

# HIGHER LEARNING COMMISSION

FORM

## Open Pathway Quality Initiative Report

### Institutional Template

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The enclosed Quality Initiative Report represents the work that the institution has undertaken to fulfill the Improvement Process of the Open Pathway.

*Teresa L. Amott*

*Signature of Institution's President or Chancellor*

*August 5, 2019*

*Date*

Teresa L. Amott

*Printed/Typed Name and Title*

Knox College

*Name of Institution*

Galesburg, IL

*City and State*

The institution uses the template below to complete its Quality Initiative Report. The institution may include a report it has prepared for other purposes if it addresses many of the questions below and replaces portions of the narrative in the template. This template may be used both for reports on initiatives that have been completed and for initiatives that will continue and for which this report serves as a milestone of accomplishments thus far. The complete report should be no more than 6,000 words.

Quality Initiative Reports are to be submitted by August 31 of Year 9. HLC recommends that institutions with comprehensive evaluations in the first half of Year 10 submit their report at least six months prior to their Assurance System lock date. Submit the report as a PDF file to [pathways@hlcommission.org](mailto:pathways@hlcommission.org) with a file name that follows this format: QI Report No Name University MN. The file name must include the institution's name (or an identifiable portion thereof) and state.

**Date: 08-05-2019**

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## Report Categories

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### Overview of the Quality Initiative

1. Provide a one-page executive summary that describes the Quality Initiative, summarizes what was accomplished and explains any changes made to the initiative over the time period.

See below for the Quality Initiative Report.

### Scope and Impact of the Initiative

2. Explain in more detail what was accomplished in the Quality Initiative in relation to its purposes and goals. (If applicable, explain the initiative's hypotheses and findings.)

3. Evaluate the impact of the initiative, including any changes in processes, policies, technology, curricula, programs, student learning and success that are now in place in consequence of the initiative.

4. Explain any tools, data or other information that resulted from the work of the initiative.

5. Describe the biggest challenges and opportunities encountered in implementing the initiative.

### Commitment to and Engagement in the Quality Initiative

6. Describe the individuals and groups involved at stages throughout the initiative and their perceptions of its worth and impact.

7. Describe the most important points learned by those involved in the initiative.

### Resource Provision

8. Explain the human, financial, physical and technological resources that supported the initiative.

## Plans for the Future (or Future Milestones of a Continuing Initiative)

9. Describe plans for ongoing work related to or as a result of the initiative.

10. Describe any practices or artifacts from the initiative that other institutions might find meaningful or useful and please indicate if you would be willing to share this information.

## Executive Summary

The 2015 HLC Quality Initiative focused on upholding Knox College's long-standing mission to "increase access to all qualified students of varied backgrounds, races and conditions, regardless of financial means" by improving retention and completion rates. The Quality Initiative was well aligned with the Knox 2018 Strategic Plan, which called for "a comprehensive retention plan to better address the academic, wellness, and social needs of our students." We approached this work by developing both curricular and co-curricular programs; whenever possible, these programs were designed to improve the retention and completion of all students, but some programs were strategically designed to meet the needs of specific, high-risk subpopulations.

Our plan was ambitious and included both major initiatives such as our SPARK Summer Bridge Program, the addition of a Student Success Coordinator and the development of experiential learning stipends, as well as initiatives located within specific campus departments, such as improvements to counseling services and the retooling of our approach to case management.

Assessment was completed at the level of each individual initiative, as well as by examining campus-wide retention and completion rates over time. Many initiatives had positive results:

- The SPARK Summer Bridge Program appears to have had a positive impact on student retention, completion, and GPA.
- Experiential learning stipends were well-utilized by low income/first generation students, the majority of whom indicated that they would not have been able to participate in experiential learning without such funding, and 98% of whom are still enrolled or have graduated.
- Components of the new First Year Experience, particularly living learning communities, showed a positive impact on student belonging and relationship building.
- Restructuring Counseling Services' staffing and intake structure, as well as increasing outreach to student populations underrepresented among the client base, resulted in more equitable service usage and greater student satisfaction.
- Restructuring the College's interdisciplinary approach to case management resulted in the ability to handle more cases while maintaining a stable retention rate.
- Additional faculty development workshops, student financial literacy education workshops, and parent programs were more difficult to tie directly to retention/completion outcomes. However, program-level assessment revealed positive learning and satisfaction outcomes.

The Student Success Coordinator position demonstrated less obviously positive results, and warrants further evaluation in the coming year.

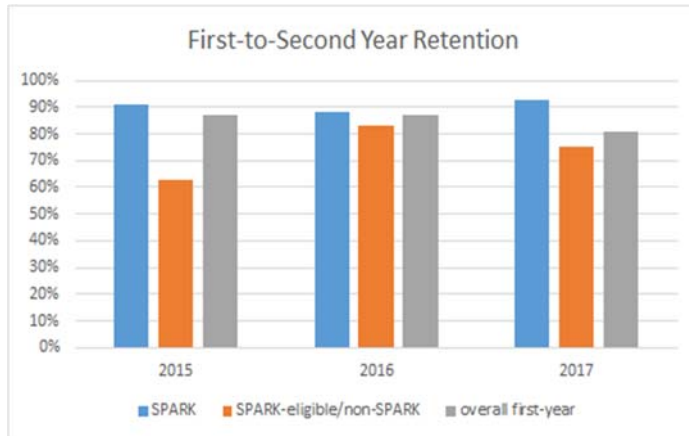
The College's overall retention rates improved over the first two years of the Quality Initiative, and retention for underrepresented students mirrored that of majority students, which had not been the case in prior years. While there was a drop in overall retention in the third year of the Quality Initiative, there remained no significant difference between the retention rate of underrepresented students and that of majority students. It is too early to tell if this data point represents an aberration or the beginning of a pattern, as 2018/19 fall-to-fall retention data is not yet available. Nonetheless, the College continues to direct significant resources toward retention initiatives.

Additionally, while we did not see the increase in overall graduation rates that we had hoped to see, we did see a significant narrowing of the completion gap between racially underrepresented students and non-underrepresented students and between TRIO-eligible students and non-eligible students.

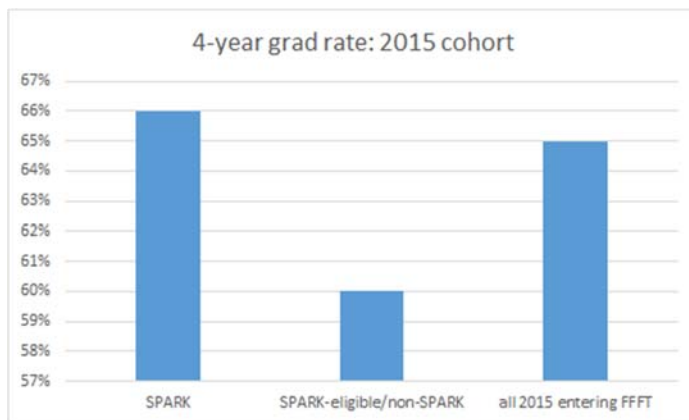
## Scope and Impact of the Initiative

### SPARK (Student Preparation and Readiness for Knox) Summer Bridge Program

SPARK was developed to give entering first-generation and other TRIO-eligible students (a cohort that is statistically less likely to persist and graduate) extra time to acclimate to the expectations of college life. At the time of the retention and completion plan's development, the SPARK program had completed its inaugural (2015) summer, with 32 student participants. The SPARK program has been offered each summer since then, with a total of 135 students in four cohorts.



First-to-second year retention rates for SPARK participants were higher than those of eligible non-participants and higher than the overall college first-to-second year retention rate for each cohort.



The four-year graduation rate for the SPARK 2015 cohort was higher than SPARK-eligible non-participants and higher than the overall 2015 FFFT entering class.

Across the four cohorts, the percent of SPARK students with first-term GPAs in the 3.0-4.0 band is higher than the percent of eligible non-participants. Similarly, the percent of SPARK students with first-term GPAs in the below 2.0 band is only one percentage point lower than non-eligible (not first gen or low income) students.

The program continues to be improved through ongoing assessment of participant retention, completion, and GPA. An ongoing challenge is the extent to which student athletes are able to participate in SPARK, as the dates overlap with the athletic summer training schedule (guided by NCAA and conference regulations). The College's new athletic director has made a commitment to ensuring that incoming student athletes can participate in both programs, which was indeed the case for the 2018 cohort. This will be an area of close collaboration and monitoring in the coming years.

SPARK is an opt-in program, so the possibility of a certain amount of selection bias exists. Nonetheless, the College counts SPARK as a success and, as a result, will continue to offer the program. Additionally, because both our own data and relevant literature indicate a need to more intentionally facilitate all first-year students' academic transition into college, the SPARK curriculum is serving as a foundation for the College's newly

developed FOX (First-Year Oriented Experience) courses. FOX courses, which are being piloted in the 2019-20 academic year, will help first-year students:

- Understand how to read and comprehend a syllabus and utilize it as a tool for academic success;
- Demonstrate knowledge of campus resources and how/when to access them;
- Develop strategies for effective time management;
- Practice academic success skills (class participation, note taking, reading for comprehension, approaching an assignment, studying for an exam, metacognition);
- Engage in meaningful interactions with faculty and fellow students (class discussions, group projects, office hours); and
- Feel that they matter, belong, and are supported at Knox.

Our plan is ultimately to integrate FOX courses into every academic department at the introductory level.

### Student Success Coordinator

Like SPARK, the Student Success Coordinator (SSC) position was developed to provide support to TRIO-eligible students who do not participate in the TRIO program. The SSC has two primary responsibilities: coordinating and teaching a credit-bearing Student Success Seminar, and advising the larger student success cohort.

Since its inception in 2016, the SSC has worked with 147 students through a credit-bearing Student Success Seminar, which focuses on study skills, learning strategies, motivation, resources, and time management. Students are supplementally supported in the course by peer success tutors. Students who are invited to participate are identified by their TRIO eligibility and their academic needs. Fall cohort selection is based on SAT/ACT scores, demographic considerations, and high school GPAs. Winter and Spring cohort selection is based on academic performance at Knox, including GPAs, number of D, F, and W grades, and recommendations from the Academic Standing Committee. These students represent the most academically challenged students at Knox College, which is indeed the program's biggest challenge. Term-to-term retention for cohorts enrolled in this course has ranged from 36% to 75%, which is certainly lower than our target. However, for individual students, there has been a more positive impact. Over half of the group saw an increase in GPA following enrollment in the course. Data also revealed that students who return for the first term following their Student Success Seminar have a high likelihood of persisting through completion, which provides a focus for continued intervention.

The Student Success Seminar utilizes student feedback to improve course quality and student support. At the end of each term, the SSC asks students to complete an evaluation of course components. Needed changes are then identified and implemented in the next iteration. For example, many students in the first seminar cohort did not find the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI) or a mandatory Student Success Plan particularly useful. In subsequent years, the students were instructed to use their LASSI outcomes as the basis for their Success Plan, looking at ways to address areas in need of improvement. Additionally, students were required to regularly update their success plan. As a result of these changes, in 2018, no students rated the value of the LASSI or their success plan in the bottom half of the scale, and 65% gave the LASSI the highest rating (as compared to 42% in 2016), and 76% gave the success plan the highest rating (compared to 53% in 2016).

The larger Student Success Cohort consists of students who are eligible for services through the TRIO program at Knox, but are not participating in that program. Those students are routinely invited to workshops focused on financial literacy, study skills, study abroad, and career readiness, with an average of two workshops offered each term.

Consistency of staffing has been an additional challenge for this aspect of the plan. The first Student Success Coordinator took a position with the TRIO student success program in January 2018. Difficulty in recruiting for the position left it vacant until late in the fall 2018 term.

As a result of these factors, the Student Success Coordinator position is slated for thorough evaluation by the College in the coming year.

## Experiential Learning Stipends

Funded by a grant from the Mellon Foundation, the College awarded experiential learning grants (known as Mellon Fellowships) ranging from \$990-\$3000 to a total of 83 students to support engagement with high impact practices including research, internships, and community service. These grants were available specifically for low income/first generation students. Due to the success of this program, as evidenced by students indicating that they would not be able to participate in these experiential learning opportunities without such funding and the fact that 98% of the students who received stipends are still enrolled or have graduated, the College has implemented a campus-wide Power of Experience Grant program through which all students are eligible for a \$2000 grant to offset experiential learning costs once they have reached junior standing.

## High-Impact Practices

In 2016, the Task Force on the Knox Educational Experience facilitated a comprehensive curricular redesign. This recent revision of the Knox Education Experience notably includes the integration of a number of high-impact practices into the curriculum and the co-curriculum, with particular focus on the first-year experience (FYE). Components of the FYE now include:

- *Orientation:* As a result of the College's assessment of student learning during fall orientation, the program was revamped in 2017. The most significant change involved shortening the program and making the days "less dense" to more realistically align with students' capacity to retain new information (as defined by our own assessment data and national literature). Content that was cut from the orientation program was moved to the residential curriculum (see below).
- *First-Year Preceptorial (FP):* FP has long been the academic core of the FYE, and the FP Steering Committee continues to assess and refine its curriculum. To better understand the role of FP in retention, questions regarding the extent to which FP facilitates students' connections and sense of belonging were added to the annual FP evaluation. Data to date suggest that FP plays a role in retention within the first year (fall to winter), but not fall to fall. This will be a continued area of inquiry moving forward. Ongoing FP faculty development topics include the role of FP in the new FYE, effective strategies for teaching student writing, learning outcome development, and common expectations for FP courses.
- *Living Learning Communities (LLCs):* In Fall 2017 the College piloted two LLCs (32 student participants total). Students were housed in suites with their FP classmates, and the FP faculty member engaged with students both in the classroom and in the residence halls in order to provide a seamless curricular and co-curricular experience, facilitate faculty-student and student-student connections, and promote a sense of belonging. Compared to control groups (non-LLC sections of the first-year preceptorial and non-LLC first-year residence halls suites), students in the pilot living-learning communities reported feeling both a greater sense of belonging at Knox and that they were treated with more openness and respect by their peers.

In Fall 2018, the number of LLCs was expanded to five (80 student participants total). Assessment data again revealed positive pro-social gains for LLC students compared to control groups, and also indicated that LLC students were more likely than their non-LLC peers to discuss course content (both FP and non-FP) with peers outside of class.

While sample sizes are too small to analyze the LLCs' impact on retention at this point, the positive outcomes detailed above have resulted in a commitment to continue to expand the LLC program in the years to come.

- *Residential Curriculum:* The residential curriculum--a series of programs offered in and around the residence halls focused on the developmental tasks of first-year students--was implemented beginning in Fall 2017. Examples of topics covered in the residential curriculum include communication across difference, time management, stress management, and financial literacy. Attendance at residential curriculum programs has ranged from 20 to 385 students per event. While assessments have largely

indicated that students who participate in these programs are learning what we intend for them to learn, staff continue to consider ways to maximize attendance.

### Counseling Services

Over the past four years, the College has made significant improvements to student counseling services. The changes were made in response to longer-than-desired wait times to see a counselor and a lack of counselor diversity. These changes include:

- Adding one full-time counselor, two part-time counselors, and one part-time intake coordinator (including two counselors of color);
- Implementing intake appointments so students have face-to-face contact with a counseling staff member within 72 hours of contacting the office;
- Revamping crisis appointments so students in crisis are seen immediately; and
- Purchasing clinical symptom tracking software to better assess the effectiveness of counseling services.

Prior to implementing these changes, 31.5% of the students who were not retained indicated that they were leaving the College for mental health reasons. Students of color were significantly overrepresented in that population. The number of students citing mental health as their primary reason for attrition has since declined (13% of the 2017/2018 fall-to-fall attrition group), with no disproportionate representation of students of color.

### Case Management

The College's work with high-risk students has been revamped to utilize a case management model for working with students who may be experiencing academic or personal distress. Additionally, the College implemented new case management software for more efficient, robust, and centralized tracking of high-risk students. The new process and software has allowed the Student Support Committee (the interdepartmental group that manages student cases) to support more students, with retention remaining relatively stable.

<b>Academic Year</b>	<b>Number of cases</b>	<b>% of those students retained/completed</b>
2016-17	25	80%
2017-18	44	77%
2018-19	66	not yet available

### Advising and Mentoring

Advising, particularly advising by faculty members, is a core component of the small, liberal arts college experience and, while critical to the success of all students, it is particularly critical to the success of first generation students. For this reason, much attention has been paid to the advising model in the SPARK program. Academic advisors were incorporated into the SPARK program beginning with the second cohort. Advisors are provided training for their roles in SPARK, with an emphasis on intrusive advising strategies. SPARK students provide feedback on the advisors at two points during the summer/fall. Data collected to date reveals that SPARK students have a positive view of their advisors, and especially value ongoing follow-up meetings once the summer bridge program has concluded.

The 15 faculty members who serve as SPARK advisors have been able to use the training they receive to better serve their other advisees. Additionally, annual general faculty advising workshops (for both new and continuing advisors) have been retooled to focus on the best practices of intrusive advising. The College has also begun to pilot advising triads, in which each First Year Preceptorial section is assigned three advisors representing different academic departments, so students can both have access to faculty with varying backgrounds and participate in



group advising--a modality that is widely regarded as beneficial to first generation students. As advising triads are a new initiative, assessment is in process.

Beginning in July 2018, Knox provided three summer pre-advising opportunities to incoming first-year students and their families. Students could come to campus to meet with a faculty advisor, participate in a virtual advising session or, for students living in or near Chicago, attend an advising session held at a downtown venue.

One hundred thirty-four students participated in the pre-advising sessions in summer 2018 (86 in person and 48 virtually). Although the sessions were open to any incoming student, 71% of those who participated were first generation, financially challenged, and/or underrepresented. Several of the students and their families who attended in Chicago were Spanish-speaking, and they were pleased to find that the Associate Dean of the College could do a parent break-out session in Spanish.

The virtual advising sessions were very popular and filled immediately. (We have increased the number of available slots for summer 2019.) Google Meet was the platform used for the virtual sessions, which worked very well with one exception: incoming Chinese students were not able to participate, because China does not allow the use of Google products. We are experimenting with other tools such as Zoom to resolve this issue.

The summer advising sessions appear to have had a positive impact on Fall 2018 enrollment; 98% percent of those who attended a session enrolled in fall classes at Knox. In contrast, of all students who made an enrollment deposit at Knox, 90% enrolled for fall term. Summer advisees who enrolled in the fall term enrolled in winter term at a comparable rate (97%). Summer advising continues this academic year.

As a complement to advisors, peer mentors, widely supported in the student development and academic support literatures, have flourished at Knox over the past three years. While resident assistants and orientation leaders have long been a part of the Knox landscape, and SPARK mentors have been a core component of the program since its inception, training and responsibilities of these positions have evolved through assessment. Most significantly, students in all of these positions are now required to participate in a credit-bearing leadership development course which covers topics such as student development theory, social identity development, and strengths-based leadership. New mentor roles in disability support services, intercultural life, and counseling services have also been added.

### Faculty Development

In addition to advisor and mentor development, overall faculty development continues to be a valued component of the Knox teaching and learning ecosystem. In the years leading up to the curriculum revision pursued between 2015-2018, faculty development focused on inclusive pedagogies to our diverse student cohort and redesign of introductory level courses to improve onboarding of new students into all academic disciplines. Since 2016, the focus of faculty development workshops has shifted to focus more proactively on teaching for retention and completion. Topics over the past three years have included:

- Effective teaching strategies within first-year level courses;
- Syllabus and assignment transparency;
- Accommodating students with disabilities;
- Trauma-informed teaching, including effective use of trigger warnings and “mental health first aid;”
- Leading discussions in diverse classrooms; and
- Contemporary utilization of classroom technologies to improve access and engagement.

### Financial Literacy

The College has implemented a number of initiatives to support students who may be struggling to finance their Knox education, as well as to equip them with financial literacy skills that will serve them now and beyond Knox. They include:

- Development of a comprehensive advising process to work with students on registration holds due to outstanding balances;

- Relocation of the student accounts manager position to the financial aid office to promote a more seamless interface for students;
- Financial literacy education, including FAFSA re-submission, loan management, scholarship opportunities, budgeting, and building good credit, as part of the residential curriculum; and
- The addition of a financial literacy component to parent orientation.

Parent Programs

Fall of 2017 saw the implementation of enhanced parent onboarding, including:

- A new financial literacy component. as mentioned above;
- Consistent parent orientation experiences across sub-populations (athletes, international families, summer bridge families); and
- Increased communication with parents throughout the year via social media.

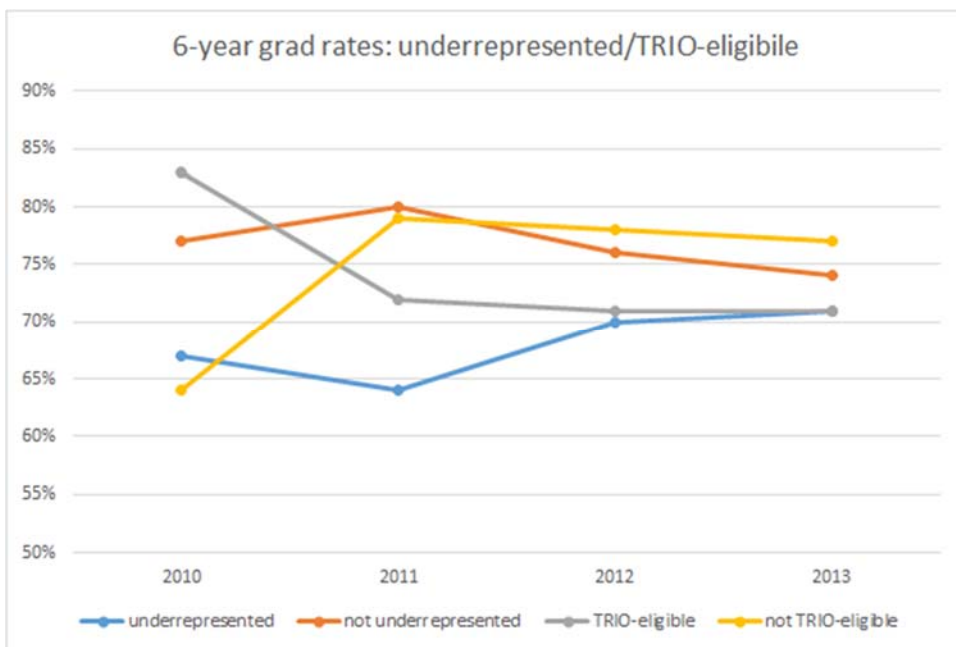
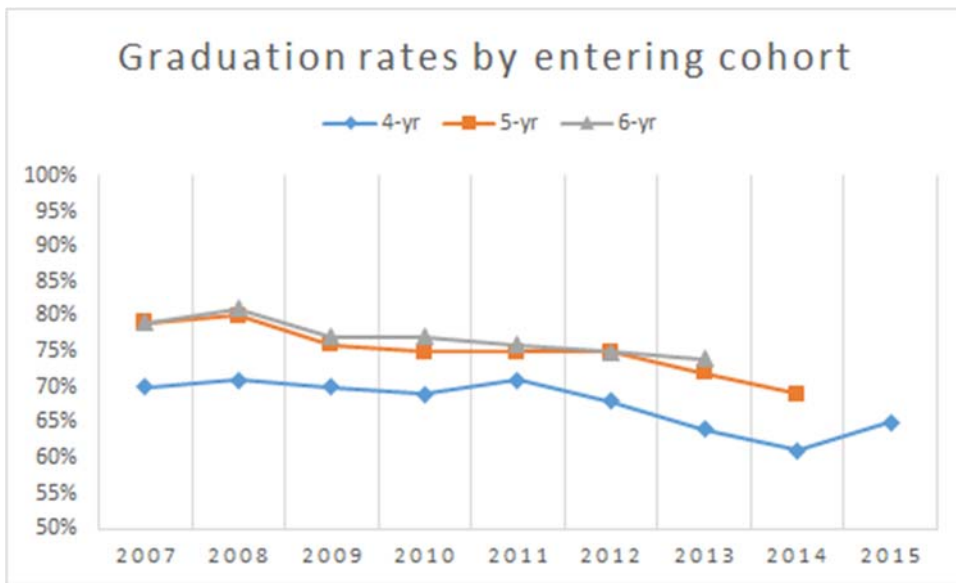
Overall Impact on Retention and Completion

Good progress was made on student retention in the first phase of this initiative, with first-to-second year retention rising for both the entering 2015 and 2016 cohorts. Moreover, retention for underrepresented students mirrored that of majority students, which had not been the case in years past. However, the College experienced a setback with the entering 2017 cohort, seeing a first-to-second year retention rate of 81% (with no significant difference between underrepresented and majority students).

Entering Fall Term	1st to 2nd	2nd to 3rd	3rd to 4th
2017	81.0%		
2016	87.3%	92.1%	
2015	86.8%	92.8%	92.6%
2014	82.9%	90.7%	93.0%
2013	88.4%	90.8%	90.8%
2012	87.8%	91.5%	91.7%
2011	88.3%	92.4%	90.7%

While it is too early to tell if this data point represents an aberration or the beginning of a new trend, we are aware that the evolving regional and national environment is generating some headwinds in our retention efforts. Rural Illinois is experiencing outmigration among college age students and their families due to regional economic forces. We have also seen year over year increases in student visits to counseling and disability support services over the past four years (for example, a 17% increase in the percent of students utilizing counseling services from 2015-16 to 2018-19), which has required continuous reallocation of resources to meet student needs. The College continues to direct significant resources toward retention initiatives, including two new staff positions in this area.

While we did not see the increase in overall graduation rates that we had hoped to see, we did see a significant narrowing of the completion gap between racially underrepresented students and non-underrepresented students and between TRIO-eligible students and non-eligible students.



## Resource Provision

Much of the funding for this plan came from an \$800,000 Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grant for the proposal entitled “Enhancing the Academic Success of Underrepresented Students at Knox College.” Specifically, this grant funded the SPARK program, Student Success Coordinator, and Experiential Learning Stipends. As the grant period comes to an end in summer 2020, the College must determine which initiatives will be built into ongoing operational budgets moving forward. As stated above, the SPARK Summer Bridge Program’s success represents a positive return on investment, and so the program will continue in the years ahead. Furthermore, components of the SPARK Program are beginning to be replicated more widely across the curriculum through the pilot FOX courses as part of the enhanced First Year Experience. Similarly, the College has committed to institutionalizing experiential learning stipends through the new Power of Experience grants, which provide all students with access to \$2000 in support of study away, internships, research, creative work, or community engagement. The Student Success Coordinator position has less clear positive outcomes, and is slated for more thorough review this year.

Other initiatives have been funded through the reallocation of existing operational budgets and through fundraising. These include the additional counseling services staff and operational budgets for the living learning communities and the residential curriculum. Yet other initiatives, such as parent programs and revised orientation programming, were budget-neutral.

As the scope of this plan had broad reach across campus, many campus leaders, faculty, and staff were involved in its implementation. Oversight for the work was coordinated by the Provost/Dean of the College and the Vice President for Student Development, with significant support from the Director of Academic Assessment and the Associate Deans. While retention and completion work is the responsibility of the entire campus community, these individuals will continue to provide leadership to the development, implementation and assessment of ongoing and future initiatives.

### **Plans for the Future**

A retention and completion plan is an iterative process, and so our work on this initiative will continue. Most changes that were made as part of the Quality Initiative will continue, and some--such as experiential learning stipends--have expanded exponentially. Other aspects of the plan--such as the living learning communities and residential curriculum--are still in their infancy, and so require close assessment and evaluation over the next few years. Yet other programs--such as the FOX courses--were not yet conceived of when this plan was developed, but instead grew from what we learned over the plan's lifespan; these programs are in pilot phase, and assessment measures are under development. In sum, Knox's continued commitment to increasing access to all qualified students of varied backgrounds, races and conditions, regardless of financial means, coupled with the reality of the pressures facing small liberal arts colleges nationally, requires that we continue to pay keen attention to incorporating into the Knox educational experience data-driven, targeted supportive practices that ensure the College is doing everything possible to promote persistence and completion among all of its students.