

**Comprehensive Persistence and Completion Plan:
Supporting our Mission of Inclusivity
Knox College**

Overview of the Quality Initiative

Knox College is a small, private, residential liberal arts college in west-central Illinois with an enrollment of approximately 1,400 students. The current student body is drawn from 42 U.S. states and 45 countries; our first year classes enter with an ACT mean composite around 26; and our student-to-faculty ratio is 11:1. A key commitment stated in the Knox College founding mission is to “increase access to all qualified students of varied backgrounds, races and conditions, regardless of financial means.” Currently implementing its strategic plan, *Knox 2018*, the College has renewed its pledge to value and promote inclusivity in all areas of the College. Within the strategic plan we have effectively broadened our commitment to “increasing access” to include increasing student persistence toward and completion of the Knox degree. The Quality Initiative is part of the larger commitment of the College to increasing persistence and completion.

The *Knox 2018* strategic plan specifically calls for the development and implementation of a comprehensive persistence and completion plan for the College, and some key features of the larger plan already have been piloted or are in the early stages of development. Perhaps the most notable of these features is a summer bridge program targeting students shown by our data to be at risk for attrition. Other elements of the plan are unfolding and this coming academic year, initiatives will gain particular attention from our new Vice President for Student Development. The Associate Dean of the College serves as point on developing the persistence and completion plan, and she has worked consistently with a standing committee of the faculty, the Admission, Retention, and Placement Committee (ARP), to ensure faculty buy-in on all aspects of the unfolding plan.

Institutional commitment to the current persistence and completion plan comes not only in the form of inclusion in the overall strategic planning document of the College but also in the specific form of budget allocations (e.g., in support for a two-year intensive revision of the College educational experience, support for a cost-free summer bridge program for selected students). Further, the College has been awarded a \$800,000 Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grant for its proposal entitled “Enhancing the Academic Success of Underrepresented Students at Knox College.” More detail about the role of this grant in supporting this initiative is given in a later section of this proposal.

Scope and Significance of the Initiative

Knox has a richly diverse student body, comprised of roughly 12% international students, 35% non-white U.S. citizens or residents, and a fast-growing population of first-generation students, low-income students, and students with disabilities.

Our TRIO-eligible and underrepresented population has grown significantly in recent years, now reaching 60% for first-year full-time U.S. students, more than can be supported by the federal grants we have in place (see Figure 1).

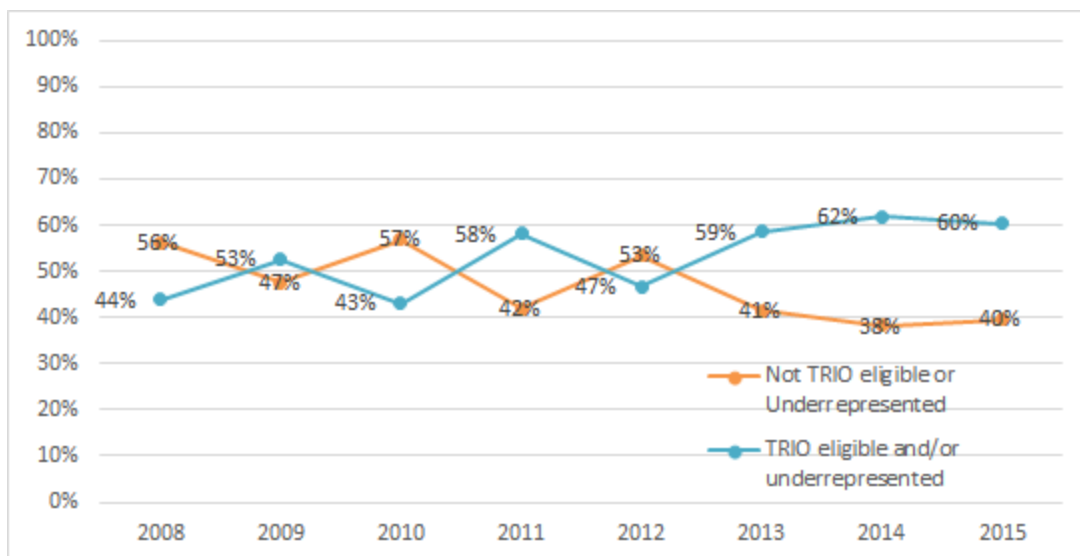


Figure 1: Proportion of US Students who are TRIO Eligible and/or underrepresented, by Year of First Attendance.

The intended impact of the initiative outlined here is to improve persistence and completion at Knox in two ways: by redesigning our curriculum and co-curriculum; and by developing new and improving existing programs that support these curricula and all key aspects of students’ well-being on our residential campus. Wherever possible, we are seeking to make changes that will improve student persistence and completion for all of our students (e.g., by employing high-impact practices in student learning). We also are mindful that some programs will support the particular needs of certain subgroups of our student population. We have drawn on meaningful data for identifying subgroups that come with particular needs. For instance, as a College with a long-standing U.S. Department of Education-funded TRIO-SSS Achievement program, we have been interested in how the retention rates for students eligible for that program differ from those of the entire student population. We have also considered how students from historically underrepresented groups compare to the broader population.

In the graphs below, Figure 2 illustrates our overall first-year retention rate and graduation rates. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate retention rates for significant subgroups of the Knox student population, including TRIO-eligible students.

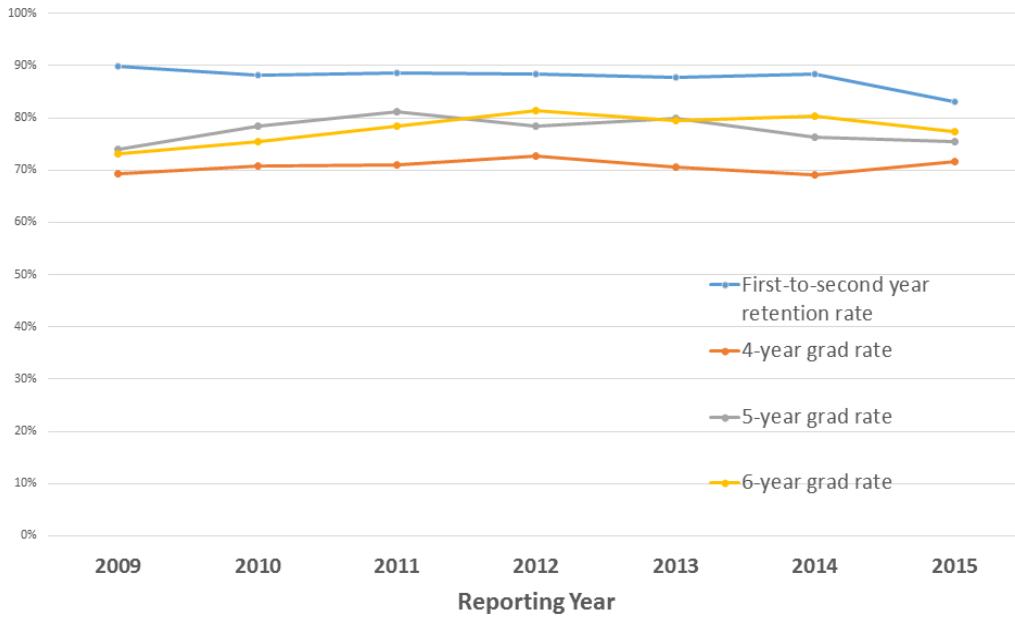


Figure 1: Knox College First to Second Year Retention and 4,5, and 6 Year Graduation Rates

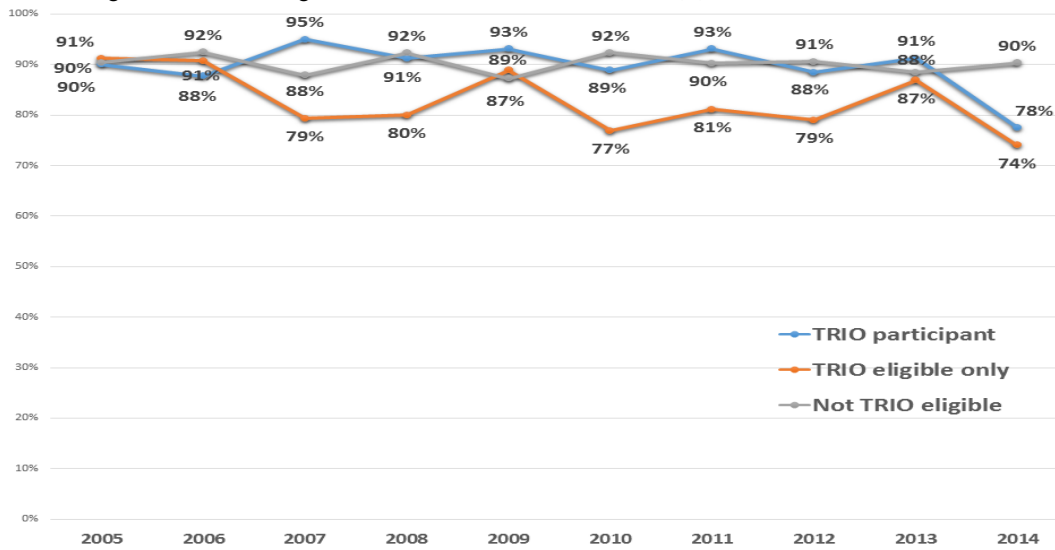


Figure 2: First Year Retention Rates (Fall to Fall) by TRIO Status

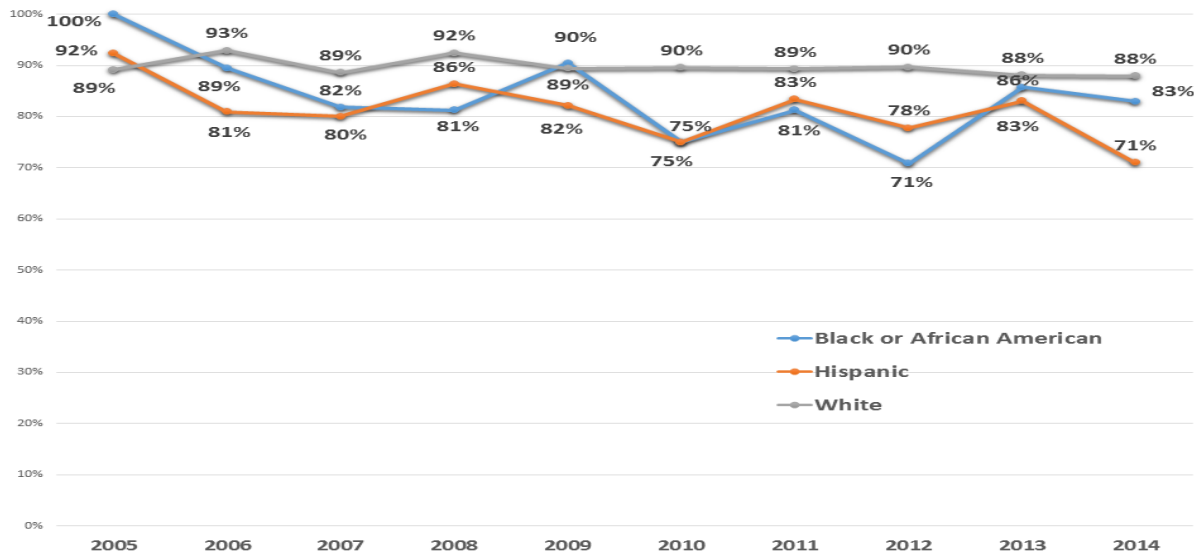


Figure 3: First Year Retention Rates (Fall to Fall) by Race/Ethnicity

The significant shifts shown here (over a relatively short period of time) have put pressures on several areas of the College—and have created an imperative for us to re-think how Knox can best educate its 21st-century students. Indeed, the College sees itself in the vanguard of many private, residential liberal arts colleges whose historic missions are now being contemporized for a nation and world that has become more diverse, intercultural, and fluid. Knox welcomes such diversity—in its many manifestations—because of its belief that excellence in a college education today requires such diversity. To be sure, such shifts have created significant challenges even as they have allowed the College to more fully realize its mission-based, long-practiced commitment to access and inclusivity.

Purpose of Initiative

The Knox College Quality Initiative, Comprehensive Persistence and Completion Plan, is designed to incorporate into the Knox educational experience targeted supportive practices that ensure the College is doing everything possible to promote persistence and completion among its students.

Knox recognizes that a student’s decision to remain at the College, to leave the College and enroll elsewhere, or to not continue in college anywhere, is often uniquely personal, and dependent on a number of factors. At the same time, we also know from our data and analyses and from larger national trends, that many students feel similar pressures or struggle in similar areas. For example, since 2010, the College has gathered data from students about the reason/s they leave Knox. Two responses have been offered most frequently: mental health considerations and financial complications. We also have noted that as the student demographic shift has occurred, there has been a steady increase of reported financial stressors.

The targeted supportive programs and practices articulated as part of this Quality Initiative are being developed at the same time that the College also is dedicating time, energy, and focus to reimagining its educational experience. It is no coincidence that these two projects are unfolding simultaneously--and indeed, need to unfold simultaneously--since the goal of increasing student persistence and completion is very closely aligned with two other goals articulated in the *Knox 2018* strategic plan: 1) to “advance

Knox's distinct approach to liberal learning" and 2) to "engage our diverse, vibrant campus community." We value our students not only as learners but also regard the diversity represented within our student body as a key feature *from and by which* our students learn. A faculty-led Task Force on the Knox Educational Experience (Task Force) was convened in spring of 2015 and during the 2015-16 academic year, led conversations across the campus about how to restructure the College's educational program. One core purpose of this group's charge is to optimize the way in which the College delivers an excellent education to all of its students, in response to the *Knox 2018* strategic plan initiative: "to assess the learning outcomes of the Knox educational experience and identify new pedagogies and curricula for an increasingly globalized and technologically sophisticated world."

As the work of the Task Force has unfolded, it has done so with a strong understanding of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) proven high impact practices. High impact practices promote optimal learning for all students and have been shown to especially promote learning among students at risk for attrition. The Office of the Dean of the College has underscored its commitment to these practices. In Fall 2015, for example, the Faculty Development Program offered teaching and learning workshops attended by faculty in 9 academic departments, most of which teach large numbers of students as part of general education or disciplinary foundations courses. These workshops were designed to help faculty reimagine the ways in which they can most effectively offer courses, especially those at the introductory level, when students are most at risk for becoming disengaged in their college learning. The workshops were informed both by the work conducted by a small group of faculty at the 2015 AAC&U Summer Institute on High Impact Practices and by a (virtual) campus talk on the same topic by Tia Brown McNair, Vice President, Office of Diversity, Equity, and Student Success, AAC&U. The Task Force is further following the recommendations for high impact practices by developing the most learning-rich First-Year Experience program possible for Knox students. Certainly, the program is intended to promote engagement (both academic and social) among all students, and in particular, to promote engagement among the students less inclined to persist.

Goal and Metrics

The call for a Comprehensive Persistence and Retention Plan is included in the *Knox 2018* strategic plan under *Goal 1: Advance Knox's Distinct Approach to Liberal Learning*. This goal recognizes that improved persistence and completion builds upon Knox's mission "to understand and improve ourselves, our society, and our world" and "to put learning to use to accomplish both personal and social goals." The specific target established in the strategic plan is to aim for the following targets by the end of 2018:

- Achieve first-to-second year retention rate of 92%
- Increase four-year graduation rate to 75%
- Increase five-year graduation rate to 85%

While the College's leadership recognize that these targets are ambitious and will be difficult to reach, given various factors outlined below, there is nevertheless institutional commitment to striving for these targets (See Figures 2-4 above for current retention and graduation rates).

Timeline of the Comprehensive Persistence and Completion Plan

Phase I: 2014-16 (completed)

In the first phase of the current Plan, the Admission, Retention, Placement Committee (ARP is a standing committee of the faculty that includes key staff, as well), and Associate Dean of the College assessed needs of cohorts at particular risk for not persisting and then advanced first steps of an emerging plan. During this time, the first draft of the Plan was developed.

Although the ARP understood that a revision of the Knox educational experience was forthcoming, they determined that certain steps in the overall Plan could be implemented or piloted more immediately. For example, the College's Academic Standing Committee was asked to approve new, scaled requirements for maintaining student "satisfactory academic progress" to help first- and second-year students retain federal financial aid while trying to make up some necessary academic ground. This proposal was successfully passed and implemented in 2014-2015.

More significantly, the the College focused on planning a summer bridge program (for the incoming class of 2015) with the purpose of giving first-generation and other TRIO-eligible students (a cohort that is statistically less likely to persist) extra time to acclimate to college and academic expectations. The design of the bridge program was based on research showing that developing a sense of belonging is the most important factor in helping students to persist. This inaugural bridge program, branded as SPARK (Student Preparation and Readiness for Knox), was offered in Fall 2015, and Knox's Office of Academic Assessment is tracking the 32 students who participated in SPARK. More than 50 students have indicated an interest in participating in the Fall 2016 SPARK program.

Phase II: 2016-18 (in progress)

The second phase of the comprehensive plan develops additional initiatives and campus resources, and further expands our persistence and completion efforts beyond Academic Affairs and vitally, into Student Development. Some specific highlights include:

In September 2015, the College secured a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for \$800,000 over four years. All of the funds are dedicated to enhancing the academic success of underrepresented students at Knox College in four key areas: 1. Additional funding for SPARK to grow the program to up to 50 students; a new staff position, the Student Success Coordinator; Experiential Learning Stipends for First-Generation and Income-Eligible students; and funds to support alternative models of advising.

In addition, individual initiatives within the Plan have been or are being moved to appropriate offices and other campus leaders for implementation. Below is a list of those initiatives:

- Student Success Coordinator works with TRIO-eligible students (but who do not participate in the TRIO program) using an intrusive advising model. Center for Teaching and Learning (supported by Mellon grant, **2015-19**)
- SPARK summer bridge program (partnership between Academic Affairs and Student Development)
 - Continue assessment of the 2015 pilot program outcomes and make changes as warranted
 - Increase number of students participating in 2016 program to at least 50 students

- Design program with goal of financial sustainability when outside funding ends (\$20,000 annually in Mellon funds **2016-19**, additional support from strategic initiative funding)
- Experiential Learning Stipends for First-Generation and Income-Eligible Students (Mellon funding, \$285,000 over four years) in support of high-impact experiential learning opportunities: internships, summer workshops/intensive study; community engagement; research, scholarly, or creative work. (Administered by various established centers dedicated to student research/scholarship.creative work, internships, and community engagement)
- Further development of high-impact practices throughout the curriculum, with an emphasis on persistence and completion. This work is being accomplished through the Task Force on the Knox Educational Experience (Academic Affairs, **2015-2017**)
- Teaching and learning workshops for faculty/departments on pedagogies most suited to at-risk students (Academic Affairs, **ongoing**).
 - Workshop on teaching 100-level courses **Fall 2015**
 - Workshop on teaching with technology **Winter 2016**
 - Workshop on problem-based learning **Summer/Fall 2016**
- Reconsiderations of how Knox implements academic support.
 - Assessment of current practices to see which promote student learning most effectively (Office of Academic Assessment, **ongoing**)
 - Alignment of tutoring support more closely with needs of students in all academic disciplines (Academic Affairs **ongoing**)
- Improvement of counseling services to enhance responsiveness to student needs. (Student Development)
 - Hire counselors that represent diversity (**ongoing**)
 - Hire one additional full-time counselor (**2015-16**)
 - Organize hours of availability to best suit student needs (**ongoing**)
 - Assist faculty in responding to student mental health concerns that arise in the classroom (**ongoing**)
- Strengthened academic advising and mentoring support for students at all levels and of all identities, including:
 - Workshops to help faculty advisors better support new students and students from all identity groups (Academic Affairs, **2015-18**)
 - Peer mentoring system to augment faculty and staff advising of students (Academic Affairs, Student Development, **2015-18**)
 - Proactive advising system for students at risk for attrition (Academic Affairs, Student Development) Supported in part by Teagle Foundation grant (2014-15) (**ongoing**)
 - Culturally appropriate ways of encouraging mentorship (e.g., first-generation students meet first-generation faculty and staff; Latina juniors and seniors mentor first and second-year Latinas). **2015-ongoing**
 - Academic advising systems for juniors and seniors to help ensure completion of degree (Academic Affairs) Supported by Teagle grant (2014-15) **ongoing**

- Strengthened advising and mentoring of high-achieving students, including “advising for opportunity” advising. (Academic Affairs, various centers, academic departments, **2015-18**)
- Re-envisioned advising of transfer students (Academic Affairs, Student Development, **2016-18**)
- Programs to address needs of students and families who struggle to finance the four-year program at Knox, including:
 - Experiential Learning stipends for qualifying students, (**2015-19**)
 - Better education for students and families about how to finance their four years at Knox successfully; increased support structures to help students and families navigate financial aid requirements (Business Office, Admission, Financial Aid, Student Development, **2016-17**)
 - Individualized advising for students who are placed on “financial hold” at point of pre-registration for upcoming term. (Financial Aid, Business Office, **2016-17**)
 - Program to ensure that students from all socioeconomic groups are able to obtain necessary course texts and materials by the first week of the term. (Admission, Administrative Services, Academic Affairs, **2016-18**)
- Enhanced existing “High Risk Student” meetings and case management system; integrate with Maxient software program (Academic Affairs, Student Development, **2015-17**)
- Improved communication with/support of parents, particularly parents of first-generation students (Student Development, Academic Affairs)
 - Enhanced parent components of summer orientation and pre-orientation programs (**2017**)
 - On-going programming for parents throughout their student’s time at Knox (**2016-18**)
 - Parent/family newsletter (**2016-18**)

Phase III: 2015 - 2018 and beyond

The third and final phase is not, strictly speaking, a separate phase. Rather, it is a continual loop of assessment and feedback that the College will use to ascertain how well its Plan for promoting persistence and completion is working. With ongoing assessment data, we will determine which of our initiatives have had the most impact, where they have fallen short, and what measures we might take for improving our ultimate purpose.

Assessment and evaluation of programs for high risk students will follow the same general outline, with modifications for individual programs as needed.

- **Step 1: Identify students who will best benefit from new programs**
 - Identify students who would most benefit from participation in initiatives for student success
 - Incoming students
 - High risk of attrition
 - Academic need (High School GPA, ACT, SAT)
 - Recommendations from Admissions

- SPARK Application process
 - Self identification through application process
 - Current students
 - High risk of attrition (low income, first generation, underrepresented students).
 - Academic need (GPA, ACT, SAT, placement test scores)
 - Recommendations from Academic Affairs offices, Student Development, and ARP
 - Mellon Experiential Learning Fellows
 - High risk of attrition
 - Barriers to participation in high impact practices
 - Self-identification through participation in workshops and application process
 - Faculty Recommendations
- **Step 2: Identify specific needs of each targeted population for each program**
 - SPARK Inventory, which identifies levels of peer and family support for students and provides detailed information regarding their academic experiences prior to college
 - Student Success Coordinator one-on-one interactions, LASSI and other inventories as identified
- **Step 3: Measure impact of student participation in initiatives, including metrics on retention, GPA, and progress toward degree and completion**
- **Step 4: Gather feedback**
 - Indirect assessments regarding their experiences through surveys, focus groups
 - Direct assessments of student work where applicable (e.g. student success course)
 - Faculty/staff feedback regarding programs
- **Step 5: Institute changes in programs as warranted by impact and feedback data**

In addition to these specific assessment and evaluative processes for student programs, assessment and evaluation will be integrated into the other components of the quality initiative.

- As the Task Force on the Knox Educational Experience works on curricular redesign, learning goals will be developed for curricular changes, and assessment of student learning will be integrated into implementation of the new curriculum.
- The First-Year Experience, as it is developed, will include learning outcomes and measures of success, including student evaluations of program components.
- Faculty development outcomes will include:
 - Faculty outcomes measures, as appropriate (e.g. revisions of 100-level courses, and implementation of new technology in faculty pedagogy)
 - Student outcomes measures, as appropriate (e.g. retention to next course in sequence from 100-level courses)
 - Indirect measures (e.g. student satisfaction with academic advising)

In addition to program specific assessment and evaluation components, the College also will utilize more global measures of program success. Some of these will extend beyond the 2017-18 academic year. These measures will include:

- Overall persistence rates
- Overall graduation rates at 4-, 5-, and 6-years
- Persistence rates for targeted sub-groups
- Graduation rates for targeted sub-groups
- Responses to the CIRP Senior Survey
- Additional measures of satisfaction with college experiences

A Task Force on the Knox Educational Experience

This year, individuals, offices, and committees have started the exciting work of developing and implementing the strategic priorities of *Knox 2018*. The Cultural Events Committee, for example, has proposed the common campus theme of "The Tipping Point," the Campus Diversity Committee is putting forward recommendations for recruitment and retention of faculty, and groups of faculty have started or resumed conversations about possible new program areas.

This proposal, to convene A Task Force on the Knox Educational Experience, aims to begin conversation about another strategic priority in *Knox 2018*: "to assess the learning outcomes of the Knox educational experience and identify new pedagogies and curricula for an increasingly globalized and technologically sophisticated world."

Our most recent curricular revision was the New Knox that developed from conversation stated in the late 1990s, with implementation of the new curriculum 2002-03. Since the turn of the 21st century, Knox has grown by 200 students and their demographics have changed. For instance, in 2000, 13% of our students identified as U.S. students of color, and today, 30% of the student body identifies as such. In this year's incoming class alone, 43% are U.S. students of color and 13% are international. During the same time, 59 full-time faculty have started their careers at Knox. And new ways of connecting and communicating have developed, for better and for worse.

Although students and their families always have considered college an important pathway to jobs and careers, today, this concern feels more acute, and it is compounded by the cost of college. In addition, we know more about how students learn than we did 15 years ago, we have seen the positive results of high-impact practices (such as independent research and first-year experience programs), and we have more than a decade's worth of new disciplinary knowledge.

At the same time, we continue to affirm the value of the liberal arts and sciences, and the value of the crucial components of an excellent education—critical and constructive thinking, thoughtful communication skills, challenging conversations, and independent and collaborative work. These commitments that form the core of a Knox education have remained steadfast. For 178 years, the educational program at Knox has valued high quality academic experiences and close mentoring relationships between students and faculty. As a liberal arts college, Knox is committed to an education that allows students to see the world not only through deep disciplinary knowledge, but also through a breadth of perspective that allows understanding of the interrelationships within the world and our place in it.

With our commitment to the liberal arts firmly in place, we also recognize that we are at a point where the expression and practice of our foundational educational commitments may have changed. And we have new voices and perspectives in our community, new communication tools that shape our relationships with each other, and new pedagogical and disciplinary knowledge to explore.

And so that is what this proposal asks us to do: to convene A Task Force on the Knox Educational Experience in order to assess the learning outcomes of the Knox educational experience and to identify new pedagogies and curricula for an increasingly globalized and technologically sophisticated world. Doing so will allow us to imagine the possibilities, to recommit to our students, to explore ideas in

curricula and pedagogy that may hold risk and then great promise, to come upon ideas that are vital to who we are and who we wish our students to be, and to best express the remarkable, often intangible distinctiveness of a Knox education.

CHARGE

The Task Force will “assess the learning outcomes of the Knox educational experience and identify new pedagogies and curricula for an increasingly globalized and technologically sophisticated world.” To do that, it is key that members:

- Become familiar with national scholarship, trends, models, best practices, and accrediting agency guidelines with respect to general education.
- Engage in broad consultation with the faculty, students, and relevant staff at Knox.
- Develop the process for considering common degree requirements, with a specific focus on knowledge, skills, and habits of mind that will best equip Knox College graduates to thrive in their personal, professional, and civic lives.
- Create and manage a timeline with milestones for developing and implementing the process.
- Identify the many stakeholders and insure their consultation.
- Make final recommendations to the faculty about the Knox educational experience. Recommendations should be feasible, informed by evidence, and connected to current scholarship and thinking about liberal arts education for today’s college student. Above all, the recommendations should be intellectually innovative, drawing widely on creative thinking already on campus in order to make a Knox education distinctive.
- Keep the campus community and governance groups informed of deliberations and discussions throughout the process. Share issues and key decision points throughout the process.