

 CASES FROM THE FIELD

# Improving Student Success Rates: Eliminating Performance Gaps

By Michelle Bombaugh and Thomas E. Miller

As performance-based funding models have become the new norm for allocating state funds, universities have begun to focus more on meeting and exceeding persistence and graduation metrics. For those universities that have already made substantial gains in these metrics by implementing changes that address large populations of students, attaining critical benchmarks may prove even more difficult. An organized approach that identified, addressed, and resolved individual student cases in a timely and efficient manner was critical in making the incremental gains to reach desired metrics at the University of South Florida (USF). In the last five years, USF has made significant gains in its four- and six-year graduation rates. In addition, USF broke its first-year retention rate plateau to reach its aspirational goal of 90 percent. This paper highlights the specific initiatives USF implemented in order to realize these gains.

The University of South Florida is a large, public, metropolitan research university comprising a main campus in Tampa and two separately accredited regional campuses in St. Petersburg and Sarasota. USF Tampa is the focus of this article. In 2017, USF Tampa reported an unduplicated headcount of 30,984 degree-seeking undergraduate students. More than 40 percent of the student body identifies as African American, Asian, Hispanic, or multi-racial. Historically, the university enrolled a summer/fall first-year class of more than 4,000 students. The fall 2017 first-year entrants boasted a strong academic profile, with an average SAT score of 1280 and high school GPA of 4.12.

## Performance-Based Funding and Preeminence Metrics

The state of Florida implemented a performance-based funding model in 2014 that evaluates institutions in the State University System (SUS) on the basis of ten metrics: Eight apply to most SUS member institutions, one is chosen by the board of governors, and one is chosen by the university's board of trustees. The state measures the institutions according to their overall success in each of the defined metrics as well as demonstrated improvement. The two metrics that drive USF's initiatives regarding student success are six-year graduation rates and first-year retention rates (Braxton *et al.* 2014).

In 2013, the governor of Florida approved the Career and Professional Education Act, which included the twelve metrics for designating a state research university as a “preeminent state research university.” Achievement of preeminent status has required the achievement of eleven of these twelve metrics, two of which are the achievement of at least a 90 percent freshman retention rate and at least a 70 percent six-year graduation rate. Classification of a university as “preeminent” merits the award of extra funding by the state. Because USF met at least six of the 12 metrics (nine, in fact), it was designated an “emerging preeminent state research university” with aspirations of quickly attaining “preeminent” status. In order to gain this status, USF needed to increase its first-year retention rate from 89 to 90 percent and its six-year graduation rate from 63 to 70 percent. USF therefore undertook to transform the culture of the institution to focus on student success and implemented various initiatives to increase these metrics.

## Student Success Efforts

### *First-Year Retention Model*

Early warning systems exist in proactive and reactive forms. Both are essential to identify students and potential strategies to help “ensure that the investments made to recruit and successfully enroll these students are not squandered” (Braxton, Hartley III, and Lyken-Segosebe 2014, 290). Since 2007, USF has been using an in-house persistence model to identify the 10 to 12 percent (400 to 500) of new first-year students at risk of not persisting to their second year of college. This proactive model was developed using logistic regression and is based on pre-matriculation data from the student information system (Miller and Herreid 2008). This model has been demonstrated to predict accurately: Those students who are identified as less likely to return persist at lower rates than do those who are more likely to return (Miller, Tyree, Riegler, and Herreid 2010).

Each year, the institution reworks the model based on the characteristics of those students who did not persist to their second year. Therefore, the predictive factors of at-risk students can change from year to year

based on who did not persist. For example, high school GPA (positively correlated with persistence), race/ethnic group (Asian and black students are more apt to persist than are white students), and college declared at the time of admission to the university (pre-nursing students were less likely to persist) have surfaced each year as the strongest predictors of first-year persistence. In 2015, gender and in-state residency were statistically significant. (Women were more likely to persist than were men.) However, these were not significant in any previous or subsequent models (Herreid 2015, Herreid 2016; University of South Florida, Office of Decision Support 2017). The most recent model that was applied to the 2017 cohort indicated that living in the residence halls, enrollment in Academic Foundations (first-year seminar), and participation in the honors college were positive persistence predictors. These had not surfaced as statistically significant in the previous two years (University of South Florida, Office of Decision Support 2017).

In fall 2016, USF incorporated the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE) data into the predictive model. Not only did this strengthen the statistical model, but it also identified which BCSSE variables were significant predictors of first-year persistence. For example, students who indicated on the BCSSE that they were unsure if they would graduate or would not graduate from USF were less likely to return. In addition, students who planned to work more than 20 hours per week while they were enrolled were also identified as persistence risks (Herreid 2016; University of South Florida, Office of Decision Support 2017).

Using pre-matriculation characteristics and survey data to predict risk of attrition allows support offices to start intervention efforts during the first few weeks of classes, when new students are in the early stages of connecting with the institution (Goodman and Turton 2017). Lists of at-risk students’ names are shared with academic advisors, Academic Foundations (first-year seminar) instructors, and housing and residential education personnel with the expectation that these entities will provide targeted interventions for the students (Hirsch 2001). Because all first-year students are required to meet with an academic advisor during their

first semester and prior to registering for their second semester, each student is guaranteed to benefit from at least one intervention. The intervention in 2015 that was most effective was that provided by resident advisors (Herreid 2016): As a result of their frequent contact with students, resident advisors are in a unique position to provide support to the first-year at-risk population (Braxton, Hartley, and Lyken-Segosebe 2014). USF adopted a residential curriculum that encourages intentional conversations between resident advisors and their residents. The conversations are themed based on the life cycle of the students during the academic year. When they know that a resident is at risk, resident advisors can tailor their conversations to best assist students. These conversations are not scripted in any way, so as to keep them natural. Housing and residential education staff were also provided with BCSSE data from individual students to inform and develop these conversations.

## BCSSE

In 2014, USF began administering the BCSSE to first-year students during orientation. The survey asks students to provide their names and university identification numbers so the institution can use individual survey results to assist specific students based on their responses. Individual BCSSE advising reports are generated for each participant; academic advisors use these to guide their advising conversations. This practice is congruent with the recommendation of Braxton, Hartley, and Lyken-Segosebe (2014) that advisors receive profiles about their first-year students that could disclose at-risk indicators. As mentioned, BCSSE responses are incorporated into the predictive model, and statistically significant survey responses are identified. USF can identify students for early intervention based on their individual BCSSE responses (Tinto 2012). USF has utilized additional items and responses to identify students who may need support from offices such as financial education, new student connections, and health and wellness coaching.

One office that was particularly proactive in how it used specific BCSSE responses for targeted and proactive outreach was USF's New Student Connections

(NSC). In fall 2016, NSC reached out to students who indicated on the BCSSE that they did not intend to or were uncertain that they would graduate from USF; NSC focused especially on those who also indicated that they did not have any close friends at USF. Those items on the BCSSE were found to be predictive in the in-house persistence model and to align with national research that indicates that students who do not make close friends in college may have "lower levels of social integration," which negatively affects persistence (Braxton, Hartley, and Lyken-Segosebe 2014, 301). These 244 students received up to six outreaches (email, phone call, text) from peer advisor leaders (PALs). The PALs engaged the students in conversations about how they were adjusting to college life, their USF experience, any struggles they were encountering, questions they might have, and how they were engaging on campus. Based on their responses, the students were encouraged to connect with a PAL for coaching to help them navigate any USF transition issues or barriers to their success. NSC tracked the outreach and shared results with appropriate campus partners and support offices.

## Case Management

Both the first-year retention model and the utilization of the BCSSE data solicited participation from multiple on-campus departments. However, until recently, these initiatives and interventions occurred in silos and without the capacity to share information about individual students. Thus, it was necessary to adopt a case management approach to coordinate the care of students as well as to determine a way to track the various interventions occurring on campus.

Education Advisory Board (EAB) research indicates that higher education institutions can adapt the theory of population health management to classify the risk level of students, formulate intervention strategies, identify a medium to monitor students, and assign care personnel to student cases (EAB 2016). By identifying low-, medium-, and high-risk students, higher education institutions can provide intentional communications and timely interventions on the basis of risk level. In addition, creating a case management care team allows

cross-functional departments to work together to efficiently assist high-risk students. The case management approach allows the institution to identify and provide the appropriate level of care for persisting students who may only need to utilize traditional campus resources, at-risk students who need more intensive monitoring and intentional resources, and high-risk students who need a care team to provide immediate and urgent interventions to quickly resolve student issues.

The Office of Academic Advocacy (OAA) was created in 2013 to focus on student persistence, progression, and graduation. It is housed in Undergraduate Studies but works closely with various departments and personnel to eliminate barriers to academic success. Two academic advocates are assigned to the current first-year class to monitor these students and ensure their progression to their second year. Once they have met this persistence mark, the students are reassigned to an academic advocate who monitors and assists their cohort through to four-year graduation. At this time, each first-year cohort from 2014 is assigned an academic advocate. Three advocates work with the transfer population, and one advocate assists students who fall outside of the four-year graduation metric. As a team, OAA provides case management for students who are identified as having potential barriers to persistence. The office uses a variety of data points to identify at-risk students, contacts students who may need additional academic support based on grade reporting, and coordinates the care of students who have a confluence of issues and require the assistance of several campus partners.

In spring 2016, the university formed a Persistence Committee to discuss systemic persistence issues as well as individual student cases. Typically, the committee meets biweekly throughout the year and weekly during peak times (such as the beginning of the fall semester, when there is an increased emphasis on enrolling first-year students). The Persistence Committee includes members from student affairs, academic affairs, enrollment planning and management, and decision support and serves as an advisory group providing additional secure information about students in their curricular and co-curricular settings and feedback regarding pos-

sible interventions. Several committee members work with OAA to provide support for individual students.

One way in which at-risk students are identified is through the use of predictive analytics software developed and managed by Civitas Learning Corporation. The program generates a list of first-year students and their persistence probability. From this, the list is narrowed to those who have a very low, low, or moderate persistence probability. The list is sent to Persistence Committee members for feedback on individual student cases. OAA receives all of the information and determines the next course of action. If a solution is not evident, the student is discussed at the Persistence Committee meeting. This approach allows critical departments at the institution to collaborate on individual student cases in order to provide the most effective and efficient level of care. This model helps facilitate communication and collaboration among departments that historically have worked independently of one another. By breaking down the silos of academic units, the institution minimizes duplication of efforts while enhancing the support it provides its students.

### **Systemic Solutions**

Persistence Committee members discovered a number of administrative circumstances or practices that had a negative effect on student persistence. Officials were highly motivated to review and try to modify them so as to reduce the negative impact on student persistence. Examples follow:

■ **Study Abroad:** Academic advocates learned that rising sophomores who were studying abroad and who were not taking any courses at USF looked, according to the Board of Governors definition, like dropouts. Leadership of the Persistence Committee connected with the official overseeing study abroad. Agreement that being in another country is itself a learning experience led to a decision that all students studying abroad should take a one-credit internship in the study abroad experience and document their learning experience in writing. That was instituted as an ongoing practice in fall 2016; those studying abroad are now considered continuing students.

- **The “Home Campus” Designation:** USF comprises three distinct, independently accredited institutions. When a student transfers from one campus to another, the record shows that student as a dropout from the departed campus and an incoming transfer student for the receiving campus. The “home campus” designation in the student information system is how that is tracked. Until fall 2016, students could independently change their home campus status; when that was discovered, a policy went into effect that required approval by an academic advisor before the home campus designation could be changed.
- **Alternative Calendar Courses:** Beginning in fall 2016, courses that were offered on an alternative calendar (starting as late as the middle of October) were actively marketed to students who were planning to leave or who had already left the institution. One such popular course that supported students seeking alternative career options was intended to attract students who were changing majors and in need of additional career development support. This allowed students who were interested in such courses to drop their existing courses but remain enrolled by adding a course at a later date.
- **Financial Education Programs:** The university has an office that provides a coordinated financial education program that is available to all students. Students who have demonstrated a particular need for a better understanding of personal financial matters might be particularly encouraged to engage that offer of help; others who have a record of decision making that has resulted in financial difficulties might be required to visit the office as a condition of financial support. (That financial support typically would come from one of the two resources described below.)
- **Student Success Fund:** The student persistence effort has access to an account derived from educational and general allocations and that is used to provide support to students in special financial need that involves a circumstance that is not continuing or recurring. Approximately 20 students receive funding support each year, and all of them continue to be enrolled. Candidates for support by this fund are referred by academic advocates, the student ombudsman, or another department in direct service to students. The referral is to a team of administrators who vet the candidates to ensure that their circumstances are appropriate for the fund. When the team recommends funding, the process generates funding to the student account.
- **Don’t Stop, Don’t Drop (DSDD) Account:** The DSDD fund is a USF Foundation account dependent upon donations from the university community and other sources. It is generally used to give financial support to students who are within one semester of graduation. As students get closer to graduation, they may be charged for enrolling in excess hours (more than 110 percent of the requirements for a particular degree) or lose access to financial aid. The same team that vets candidates for the Student Success Fund vets use of this account. Use of this fund as well as the Student Success Fund has been directly related to student persistence and success (Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson 2009).
- **Transcript Ordering:** The Persistence Committee has initiated a practice to identify the students who have requested that transcripts be sent to other higher education institutions. The objective is not to try to influence their decision making in any way but rather to coach their course choices so as to make the transfer experience as positive as possible and allow as many credits to transfer as possible.

### *Data Analysis on the Male Student Experience*

USF officials have long known that male students at the university graduate at a lower rate than do female students. Considerable effort has been expended to understand that phenomenon. One discovery was that there is little difference by gender in persistence rates to the second, third, and even fourth year. Yet the four- and six-year graduation rates have a considerable gap. There is a need for more study before solutions can be identified. Evidence suggests that men are not “help seekers.” Women are power users of counseling services,

academic support services, academic advisors, career counseling services, and other support at the university. USF officials also learned that male students were disproportionately involved in the Video Games Club, providing some insight about how male students spend their time. These data help USF officials better understand the male student experience; solutions are being developed to try to close the gender performance gap.

### *Staffing/Programmatic Support Solutions*

As part of the total commitment to student success that is championed by the highest level of the university's organization, many departmental initiatives have been developed to support student success. Described above are the efforts of the academic advocates and the Office of New Student Connections; other examples are described below. These initiatives were applied broadly and not analyzed for their independent effect. The general theme is that student success is everybody's business.

■ **Student Ombuds:** The Student Ombuds Office was created in spring 2015, when much of the focus on student success was just beginning. The Ombuds is a confidential, independent, informal, and impartial resource for students. Many visit the office to express concerns or frustrations with the university or their interactions with it. Quite often, the Ombuds is a last resort for students. It is quite common for the Ombuds to seek solutions or solve problems that result in students' remaining enrolled rather than departing or—in some cases—initiating litigation. The Ombuds is also a frequent referrer to the vetting process for the Don't Stop, Don't Drop account and the Student Success Fund.

■ **Campaign on Mental Health Literacy:** The wellness branch of the student success initiative has a campaign underway to improve the mental health literacy of the campus. The campaign was initiated in response to data that showed that mental health matters such as depression, anxiety, and stress were largely going untreated and were contributing to student success liabilities. Officials believed that much of that is related to the failure of peers and others who interact with students to identify the

symptoms of their mental health difficulties. The campaign is intended to generate more interventions and better treatment of those conditions and to thereby enhance student success.

■ **Residential Curriculum:** The USF residential education department has initiated a learning curriculum and learning outcomes associated with the on-campus housing experience. The intentionality of the curriculum has allowed residence staff to have purposeful conversations with resident students and to initiate outcomes-oriented programs for them. One of the effects of this effort is that residence hall staff have become the most effective of the three intervention options associated with the first-year retention predictor. The curriculum and the ways it is applied have had a clear and positive impact on student success.

■ **Career Emphasis in Freshman Seminar:** The freshman seminar at USF, Academic Foundations, has been expanded from a two- to a three-credit course, with additional material focused entirely on career planning and pathways and career readiness initiatives. Students enrolled in the course are encouraged to focus their experiences or become ready for a specific range of careers matched with their abilities and interests.

■ **Career Readiness Efforts:** In 2015, the university hired a person to work full time on creating new internship and career readiness experiences for students. This initiative impacts student success because the sense of purpose and the focus on outcomes give students meaning associated with the university experience and a tangible set of goals related to their time at USF.

### *Reorganization of Student Affairs*

In July 2016, USF integrated student affairs, undergraduate studies, and the Office of Student Success into a single student affairs and student success unit in order to streamline efficiencies and encourage collaboration among formerly disparate departments. This unit is headed by the vice president for student affairs and student success, who reports to the provost. The seven sub-

areas that report to the vice president are admissions, community engagement (career services, community engagement, and partnerships), enrollment, planning, and management (financial aid, registrar), undergraduate studies (faculty development, undergraduate curriculum, orientation, New Student Connections, and tutoring), community development, and student engagement (residential education, student involvement), health and wellness, and resource management and development. This integrated approach allows the unit to focus on a singular mission of student success and the notion that student success is a shared responsibility.

### ***Expansion of Wellness Services***

As mental health concerns at colleges and universities have increased at the national level and as counseling center usage has increased, USF focused on creating initiatives to provide proactive and reactive wellness support for students. In response, the USF Counseling Center expanded its hours of operation and offered evening appointments at remote locations on campus. The Counseling Center also observed that a population of students had concerns that could be addressed without the assistance of a licensed mental health counselor. To assist these students, USF offered training to professional staff on motivational interviewing and wellness coaching to support the task of problem solving with students in difficulty. These staff members were able to gain additional certification to become success and wellness coaches. Students can meet with a coach for support with goal setting, behavior modification, and holistic wellness. By outsourcing coaching to other professional staff on campus, the Counseling Center is able to focus on students who need more specialized and intensive care. This also allows for more students to get the services and support they need.

The Office of Student Outreach and Support (SOS) provides assistance to students experiencing wellness issues that may be adversely affecting their academic performance. Students and staff can refer students they believe are experiencing mental or emotional distress. SOS works with on- and off-campus partners to get the students the assistance they need. Food insecurity has

garnered national attention lately on college campuses. SOS manages the Feed-a-Bull Food Pantry that provides students in need with perishable and non-perishable food items. In addition to providing food, SOS connects students with resources to improve their circumstances.

The Center for Student Well-Being provides wellness education and services to promote students' physical and mental health. The Wellness Center is located in the student union and offers chair massages, basic health screenings, sexual health resources, sleep packs, free fruit, and a registered dietitian. It has expanded its services to a satellite campus recreation center integrated in a new residential area. This space is a designated Quiet Zone with massage chairs and nap pods.

### **Results**

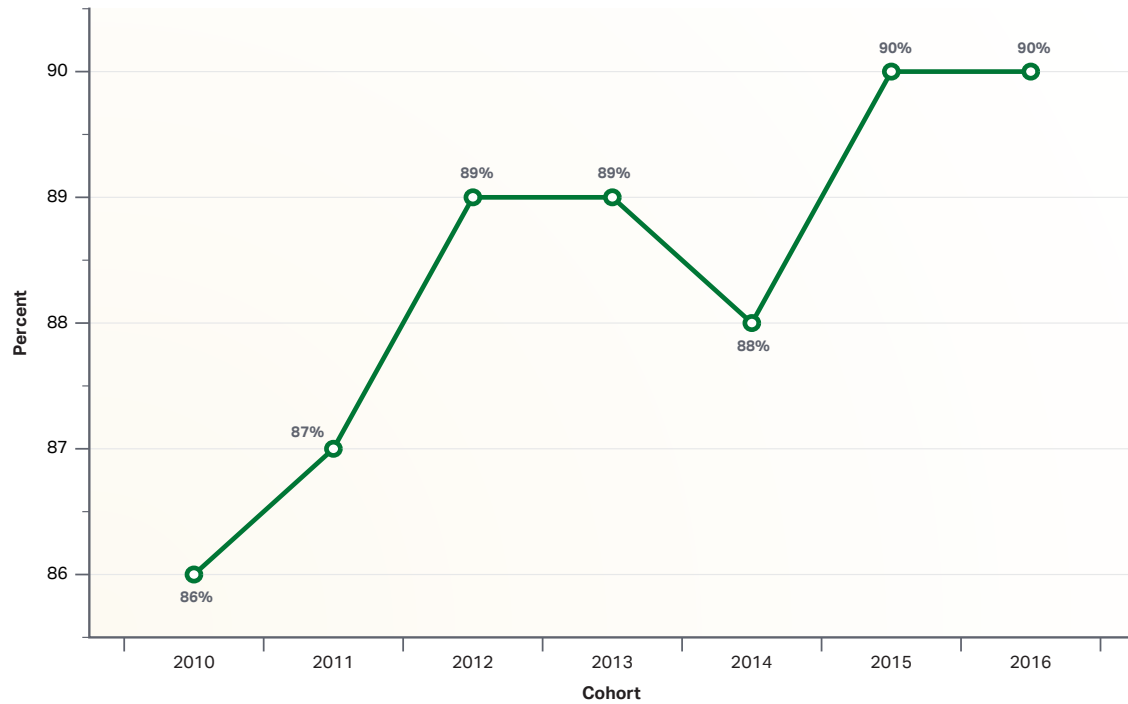
As a result of myriad initiatives implemented at USF, the first-year retention rate increased to 90 percent for the 2015 and 2016 cohorts (*see* Figure 1, on page 56). This can be attributed to the intentional focus on smaller populations of students in need and on individual student cases.

USF made significant gains in its six-year graduation rate, increasing from 51 percent in 2010 to 71 percent in 2017 (*see* Figure 2, on page 56). The shift to an emphasis on student success and the initiatives that accompanied this new focus are represented in this 20 percentage point increase over a seven-year period.

USF has also managed to close the achievement gap between students who receive the Pell Grant and those who do not. In 2017, the six-year graduation rate of Pell Grant recipients was 69.7 percent whereas the graduation rate of non-Pell Grant recipients was 71.2 percent (*see* Figure 3, on page 57).

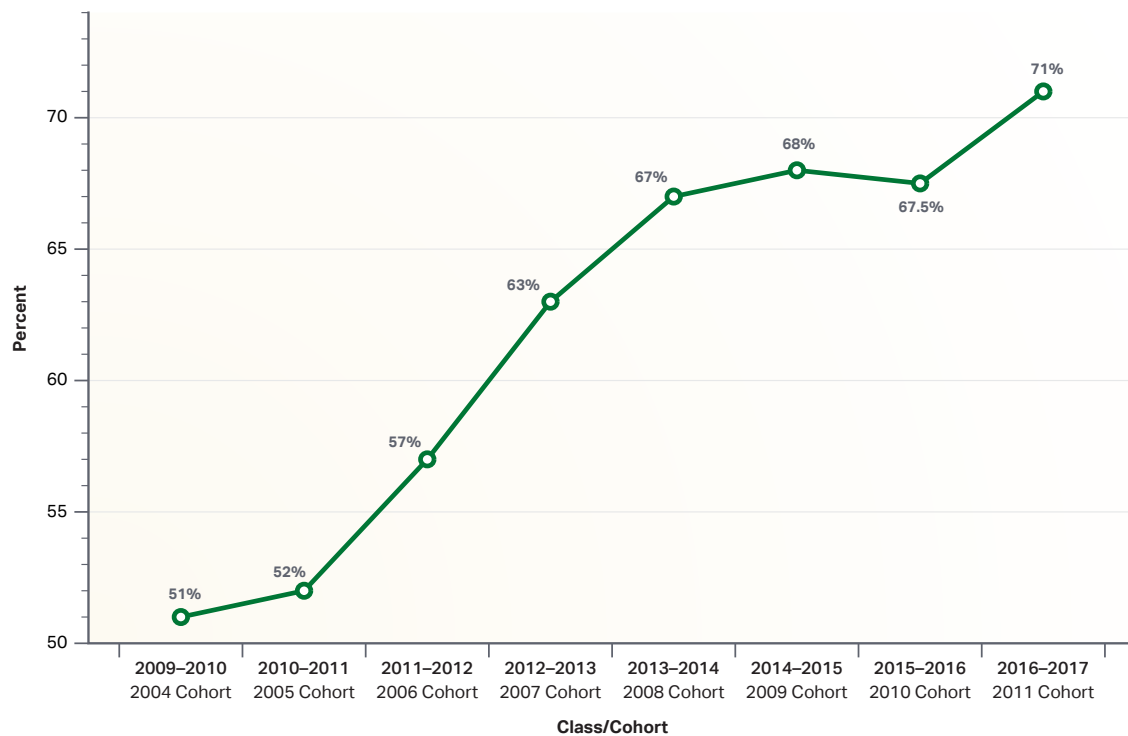
In addition, black, Hispanic, and Asian students from the last three cohorts graduated at higher percentages than did white students (*see* Figure 4, on page 57). In 2017, 87 percent of Asian students, 74 percent of black students, 74 percent of Hispanic students, and 68 percent of white students who entered in 2011 graduated in six years.

Although USF has eliminated the degree achievement gap in the areas of race and socioeconomic sta-



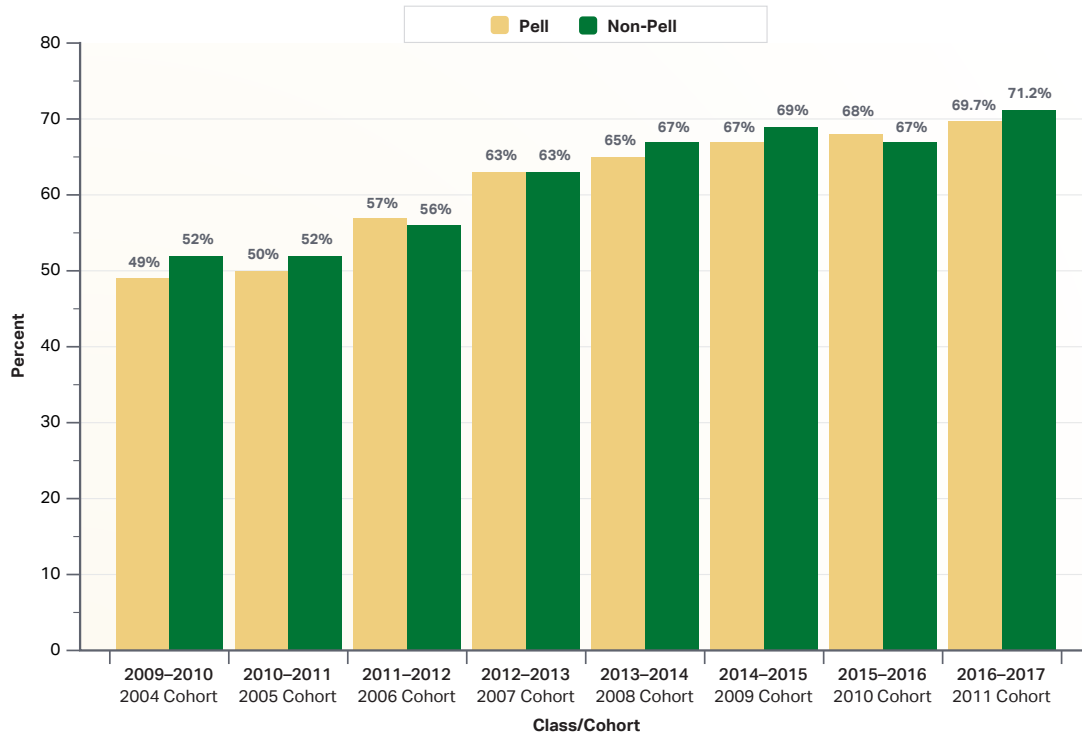
**FIGURE 1** ► First-Time-in-College Retention for USF 2010–2016

Source: Data reported follow IPEDS methodology but are based on internal preliminary data from University of South Florida, Office of Decision Support



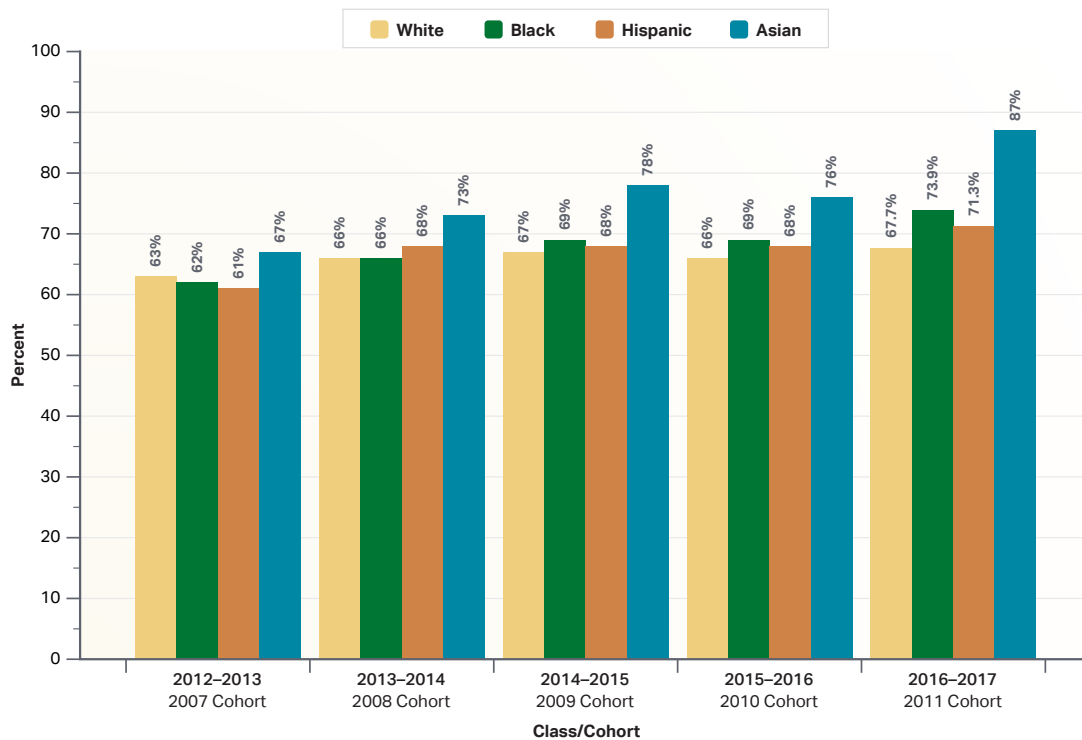
**FIGURE 2** ► Six-Year Graduation Rates from 2009 to 2016

Source: Data reported follow IPEDS methodology but are based on internal preliminary data from University of South Florida, Office of Decision Support



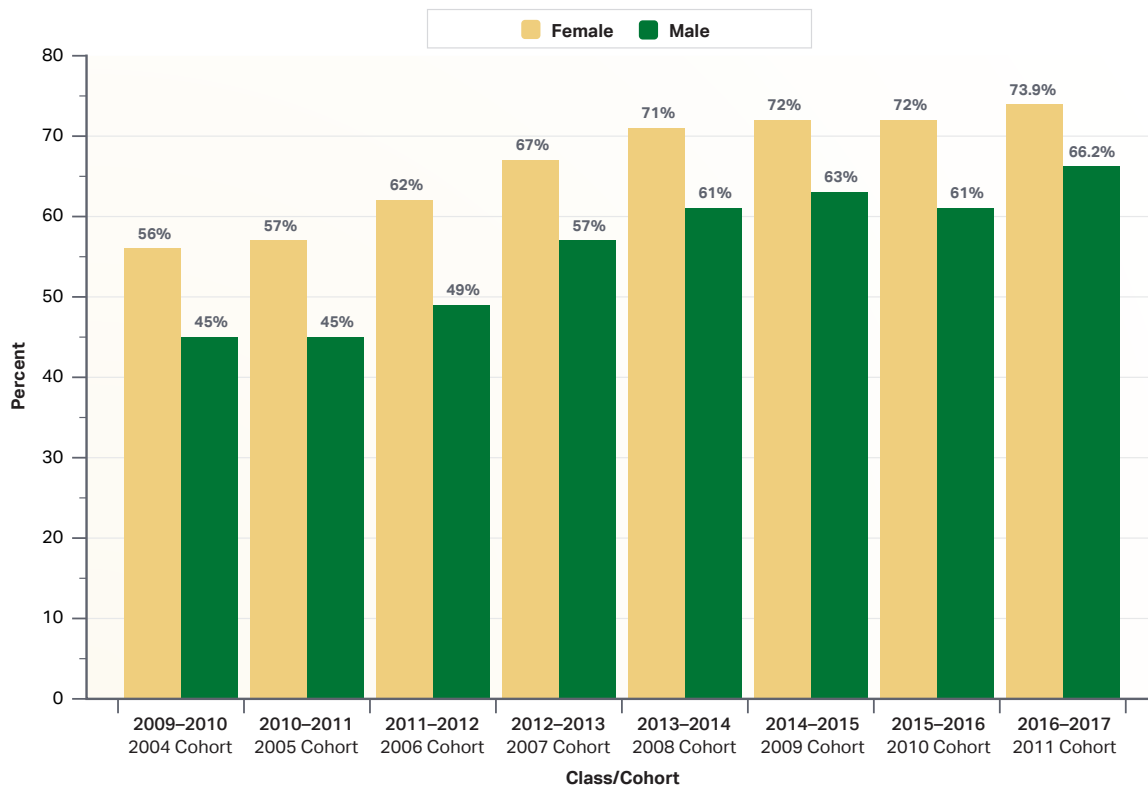
**FIGURE 3** ► Six-Year Graduation Rate, First-Time-in-College Pell and Non-Pell

Source: Data reported follow IPEDS methodology but are based on internal preliminary data from University of South Florida, Office of Decision Support



**FIGURE 4** ► Six-Year Graduation Rate, Ethnicity and Race

Source: Data reported follow IPEDS methodology but are based on internal preliminary data from University of South Florida, Office of Decision Support



**FIGURE 5** ➤ Six-Year Graduation Rate, Gender

Source: Data reported follow IPEDS methodology but are based on internal preliminary data from University of South Florida, Office of Decision Support

tus, the university is concerned about the achievement gap between males and females (*see* Figure 5). In 2017, 74 percent of the female population from the 2011 cohort earned their degrees compared to 66 percent of the male population. USF is concerned about this gap and is dedicating resources and research to determining potential causes and solutions.

## Next Steps

One of the challenges that USF faces is associated with changing targets for the metrics associated with performance-based funding and pre-eminence status. Another is that the state legislature has passed a bill that will make all three USF campuses align as one singularly accredited institution. That will complicate student success because the other campuses do not currently have the same measure of success as the Tampa campus. For that reason, in addition to increasing student success at those campuses, the Tampa campus needs to improve

its students' performance. USF Tampa's targets are a persistence rate of 93 percent and a six-year graduation rate of 73 percent.

One population that is currently underserved, partly because it does not affect a metric, is transfer students. USF intends to develop an FYR predictive model for transfer students and to help them attain higher levels of success. Another smaller population that should be better served is emancipated foster children. This population has a very low graduation rate, and university officials are confident that the institution could help them perform at much higher levels. Of course, as Figure 5 indicates, USF also must help male students succeed at higher levels. That is a priority.

The University of South Florida is proud of what it has accomplished over the past five or six years, and it remains committed to continuous improvement. Expectations are that USF will continue to make progress and improve the measure of its students' success.

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