providing suggestions for improving the institutional learning environment.

North Carolina A&T State University Participation in the Wabash National Study

During the fall 2007 semester 722 first-time, full-time North Carolina A&T State University freshman participated in the Wabash National Study. Students completed assessments measuring critical thinking, writing, and moral reasoning skills, as well as surveys focused on lifelong learning, diversity issues, leadership, and psychological well-being.² Overall, these assessments measured the academic proficiency, attitudes, and behaviors of incoming freshman students as they entered the university. During spring 2008, 315 students from the original freshman cohort were retested using many of the same assessments administered in the fall semester. In the spring, students also completed the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), along with surveys aimed at measuring students’ first-year college experiences. Results from these assessments help identify practices, programs, and institutional conditions that contribute (or fail to contribute) to students’ intellectual and personal growth while attending the university.

Results from the fall 2007 Wabash National Study testing indicated that entering A&T freshmen exhibit an “aspirational gap”: most incoming students have very high life aspirations – they want to be professionals, own their own business, and earn large incomes, all potentially positive motivators for academic success – but they often fail to display either the skills or the dispositions that will help them achieve

¹ See <http://www.liberalarts.wabash.edu/nationalstudy> for extensive information about the Wabash National Study, participating institutions, assessment instruments, and research findings.

² For specific information on the assessment instruments used in the Wabash National Study, see <http://www.liberalarts.wabash.edu/studyinstruments>.

those aspirations – self-reporting that they don't particularly like to read, don't spend a lot of time studying, and don't like to have their ideas challenged, among others. Finding ways to close this gap is critical for helping North Carolina A&T State University students succeed.

In addition, results from the full-year Wabash National Study data show that A&T ranks low, relative to other institutions in the study, on a cluster of survey questions related to students' perceptions of classroom teaching and the quality of interactions with faculty. This outcome is important because Wabash research has shown that these questions, taken as a group, are positively related to students' personal and academic growth. Improvements in this area are likely to help close the aspirational gap noted above and help students align their academic skills, behaviors, and dispositions with their life goals.

The Wabash-Provost Scholars Program: Using Focus Groups to Dig Deeper

The Wabash National Study results, while providing a rich, institution-specific picture of the factors contributing to students' success, are best viewed as the starting point for further inquiry and analysis. To better understand the Wabash National Study results, a group of seventeen NC A&T undergraduate Honors students were trained to conduct focus group sessions and collect data on student responses to follow-up questions related to the Wabash National Study.³ During the spring of 2009 nearly 150 students were interviewed in 26 focus group sessions conducted by the Wabash-Provost Scholars. In addition, Drs. Hornsby and Simkins conducted three additional focus group sessions. Approximately two-thirds of the participants were female (103 females/46 males); approximately one-third were freshman students (53), a little less than one third were seniors (43), and the remaining participants were nearly evenly divided between sophomores (27) and juniors (26).

A small set of focus group questions were intentionally developed to provide a deeper understanding of the responses to Wabash National Study questions in the areas of classroom teaching and the quality of interactions with faculty members, two areas of concern highlighted in the results for North Carolina A&T State University. Gaining a better understanding of why students at A&T rate these areas lower than their peers at other Wabash National Study institutions is important for developing responses aimed at improving teaching, learning, and overall student success at A&T.

The focus group sessions included the following eight questions:

- a. Describe your experience with classroom teaching at North Carolina A&T – for example, faculty preparation, course organization, effective use of class time, and clarity of instruction.

³ Training included a full-day session on how to conduct focus group sessions and a workshop on IRB issues during fall, 2008.

- b. In your view, what kinds of things have been most beneficial in your success at North Carolina A&T thus far; what things have caused the biggest challenges?
- c. A recent survey of A&T students asked about the promptness of written and oral feedback by professors on coursework (for example, on quizzes, exams, or assignments). What, in your view, does “prompt feedback” mean in this context?
- d. If there is one thing that you could change about the way that your courses are taught, what would it be? How would this change help you as a learner?
- e. What types of academic preparation do you typically do outside of class? How do you prepare for exams?
- f. How do you know when your instructors are genuinely interested in you as a student? How does this impact your motivation and learning?
- g. What, in your view, makes a course academic challenging (in a good way) and signals high expectations?
- h. Think about your favorite college course. Describe one or two things that made this course your favorite.

The summary of student responses to these focus group questions makes up the bulk of this report. Initial work on the report was conducted in three collaborative “workshop” sessions, with groups of Scholars responsible for analyzing students’ collected responses to individual questions. Summaries of the responses were posted to a “report wiki” set up in Blackboard that allowed collaborative editing of the report. A final session was devoted to identifying cross-cutting themes that emerged from the full set of responses and developing recommendations to address the issues raised by the focus group responses. A subset of the Wabash-Provost Scholars edited this draft of the report based on the group summaries, cross-cutting themes, and recommendations developed in the face-to-face workshop sessions. Additional editing was done by Dr. Scott Simkins and Dr. Karen Hornsby.

2. Findings from the Focus Groups – A Question-by-Question Summary

a. What Students Experience in the Classroom

Passive Teaching Styles. Many students feel that professors teach in a way that does not match their learning styles. For example, one student noted that “professors use the same monotone style and do not have a lot of hands on examples for the students,” a sentiment that was echoed in a number of other student responses. Students want faculty members to vary their teaching style, increase the level of interactivity in class, and provide relevant real-world examples when possible to increase student engagement in the learning process.

Lack of Timely Feedback. Many students also expressed frustration over a lack of timely feedback on individual assignments (sometimes taking weeks to get back homework assignments or papers) and their overall standing in a course (e.g. failure to provide timely and accurate information on assignment grades in Blackboard or failure to use Blackboard at all as an organizing and communication tool in the course).

Clarity in Class/Course Structure. Students like structure in their courses. Comments range from “going by the book,” “going by the syllabus,” to just generally staying on task. One student said that she/he liked how her/his teachers were prepared for class, gave a daily outline, and usually completed all the proposed topics for that day. Students also appreciate when instructors provide a detailed course outline and follow it, because this allows them to prepare in advance for the next topic to be covered in class. Students indicated that they feel more prepared for class when professors clearly and comprehensively outline the course objectives and class schedule in the course syllabus.

Effective Use of Class Time. Many students reported that they had professors who: (1) came late to class and held students longer than the allotted time; (2) would hold ten minute classes and then dismiss students; and (3) would cancel class on a regular basis. With respect to professors who cut classes short, one student reported that the professor would frequently hand out work and leave. In reference to professors who went over the allotted class time, participants reported that they were often late for the next class and, eventually, they would walk out of the class instead of stay and be late for their next one.

Prompt and Continuous Communication. Communication is a vital component of student learning and many students believe that teachers do not put forth enough effort in this area. Blackboard is a very effective tool for promoting communication about courses but its use is highly variable among faculty members. One student emphasized how she/he had to instruct the professor on how to use Blackboard.

Interaction with Professors. Based on focus group responses, very few students believe that their professors go out of their way to ensure that the subject matter is being grasped in the course. At the same time, some students feel like teachers do not “push us to our greatest potential.” A frequently-expressed student complaint was that professors did not appear to be qualified to teach the course, and that as a result, the students felt unprepared for follow-up courses. One student mentioned that a part-time professor refused to offer office hours and told students that if they were struggling and needed extra assistance, that they should take a remedial course. Some professors are unapproachable and students felt like they “couldn’t ask a question without being put down.”

Specific Courses/Disciplines. In some cases students highlighted teaching/classroom issues associated with specific courses or disciplines. For examples, some students expressed a dislike for University Studies courses, partly due to a perceived lack of content knowledge by the professors, but also due to a

lack of understanding of how these courses are connected to their major – they are viewed by some students as a waste of time. Another area of student dissatisfaction mentioned regularly: instruction in math courses. Some math professors do not hold office hours as indicated; do not always check to make sure the students have grasped the material before moving on; and are not able to present ideas in different ways when students do not understand the concepts.

Additional issues:

- Students indicated that they prefer challenging courses that test them mentally and require them to practice their critical thinking skills to courses that rely heavily on memorization and recall.
- Many professors appear to be more interested in their research than in student learning.
- Some instructors regularly arrive late to class.
- Students expressed frustration trying to understand foreign professors teaching their classes.
- Some students felt that more things should be done to make the change from high school to college easier. They felt that teachers expected them to already understand how the entire college process worked.

b. Factors That Benefit/Retard Student Success at A&T

Beneficial Factors:

Advising. Students positively view faculty advisors “staying on top” of them when it comes to their studies and providing relevant information on tutoring, study sessions, etc. Advisors are also helpful in teaching students the importance of time management. A number of freshman students also noted the positive impact of Campus Life Mentors, who are there to talk about activities going on around campus, and serve as a “front line” advisor.

Social/Campus Life. Students find that social events around campus provide a break from the academic grind and a time to “refresh.” Friends and student organizations also add to students’ academic and emotional success. Overall, students feel that meeting new people and networking is easy on campus. New Student Orientation and AggieFest were singled out as particularly helpful/beneficial.

Professor/Student Relationship. Students gain a great deal during their one-on-one time with professors during office hours and also appreciate when professors go beyond what is required to assist them, such as helping outside of office hours. Teachers that show genuine interest in students were the biggest benefit to students.

Academic Resources. Students indicated that they liked having access to the library 24 hours a day and that the Student Center in Hodgin Hall was helpful for tutoring purposes. In addition, students like it when faculty members use

Blackboard to provide access to course materials, inform students of their course standing, and use web assignments to give students additional opportunities for practice with course material.

Barriers/Challenges to Success:

Aggie Shuffle/Frustration with Administrative Offices on Campus. Many students noted that the “Aggie Shuffle” – the run-around a lot of students face when seeking help – is a substantial barrier to their success. While the “shuffle” primarily deals with the Registrar and Financial Aid offices, students believe that the departments throughout the campus should develop a better communication method to keep students from having to go to multiple offices to get their questions answered. In addition, some students noted the lack of communication from these administrative offices and their slowness in getting paperwork processed.

Interaction with Faculty Members. The biggest academic challenges for students were lack of concern from teachers, language barriers in teaching, the overall skill level of teachers, condescending faculty attitudes, and failure to vary teaching styles.

Other Factors. A variety of other barriers/challenges were mentioned by students, but were not necessarily common across most/all of the focus group participants. A few of these are listed below:

- Getting to class from one side of campus to another is difficult.
- Current students feel that people come to A&T for the wrong reasons. A&T is “not a fashion show.” Students come to A&T for the girls/guys and to party.
- Students feel that security is not adequate on campus.
- International clubs are needed for international students.

c. Prompt Feedback Means...

Emails. According to students, when emailing a professor, they expect a reply back within 24-48 hours.

Assignments. A majority of students defined prompt feedback as returning graded assignments by the next class period. A number of students defined prompt feedback as returning an assignment on the day the teacher said it would be returned, whether that is the next class period or some time after that.

Exams/Quizzes. When it comes to exams and quizzes, students believe prompt feedback means returning corrected exams within a week. Some believe that if the exam is machine-scored, it should be returned the next class period.

d. Recommended Changes to Teaching

Effective Use of Instructional Technology. Students feel that their professors should use tools such as Blackboard's Gradebook more frequently so that they are better aware of their class standing. The participants preferred PowerPoint presentations to be used only as supplemental instruction, along with hands-on activity in class and discussion-based lectures. Some students prefer that their professors post class notes on Blackboard prior to class. A few students noted that they do not consider PowerPoint as a proper visual aid but suggested that other resources such as YouTube could enhance the learning experience.

Active Learning. Some students asserted that they learn better when presented with activities that incorporate all of their senses and allow them to interact with their peers. The response to group work was split; half of the participants favored group activity, while the other half disliked the idea because they felt as though the work load was not evenly distributed throughout the group. Even so, one student said that as a senior, "group work helped me get through my last year." The main issue with group work, as expressed by participants, is that students often receive grades that they did not earn.

Class Size. Many students felt that some of their classes were too large, making them less personal. Students felt that when the class size was smaller, the setting was more intimate and students were not able to hide among their peers, but were instead forced to learn the information for fear of being called upon. They also felt that there were more group discussions when in a smaller class setting.

Class Timing/Availability. Some students feel that classes should be offered at different times because sometimes certain courses interfere with each other across majors. They also mentioned that they would change the availability of classes. "There may be only one section offered of the course that you need, but the prerequisite course has multiple sections...leading to bottlenecks: too many students coming out of one course and not enough space for them in the next course."

Uniformity Across Course Sections. Students feel that there should be more uniformity across different sections of a course. One student said that "classes should teach the same thing and every class should have the same course outline." On a related note, participants mentioned that they wished that their professors would stick to their syllabus and follow what it said, as opposed to handing out a syllabus and not following it.

Textbook Use. Students want their teachers to actually use the book to teach rather than their notes. One student even said how "some accounting classes don't need books because students use computers and calculators most of the time."

Instructor Feedback and Formative Assessment. Another common issue was that students wished that their professors would offer more feedback and make

sure that most of the students understood the material before moving on to the next subject.

Testing. Students also wished that their professors had more than just one test and that tests should be more closely related to what was covered in class and what the professor said students would be tested on (and not material covered in other parts of the book). Students felt that professors should use more study guides to help them prepare for tests and that there should be fewer multiple choice tests. One student noted that “ multiple choice tests don’t really test what you learned but how well you can recall information.”

University Studies Courses. Students felt that University Study courses were too much work, even saying that they took more time than classes in their major. They also said that UNST project deadlines were too close together. Overall, students felt that the workload in University Studies classes was just too much, especially since these courses were not related to their major.

e. Typical class/exam preparation

Class Preparation. PowerPoint slideshows, readings from textbooks, and notes taken by students from their instructors’ lectures were the primary sources for class preparation. Some instructors provide study guides, group review sessions, or Powerpoint slides to assist students with class preparation.

Exam Preparation. A majority of students rely on reading their textbook as the primary method of studying for exams. In addition, many students reported that they did not study at all for their classes. Other popular study habits that were reported were cramming right before a test, asking the professor for help during office hours, or going to the library for peace and quiet. Some students indicated that they used PowerPoint slides and class notes to prepare for exams while other students did not find these types of class materials useful.

f. How Students know when Instructors are Interested in their Learning

The focus group responses indicate that students respond positively to professors who make an effort to learn their names, notice when they are absent or late to their class, and make an effort to address learning issues. Students also view that a teacher cares when students receive low grades for an assignment or exam and the professor reviews the subject that students seem to be unsure of. These actions show that instructors are interested in their students’ success and are willing to take time and effort to promote the knowledge of their students.

Other factors that students noted:

- providing both positive and negative criticism
- including students in the learning process
- a caring instructor is open, humble, friendly, and approachable

g. Academic Challenge and Signaling High Expectations

A course is academically challenging when instructors' tests promote critical thinking, application of course concepts, and writing (rather than memorization or multiple choice questions). Conversely, a course is *not* academically challenging when book/busy work is regularly assigned and students do not have to dedicate a significant amount of time to the course outside of class. Students do not mind the difficulty of a course as long as the course is organized and grades are communicated promptly so the students know their standing in the course.

h. Features of favorite college class

Passion/Relevance/Engagement. The focus group responses indicate that most students enjoy classes where the teacher shows passion for the subject and actively engages students in the learning process. Students recognize this when professors teach without a book or when they use outside research to get points across. Interactive teaching methods (e.g. class discussions) made the students more interested in the topic by allowing them to learn things that were completely unfamiliar to them. Students also like when skills and information obtained throughout the class were applicable to life, the atmosphere of the class was personable, and the students felt that their success was a priority, not just for themselves, but also for the professor. Typical comments: "The teacher makes it very interesting and engages each student, even though the class is large," "my instructor made it real...talked to us like adults" and you "could talk about anything with the teacher" which made it easier for students to get involved in class discussions.

Practical yet Challenging. Many students also appreciate when class "information is easy to understand and practical." For some, the information was easy to take in through Powerpoint lectures; others found that small class sizes were most convenient, allowing you to "get more one on one time with the professor." Still others felt that a challenge, including mind and thinking problems, made a class more enjoyable.

Monitoring Student Learning and Providing Effective Feedback. Professors should be attentive to what styles of teaching grabs most students' focus, as well as come up with ways to engage those who are lagging behind. Students appreciate when professors understand that everyone works at a different pace and make an effort to ensure that all students are on the same page before moving on. Professors show effort by having flexible schedules that allow students to get extra help. One student said a professor showed her/him "how to improve what I am doing rather than just criticizing it" and "gave opportunities to bring up your grade if she saw that you were struggling."

Real World Connections. Students enjoy classes more when instructors relate lectures to the real world. One student enjoyed a law class because of its real-world significance: "I can use the information if I am stopped by the police." Application to the real world and an understanding of future relevance makes

class topics much more appealing. “The professor laid out the application as you were learning it and showed how it would be useful later on. That made it more relevant to me.” Some students felt like receiving assignments outside of class “helps [them] to learn something by trying to do it on [their] own and forces [them] to read the book.”

3. Findings from the Focus Groups – General Themes

The “Aggie Shuffle” – Many students reported that lack of communication among administrative offices at NC A&T hinders their success. When administrative questions or problems arise, students frequently get “bounced around” from one office to another, in particular when dealing with the offices of Financial Aid, the Registrar, and Admissions.

University Studies Courses. University Study courses are often viewed as irrelevant by students – e.g. students claim that these classes do not pertain to their majors and connections to future courses are not made explicit during their University Studies courses. Students also conveyed frustration over University Studies professors’ perceived lack of course knowledge – especially in interdisciplinary courses such as Analytical Reasoning. The focus groups indicated that in some cases the teachers are learning right along with the students or the professors are simply teaching straight from the book without amplification or examples. The structure of the University Studies curriculum is not as clear to students as their major curriculum.

Communication Gaps and Difficulties. Students reported a variety of communication issues. There is a lack of meaningful communication between students and faculty members (email not returned in timely manner, assignment grades not promptly conveyed, etc.). Students also indicated ignorance about events, opportunities and activities going on within the campus (e.g. SGA/SUAB events, opportunities on campus for students to gain global experience). Communication may be adequate within a particular school/college, but is lacking across the wider campus community. Many students expressed difficulty understanding faculty whose native language is not English.

Instructional Preparation/Teaching: Classroom preparation and organization is a pervasive problem, according to students. Students reported that some professors come to class unprepared, class organization is often lacking, and class time is frequently used ineffectively. As noted by the students, when faculty members are organized, they learn more. Students also argued that professors need to teach the same curriculum across course sections and maintain similar demands and outcome expectations. Many students felt that teachers need to adopt more interactive teaching styles and vary pedagogies more rather than relying heavily on lecture. Additionally, students noted that faculty members do not always maintain their office hours and are not always available when they say they will be (in compliance with university policies on office hours).

Effective use of Instructional Technology. The focus group responses indicate that too many faculty members fail to make effective use of instructional technology, in particular Blackboard. Students would like to have ready access to their current grades, course materials, etc., in order to help them keep up and excel. In addition, students reported that faculty members sometimes don't know how to use available classroom technologies and have trouble playing film clips, getting sound to work with video, etc.

4. Recommendations Based on the Findings

Timely and Effective Feedback/Communication: Instructors should provide timely and effective feedback to students. All students should have easy access to up-to-date information on their course grades. Faculty should be required to post student grades in a timely manner via the Blackboard Gradebook tool. In addition, instructors should be required to hand back hard copies of all course assignments and exams. Students use these resources to study and prepare for future assignments and exams. Instructors should respond to student emails within 24 hours and return assignments/exams promptly.

Instructional Improvement: Teachers who teach well should share effective teaching methods with colleagues in their department, school, or college. Workshops to help professors learn new teaching techniques would also be useful. Faculty members need to adopt more interactive teaching styles such as structured discussions, real-world applications, or small-group activities. Student and peer teaching assessments should be used to ensure teachers are doing their jobs in a professional, productive manner. Instructors should be required to learn how to use Blackboard to provide course-related learning resources and up-to-date information on course-related grades.

Uniformity Across Course Sections: All professors who teach a given multi-section course should work collaboratively to ensure similar workloads, content coverage, and student learning outcomes. Students in different sections of the same course should have similar course experiences and preparation for subsequent courses. Provide a common course syllabus for multi-section courses, common tests, and joint study/review sessions for all sections of the course before major exams.

Customer Service Improvements: Students should be treated more like customers – provided with personable, accurate, and honest service. In particular, staff members in administrative offices should treat students like they appreciate their business; not like the students are an irksome bother. More staff training should be undertaken, focused on preventing students from being shuffled from one office to another without any resolution to their problems/questions. Provide customer service surveys in the Financial Aid, Registrar, and Admissions offices and encourage students/parents to complete these surveys as a means of providing feedback on service levels.

Communication Improvements: Update the “Student Corner” on the A&T website. Provide an “At a Glance” portion on the website for students that provides easy access to up-to-date information about intramurals, club activities, and campus activities.

- **Admissions:** Provide better information to students about what is expected, items needed for transfer, etc., perhaps in a series of one-page guides. Make sure that students know what they need before they come here.
- **Financial Aid:** Provide additional customer service training. In addition, we recommend that customer satisfaction surveys be conducted outside of Dowdy during peak use times.
- **Registrar:** Create a database of common problems that students encounter and the procedures to follow to rectify these problems. These Frequently Encountered Problems could be addressed on the university website, through leaflets, or by hanging tags in dorms.