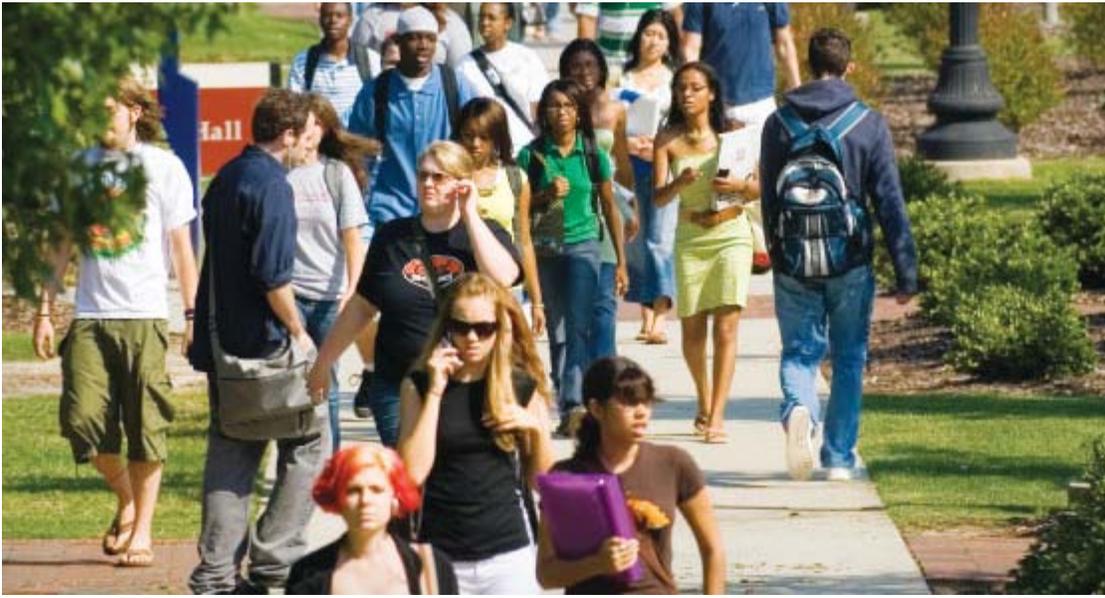


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Living. Learning. Communities.

BY [MIKE HARRIS](#) '93 MA, UNCG MAGAZINE ASSISTANT EDITOR
PHOTOGRAPHY BY [DAVID WILSON](#), ASSISTANT PHOTOGRAPHY EDITOR

Too many students do not stay in college. They do not graduate. UNCG is taking big steps to turn around that trend. Dr. Steve Roberson, dean of undergraduate studies, discusses the students and what UNCG is doing to help all of them succeed.

Today's undergraduates at UNCG — can you tell us generally about them?

At UNCG we have a really diverse undergraduate student body. The undergraduate population is around 31-32 percent minority-based. It's somewhere between 20 to 25 percent non-traditional-aged students. We have, depending on what statistics you look at, anywhere from 13 to 30 percent first-generation students. That's elusive to find out what exactly that statistic is, because we do not require students to self-report whether they're first generation (and the definition varies).

And our undergraduates' economic profile?

We have a good number of students who are economically disadvantaged. Almost 900 students are at or below the poverty level. Of that number, 30 percent of those would be eligible for entrance to (UNCG's) Lloyd International Honors College. One might think there'd be a direct connection between financial means and academic prowess, given the fact that more financial means as you are growing up will give you access to more enriching activities perhaps. However, the fact that nearly a third of these students come in with average SAT scores of 1200 or more disproves that notion. So, it is quite a gifted cohort of students. They have so much access to so many different ways of knowing, thinking and being.

What do you mean by that?

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UNCG/Glenwood mixed-use village

UNCG's strategic housing plan calls for nearly doubling the number of students using university-managed housing by the end of the decade. Chancellor Linda P. Brady notes national research links living on campus to academic success. The university, after discussions with the Glenwood neighborhood, will expand beyond Lee Street in the coming years.

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Strategies

To help all undergraduates reach their potential, several additional initiatives are under way including a Retention SWOT team, pre-health exploratory studies, improvements to

My sense is that when I left college, it still was much more an elite experience. I was a first-generation student. We were certainly at best lower middle class. However, there were scholarships for people who persevered, who worked very hard in high school, and who showed strong academic progress. But college was very elite — you found students to be much more homogeneous. The international experience was hardly there at all.

If you really want to rub shoulders with diverse ways of knowing and diverse experience and backgrounds, UNCG offers that in great abundance.

Let me ask you about student retention: undergraduates advancing to sophomore year, and so on, and graduating. Why is that such a major focus at UNCG right now?

Retention is important not just to UNCG, but nationally. Starting in the 1960s, the universities started to worry about access, because higher education was kind of an elitist activity. Doors began to be opened broadly. And we have done a brilliant job in the United States of providing a much, much enhanced access policy. What we did not worry about concurrently was success. We brought students in, we engaged them in the process, but we did not gear up in more significant ways in student support services. It is totally unfair to bring students into a system with high expectations and high standards and not provide the activities and acculturation opportunities and the academic support measures that will help promote success — particularly for first-generation students and for those who grew up not thinking that college would be a part of their lives.

What has happened nationally, the six-year graduation rate is under 50 percent now, which is a major decline in the past few decades. So the majority of students that enter universities now do not get a degree.



[Enlarge](#)

Dr. Steve Roberson

That's a remarkable statistic. This is seen nationally?

It's staggering. Now, there are exceptions, but if you flatten it out to a national average, it's less than 50 percent. And the four-year graduation rate is becoming less and less normative. Part of that is that students work, they go part time, they step out and come

back in, they go to different schools and take courses here and there. There are more and more non-traditional students. It is not the typical path of 18-year-olds going straight to college and finishing in four years. The paradigm has shifted.

At UNCG, we do better than the national average, but we do not do well enough yet, for our own hopes and desires.

In my opinion, there are no good, acceptable casualty rates for student success. Our job is to help every single student succeed. It is right that we are focused on it. It is right that the UNC system is focused on it.

I understand the UNC system may begin to provide its funding based on these rates?

I do hope that the UNC Board of Governors does in fact decide to tie funding to the 17 constituent campuses in part based on student success benchmarks. The benchmarks can take the form of retention — a measure

introductory math classes, among others.

MORE

of freshman to sophomore return rate. In the UNC system as well as at institutions nationally, that success rate of return looks at true freshmen who've come in, not transfer students who've come in. We tracked separately the true freshmen. In fall '09-'10, 76.9 percent returned for their sophomore year. Our goal that was set for us by the UNC system, by the fall of 2013, the rate will be at least 80 percent. So we have a ways to go. We are determined to get there. Not only because it is very likely funding will be tied to whether or not we get there, but more importantly because it's the right thing to do. Not only are we letting students into this portal of opportunity, but we are taking dramatic steps to make sure they succeed in getting through and getting out.

About those steps: Is one the growth in learning communities?

The learning community initiative grows out of the UNCG Strategic Plan that was embraced and adopted in 2009. And it calls for the creation of learning communities for all first-year students by 2014 or as soon thereafter as we can create them.

What we know, based on our own experiences at UNCG, is that the learning communities that we currently have — and we have several, notably Ashby Residential College, which is the oldest living-learning community in the state of North Carolina — is that freshman to sophomore retention rate at Ashby Residential College hovers at close to 90 percent. The freshman to sophomore rate overall at UNCG is 76.9, according to most recent data. So there is a dramatic, clear gain in Ashby Residential College. In Strong College, the retention rate is higher than that; it is above 90 percent. In Grogan, the retention rate is also higher. So in every experience we have on this campus, the retention rate is clearly enhanced and improved through this residential experience.

What is it about that experience that boosts those rates?

Here's what I believe — and this is based on national data. Once an institution grows beyond an undergraduate student population of about 4,000 students, it begins to lose that feel of intimate community bonding with the institution. You begin to feel like a number. What a residential learning community does is — an LLC, a living-learning community — what it does is it creates small villages, in an otherwise large university. And one begins to go back and recapture some of the chemistry of what it must have been like when it was Woman's College.

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