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2025 SMU IN FOUR YEAR FOUR ANNUAL REPORT

# SMU In Four Year-Four Annual Report

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# Introduction

SMU's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), branded SMU in Four, supports the institutional goal of improving the retention and graduation of academically and creatively gifted undergraduate students from diverse backgrounds. The QEP aims to increase the first-year retention rate from 91% to 94% and the four-year graduation rate from 73% to 80% by 2025. A key focus of the plan is on improving retention and graduation rates by decreasing gaps in retention and graduation rates.

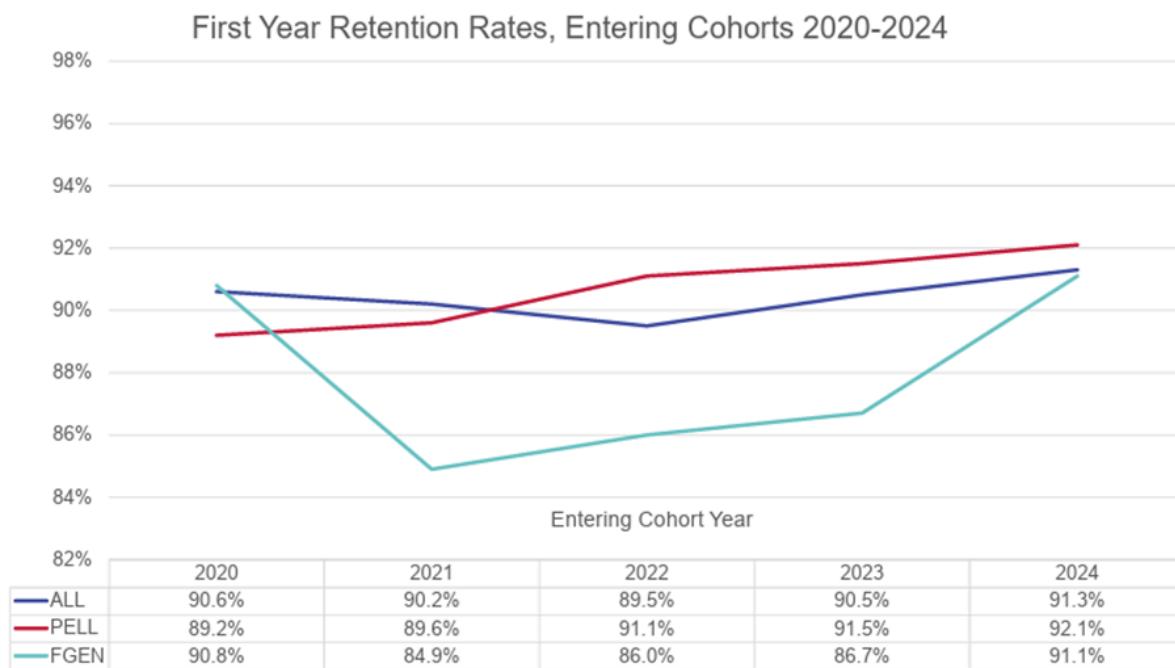
SMU has adopted a research-driven approach to improving student retention, focusing on progress toward degree completion, which is a fundamental measure of academic success. By enhancing the undergraduate learning environment and addressing equity gaps, SMU believes it can achieve its retention and graduation goals through improvements in three pillars of change: early alert, academic advising, and first-year and gateway courses.

# Overall Year-Four Progress

As the University concludes Year Four of its five-year Quality Enhancement Plan, we reflect on four years of sustained, institution-wide effort to improve student retention and graduation outcomes.

This work has included targeted initiatives, cross-divisional collaboration, and ongoing investments in student success infrastructure. At this stage of the QEP, it is essential to first assess our overall retention rates and the progress we have made in the fourth year.

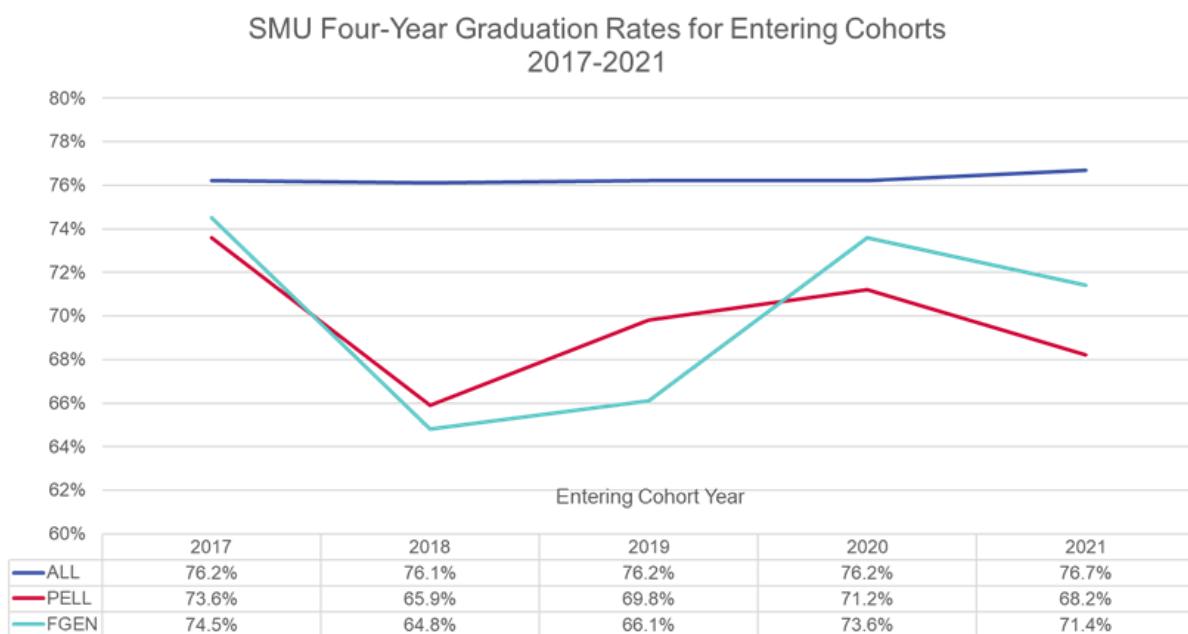
Figure 1: *First Year Retention Rates, Entering Cohorts 2020-204*



First year retention achieved a four-year high at 91.35%. More excitingly, equity gaps for PELL eligible and first-generation closed and now align or exceed the all-university average.

Four-year graduation rates also improved for the 2021 cohort overall while equity gaps for Pell eligible and first-generation students increased modestly after two years of positive change.

Figure 2: *Four Year Graduation Rates, Entering Cohorts 2017-2021*



# Pillar Updates

## Early Alert Pillar

In Year 4 the Early Alert Pillar working group was officially decommissioned following a strategic review of its function and impact. Core responsibilities previously housed under this working group were thoughtfully integrated into existing campus structures, specifically within the Office of Student Success and Retention, the University Registrar's Office, and the network of academic advisors. This integration aimed to streamline processes, reduce duplication of efforts, and better align with data-informed best practices for student success following the end of the Quality Enhancement Plan.

Leadership for this cross-functional collaboration now rests with the Director of Student Success and Retention, who regularly convenes stakeholders to coordinate efforts and monitor effectiveness.

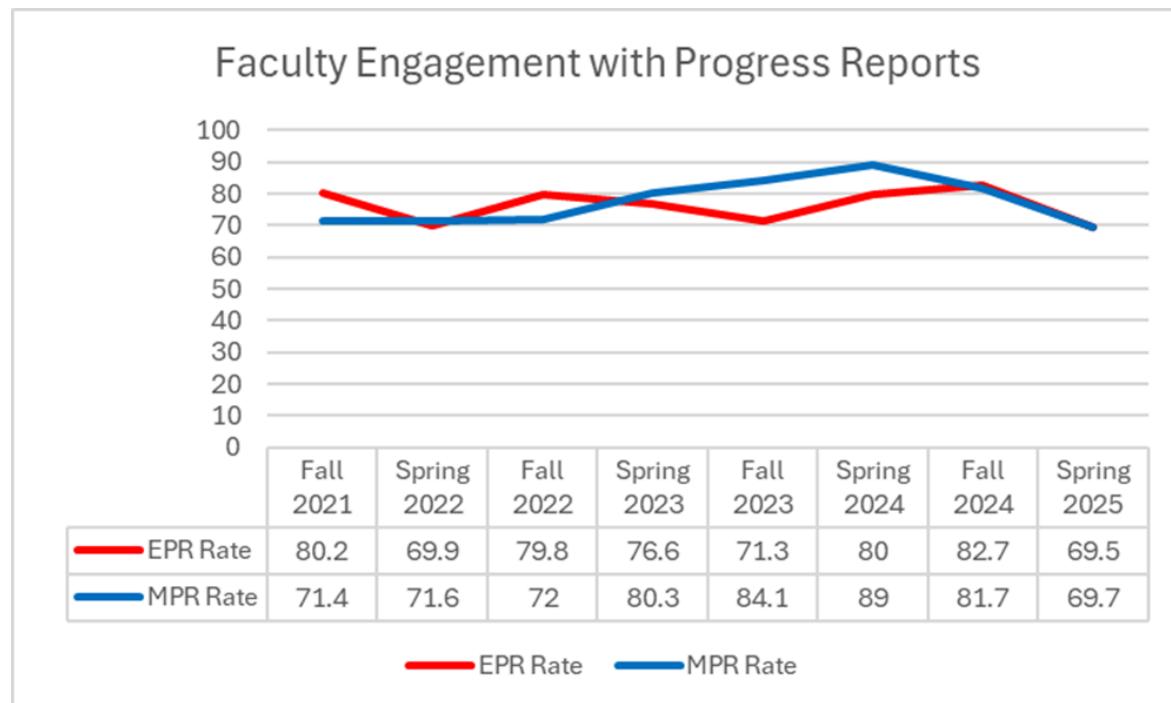
This new structure allows for more nimble and targeted interventions and the inclusion of other early alert tools into the semesterly calendar like zero login activity, attendance tracking (e.g., my.SMU, Qwickly), and the utilization of academic gradebook data from the learning management system. In addition, specific groups of students continue to be monitored through additional tools such as DropOut Detective.

After a comprehensive data analysis conducted over several academic terms, it was determined that neither Early Progress Report (EPR) grades or Mid Term Progress Report (MPR) grades were reliable predictors of key student success outcomes, including retention or end-of-term GPA. On the other hand, MPR reports of “Deficient” are a strong predictor of credit hour completion and provide students and advisors with critical information in determining which courses might need to be dropped. Additionally, despite concerted efforts over the last four years, we have had minimal success because faculty participation has not increased. This year’s participation, for instance, saw a considerable drop in faculty participation, despite the same communication plan being used for deans, department chairs, and individual faculty.

Given the limited impact of EPR grade reports, SMU transitioned to a new approach at the 6th week of the semester to focus exclusively on attendance. We believe this shift reduces the burden on faculty to calculate a grade, while still providing students and advisors with critical insight into their course attendance during the first part of the semester. These insights offer a more actionable and immediate view into which students may be struggling to connect with their coursework. Faculty will continue to report a grade-based report for Mid-term reporting using the following categories: Not Deficient, Deficient due to Testing, Deficient due to Attendance.

Significant efforts have been made to increase faculty completion rates at both points in the semester. These efforts include increased communication to faculty and providing department chairs with real-time data to identify non-responders so that they can encourage completion. In addition, department chairs and Deans have been provided with data on consistent non-responders with the expectation that they would address the behavior with these faculty. Unfortunately, little progress has been made, and some terms show a precipitous decline in faculty engagement (see Spring 2022 and Spring 2025 for EPR reports). With the exception of Spring 2024 when almost 90% of faculty submitted their mid-term progress reports, we have failed to meet the reporting goal of 90% set by the Early Alert Pillar working group.

Figure 3: *Faculty Engagement in Early and Mid-Term Progress Reports*



## Year 5 Goals for Early Alert Pillar

Given the lack of consistent progress in faculty completing EPR and MPR reports, we have turned our attention to alternative ways to gather information from the LMS. During Spring 2025, we examined the alignment between grades recorded in the Canvas gradebook and the official final grades submitted in my.SMU. This analysis concluded that alignment between MPR reports and Canvas grades of 3 credit undergraduate courses ranges from 48% - 69% by each letter grade reported. This low alignment is attributable to unknown grading scales and the total points a professor uses to determine a student's final grade. Therefore, modifications to LMS data exports are needed to move the MPR process from my.SMU to Canvas.

Even though the data maintained in the Canvas gradebook has limitations, we are moving forward a critical goal to continue to evaluate the utilization of data found within the learning management system in order to reduce the need for faculty to complete additional reports outside of Canvas. The real-time integration of the LMS gradebook data with the SIS is a critical step in meeting this goal. The Data Warehouse Team has been tasked with this goal. The Data Warehouse Teams consists of members of the Office of Information Technology (OIT), University Decision Support (UDS), and Directors in the Division of Student Academic Engagement and Success.

At the end of Year 4, the team underwent a collaborative exercise to ensure all Student Information System (SIS) data was validated in the data warehouse.

Expected to conclude before year 5, this will create a general-purpose dataset that can be augmented with other factors indicative of engagement.

This recommendation would be contingent upon continuing to communicate with faculty at key points in the term to encourage gradebook updates, ensuring that students and advisors have access to timely and holistic academic performance information. As part of this review, we will also evaluate the use of Qwickly attendance tools alongside EPR submissions and Canvas attendance tracking.

Looking ahead to Fall 2025 and Spring 2026, we will collect Canvas gradebook data at the close of the EPR and MPR periods and again at the end of the term to assess whether faculty maintain up-to-date grades throughout the semester. Based on these findings, we will finalize a recommendation regarding the continuation of early and mid-semester progress check-ins and evaluate their contribution to student retention models. Therefore, making a final determination on these early alert tools in Year 5 of the QEP.

Additionally, for Fall 2024 and Spring 2025, we will analyze the relationship between mid-year student self-reports and academic outcomes, including course performance and course withdrawal patterns. We will also examine whether these self-reports correlate with students' reported sense of belonging. If data are insufficient to draw meaningful conclusions, we will document that finding and discontinue the measure accordingly.



## Advising Pillar

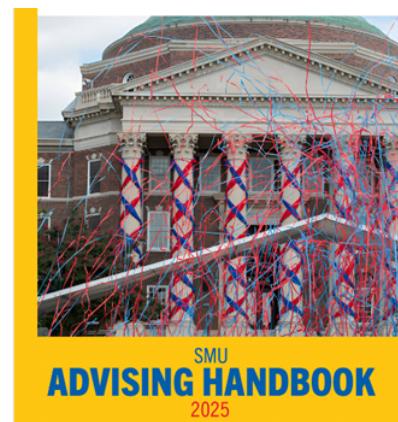
A key outcome of Year 4 Advising Pillar was the advancement of a professional advising model, building on the Year 3 recommendation to improve retention and support timely degree completion. Efforts in Year 4 centered on developing the formal structure for this transition and fostering cross-campus collaboration to ensure alignment in the student experience and consistency in tracking.

The shift to the professional advising model was formally announced in Spring 2025, along with the launch of a website ([smu.edu/advising](http://smu.edu/advising)) to share updates and resources across campus.

Effective June 1, all incoming students will be assigned a professional advisor in one of four advising units.

The Year 3 Advisor Survey demonstrated needs for more training across three areas of advising: what duties advisors are expected to perform, what information advisors are expected to know, and what tools advisors are expected to use. We organized the Advising Handbook to fill these gaps in advisor knowledge, seeking to integrate these three areas so that advisors not only knew how to complete particular tasks, and with what tools, but also why such responsibilities are important to the position.

Through the handbook, the pillar has produced a guiding document that will standardize practices – such as use of Advising Notes, Degree Planner, and SMU’s appointment scheduling system – for four different advising offices transitioning to four-year advising.

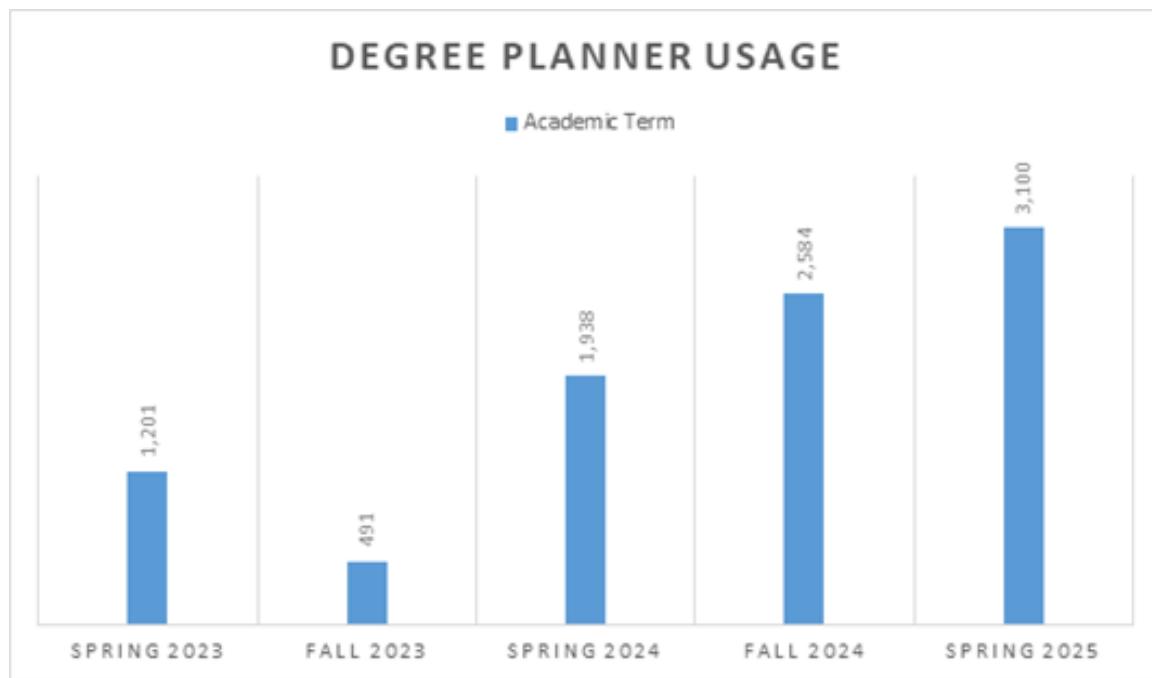


An audit of additional advising tools, including Canvas course participation and LibCal scheduling, showed growth in use compared to prior years. Of 147 major advisors, an additional 43 advisors used the Canvas course, bringing the total to 121 who have accessed the training materials. Nineteen additional advisors began to use LibCal for student appointments, for a total of 64 major advisors using the platform. This suggests advisors are increasingly engaging with available resources, while also highlighting the need for continued education and training. The hiring of a new director for the University Advising.

## Degree Planner Usage

Continued use of Degree Planner by advisors and students remains a priority. Student adoption of Degree Planner is important because it helps students understand their time to degree, helps departments with seat projections, and aids advisors with student appointments. Originally launched in Year 2 with modest participation continuing in Year 3, engagement continued to increase in Year 4. The goal is to grow usage from 26% of the undergraduate student population in Year 3 to 50% by Year 5. The adoption rate with a high of almost 42% this year.

### *Degree Planner Adoption*



Degree Planner 2.0 was adopted in Year 4, and offered both usability and speed enhancements particularly for student users. The Office of Information Technology will engage with an outside PeopleSoft consultant that specializes in performance testing. The engagement in the summer of 2025 will include performance testing for enrollment and Degree Planner.

## *NSSE Data*

The overall response rate for the 2025 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) was 27.9 percent, representing 791 total responses. This included responses from 22.5 percent (260) of first-year students and 19.9 percent (531) of seniors. This was the third and final planned administration of the NSSE as part of SMU in Four assessment efforts, following administrations in 2019 and 2022. NSSE was an original indicator for our SMU in Four planning efforts to direct our focus towards advising. Having two additional years of data from the advising module provides us with an opportunity to check on progress from the beginning to the end of the project.

A majority of first-years and seniors surveyed in 2019 reported that advising was not as helpful or comprehensive as intended. However, the 2025 results were much more encouraging, showing improvement in nearly every area of advising and student support. From this year's responses, several themes emerged:

- First-year students reported significant gains in the helpfulness of advising resources, particularly in career services, success coaching, peer mentoring, and disability services. They also noted more frequent and meaningful discussions with advisors about academic goals, majors, co-curricular engagement, and special opportunities.

- Advising practices improved for first-years, with advisors more likely to follow up, listen actively, and demonstrate care for student well-being.
- Senior student results were more stable, showing modest gains in some areas such as career services and success coaching, but little or no change in others. Some measures, such as proactive outreach, even declined slightly.
- Overall institutional support (wellness, career advising, academic success, and social support) was rated higher by first-year students than seniors, highlighting stronger engagement earlier in the student journey but a need for enhanced support as students near graduation.

Taken together, the data suggest that SMU in Four has been most effective at strengthening the first-year advising experience, a critical factor in retention and persistence. At the same time, the findings point to opportunities to enhance senior-year advising and wellness support, ensuring students receive sustained and equitable support throughout their academic career.

The advising module continued to be a key area of focus in Year 4. We announced a phased-in approach beginning in Fall 2025.

At the time of this report, 2,798 enrolled pre-majors, all of whom have a professional advisor, and 2,779 more will also have a professional advisor upon declaration.

Of the declared majors, 1759 are assigned to a faculty advisor, with no staff advisor. 869 of these students are expected to graduate by May, leaving 890 next year assigned only to a faculty advisor.

In reviewing data across all three survey administrations, we recommend that we compare the Fall 2025 or before (old advising model), Fall 2025 and forward (professional advising) in Spring 2027.

## **Year 5 Goals For Advising Pillar**

In Year Four, SMU made significant progress toward expanding and formalizing professional advising across the undergraduate population. As part of this effort, the Advisor Permissions Project advanced the development of a streamlined onboarding, training, and access process for new professional advisors. While this work remains in progress, the Advising Pillar anticipates completing all workflow and permission validation components by the conclusion of Year Five.

Looking ahead, SMU aims to increase the number of students served under the professional advising model to 100% of the undergraduate student body

By the end of Year Five, all students admitted after Fall 2024 will be placed with a professional advisor, and many continuing students will have transitioned. As the professional advising model continues to be phased in, this transformation is expected to have a substantial and positive impact on the undergraduate student experience by promoting more consistent, accessible, and developmentally aligned advising support.

In alignment with these efforts, the Advising Pillar also aims for more than 50% of eligible undergraduates to complete a Degree Planner in both fall and spring during Year Five. Oversight of the Degree Planner initiative is expected to transition from the Office of General Education to the Student Advising and Academic Success area to ensure long-term coordination, sustainability, and integration beyond the QEP period. Ongoing work will continue to focus on increasing advisor adoption of the tool in advising meetings and enhancing the supporting technology to further strengthen advising effectiveness and student engagement.

## First Year and Gateway Pillar

Year four realizes the need to continue monitoring and educating faculty leadership on DFW rates, both for courses that have undergone redesign and those that have not. Increased awareness and regular access to this data are essential. Department chairs should be consistently reminded of how to locate, interpret, and utilize DFW data to inform curricular decisions. With the launch of the QEP, SMU identified 25 courses as both high enrollment and high DFW outcomes. Working with the Faculty Steering Committee, the Center for Teaching Excellence identified specific courses from this list to redesign. Departments were provided with extra investment in teaching faculty and an opportunity to work with the CTE to rethink critical aspects of their course design.

The two-course sequence in Economics was the first recipient of the investment, with the majority of time spent addressing DFW rates in Introduction to Micro-Economics (ECO 1311). We have not seen a change in student outcomes.

The second course chosen was Introduction to Chemistry (CHEM 1303). With the implementation of a required placement exam, the Chemistry department has seen a significant decline in DFW for this course. The department also continues to allow students who are not doing well after the first exam 1 to move down to CHEM 1302.

It is unclear to what extent the placement exam or “moving down to CHEM 1302” is positively impacting the DFW rate. Additional analysis needs to take place to help Chemistry understand the true impact of its placement exam.

In Year 4, the approach was changed to focus on a general education foundational requirement rather than a specific course. Critical Reasoning was selected because it is one of the highest-enrollment courses completed by all students at SMU, and we had observed a significant gap in outcomes between first-year and transfer students. In addition, the university wanted to offer students more discipline-specific courses to satisfy the foundational requirement. After completing the course redesign process, two new courses were launched in Spring 2024, and another two courses were added in Fall 2024. There are currently 5 courses in which students outside of the honors program can complete this requirement.

Course	Fall 2022	Spring 2023	Fall 2023	Spring 2024	Fall 2024	Spring 2025
<b>WRTR 1313</b>	5.3%	3.9%	7.1%	5.7%	8.7%	4.1%
<b>JOUR 1313</b>	-	-	-	21.4%	12.0%	7.0%
<b>CCPA 1313</b>	-	-	-	0.0%	0.0%	5.9%
<b>MUHI 1313</b>	-	-	-	-	52.9%	22.2%
<b>ENGR 1301</b>	-	-	-	-	8.0%	6.3%

Another notable number comes from MUHI, with a 52.9% DFW rate. This is most likely due to the significant number of both non-major and transfer students who took that course. Based on the discussion held with faculty by the Director of Critical Reasoning, it is suspected that the large difference between the Fall 2024 and Spring 2025 DFW rate is due to the student population. More time and data are needed in order to make a full assessment of DFW rates within the new CR courses. The leadership of Student Academic Engagement and Success will hold formal discussions with Critical Reasoning faculty of these new courses to address student choice and access issues resulting in some sections with low enrollment.

In order to continue building faculty awareness of the importance of possible differences in DFW rates by groups of students, we are piloting a new report for Fall 2025 for a group of faculty who primarily teach new students each fall. Faculty will receive an overview of the demographic characteristics of the students in their courses.

Faculty will now be able to see how many first-generation, international, transfer student athletes will be in their upcoming courses. The faculty will now know which students have these characteristics but can understand that section one of a course has 25% transfer students while section two of a course has no transfer students. Sharing the information in advance of the semester will allow faculty to make any adjustments they believe are necessary based on the group characteristics of the students in the course.

Consider expanding course redesign opportunities using a small cohort model centered around a shared curricular element. The Spring 2025 Civic and Individual Ethics (CIE)-led redesign initiative demonstrated strong faculty engagement and meaningful investment in course quality and seat availability. Participants actively used the provided resources and were responsive to demand projections. Continued monitoring of seat availability and enrollment trends will be essential as these redesigned courses launch in Fall 2025. The course redesign of CIE added 5 courses with a required minimum of 25 available seats for Fall 2025.

The Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE) has embedded the concept of the Student Engagement Institute (SEI) into its annual programming. CTE has also expanded its reach by developing CTE Liaisons, who will bring insights and practices from the SEI back to their home departments and schools, helping to scale impact across campus.

## **Year 5 Goals for First Year and Gateway Course**

Continue to monitor and educate faculty leadership on DFW rates, both for courses that have undergone redesign and those that have not. Ongoing access to and awareness of this data remain essential. Department chairs should receive regular reminders and support in locating, interpreting, and using DFW data to inform course-level decisions.

Building on efforts that began in Year 3, departments have continued to implement intentional, course-based academic interventions. Placement exams in Chemistry and Math have supported students in beginning their course sequences at the appropriate level. In 2024–2025, Chemistry administered 572 placement exams, while Math 1308 and Math 1337 administered 1,005 and 776 exams, respectively.

In addition, the development of common Canvas course templates and shared supplemental materials has helped ensure equitable access to course resources.

Continued monitoring of academic interventions in Chemistry and Math, as well as expansion into additional high-impact areas, will be a priority for Year 5.

Informed by findings from the Director of Critical Reasoning, Year 5 efforts will explore how discipline-specific Critical Reasoning (CR) courses can be further leveraged to support retention and a sense of belonging. Data from existing CR offerings indicate that courses grounded within a major or pre-major community foster higher engagement and create a more meaningful learning environment for students. Moving forward, departments will be encouraged to identify opportunities for attracting major and pre-major students into CR-designated courses within their disciplines. These courses not only build a stronger sense of academic community but also provide content that supports success in future coursework.

## **Equity Gaps Working Group**

The charge of the SMU in Four Equity Gaps Working Group was threefold. First, the Working Group was responsible for reviewing data related to SMU in Four, particularly in connection with SMU in Four's three pillars and overall student retention in Terms 1, 2, and 3. Second, the Group was tasked with making recommendations to SMU to close identified gaps related to racial groups, First Generation (FGEN) students, and Pell-eligible students.

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The Working Group's key recommendations stem from 5 primary points of assessment: (1) Population vs. Engaged Students, (2) On-Time Enrollment and Withdraws, (3) Common Curriculum Reading, (4) Student Persistence and A-LEC Usage, and (5) D, F, and Withdraw (DFW) Rates and A-LEC Usage.

The Working Group recommends surveying groups that serve, or may serve, a significant number of Pell-eligible students, to assess reasons for the decline in A-LEC usage among this population (e.g., awareness, scheduling conflicts, lack of resources, etc.). Further, the Group recommends analyzing the causes for higher university withdrawal rates among Spring-admitted students compared with Fall-admitted students.

Concerning the Common Curriculum Reading, the Group suggests assessing the number of CIE and Community Engagement (CE)-tagged courses by school to evaluate the equity of course access, especially by comparing Cox with other schools. To enhance promotion of A-LEC services, the Working Group suggests increasing the advertising of A-LEC services on campus, especially during New Student Orientation. (The A-LEC and Academic Skill Development (ASD) staff have already begun efforts, including investing in a Quick Video Series on YouTube and increasing website resources.)

Finally, the Working Group recommends exploring new partnerships with faculty to increase student participation in workshops and tutoring, including the possibility of embedded tutoring within BIOL 3304, based on the high DFW rate, low count of students coming to tutoring, and consistency of instructors in this class.

These 5 key recommendations reflect the data analysis of the Equity Gaps Working Group in response to its charge and identify practical enhancements for student engagement and success within the division of SAES.



# Conclusion

Year 4 marked pivotal transition from Initiative to institutional integration. We achieved several key milestones: the Early Alert Pillar was successfully sunset with its core functions embedded in permanent structures. Additionally, the professional advising model was formally launched, creating a more consistent advising experience for students. We also made progress in course redesign and equity-focused analysis to improve student outcomes and close success gaps. Usage of tools like Degree Planner and LibCal also increased, and new advising standards were introduced to support advisor development and student engagement.

In the final year of SMU in Four, we will continue to embed initiative efforts within formal office and committee responsibilities. Priorities include finalizing data warehouse integrations, evaluating the effectiveness of the professional advising model and deepening institutional commitment to equity and access. In this final year, final recommendations for continued Early Alert tools will be made, as well as expectations for DFW Report review and follow-up. Through iterative improvement and shared accountability, we will carry forward the momentum built over the past four years into long-term impact for our students and institution.

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