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2024 SMU IN FOUR YEAR THREE ANNUAL REPORT



# Table of Contents

<b>2024 SMU IN FOUR YEAR THREE ANNUAL REPORT</b> .....	1
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	2
<b>Introduction</b> .....	3
<b>Overall Year Three Recommendations</b> .....	3
<b>Early Alert Pillar Recommendations</b> .....	3
Modify Early Alert Mechanisms .....	3
Improve Follow-Up Practices .....	4
Expand Canvas-Based Tools .....	5
<b>Academic Advising Pillar Recommendations</b> .....	5
Transition to Professional Advisors.....	5
Expand Training and Tool Use .....	6
<b>First-Year &amp; Gateway Courses Pillar Recommendations</b> .....	6
Course Redesign .....	6
Support Faculty Development .....	7
<b>Conclusion and Looking Forward</b> .....	7

## Introduction

SMU's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), branded [SMU in Four](#), supports the institutional goal of improving the recruitment, 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 for racially and ethnically diverse students, first-generation students and Pell-eligible students.

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 three pillars: **Early Alert, Academic Advising, and First-Year and Gateway Courses**.

## Overall Year Three Recommendations

Based on the collaborative work of 58 team members, we present several campus-wide recommendations. These are grounded in the evolving work of the three pillars and supported by data and insights that inform our approach.

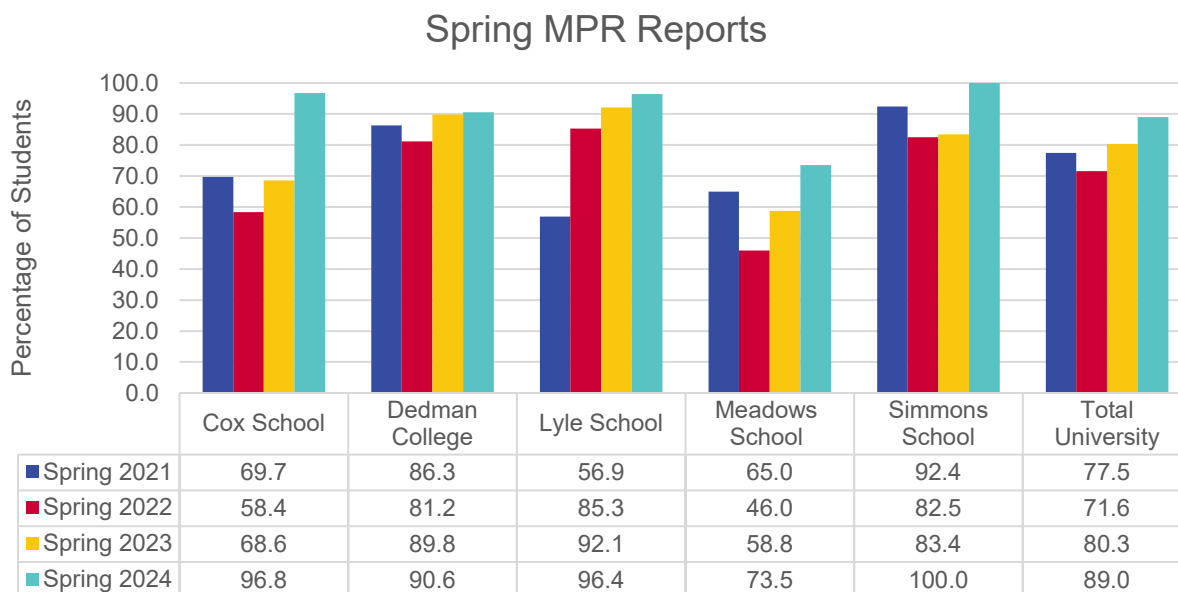
## Early Alert Pillar Recommendations

### Modify Early Alert Mechanisms

Faculty participation in completing Midterm Progress Reports (MPR) has steadily increased, nearing the 90% target, as shown in the graph below. On the other hand faculty participation in completing Early Progress Reports (EPR) lags behind at about 80%. After three years of positively nudging faculty to complete these reports, we recommend discontinuing Early Progress Reports (EPR) and replacing them with class attendance reporting by instructors. The SMU-in-Four Initiative, Student Academic Engagement and Success, and Athletics are partnering to explore the possible acquisition of an institutional technology platform for student attendance, aiming to enhance accuracy, streamline data collection, and provide real-time insights to improve student engagement, accountability and retention support across campus.

The decision to remove EPR reports was based on faculty feedback on why they struggle to report grades at the six-week mark and very limited evidence that students take action based on receiving a deficient grade at this point in the semester. Midterm Progress Reports (MPR) should continue until new Canvas-based dashboards are developed. A comparison of MPR reports with Canvas grade book data for fall 2023 and spring 2024 identifies the same students as academically at-risk thus suggesting that faculty adoption of Canvas grade books has increased.

**Graph 1. Percentage of Students who use the A-LEC by EPR and MPR**



Student completion of the mid-semester check-in has increased to 14.9% of students for fall 2023, the highest feedback rate seen since fall 2020. To improve student completion and the outreach process, we recommend enhancing the mid-semester check-in survey by disclosing to students that follow-up will occur, and exploring new delivery methods like texting is also advised to boost participation.

### **Improve Follow-Up Practices**

Academic advisors should follow up on class attendance and MPR data, documenting interactions in Advising Notes for at-risk students. The initial email to students should be sent centrally, and documentation of student behavior changes should be improved, particularly in areas like Altshuler Learning Enhancement Center (A-LEC) and Academic Skill Development (ASD), where progress has stagnated.

Results and findings from a student survey and focus groups recommend changes to outreach processes in the future to encourage student help-seeking behavior change. Despite the increase in participation in EPR/MPR, data from A-LEC show that only 24% of students who received alerts took action through engagement with services at the A-LEC, indicating room for improvement in follow-up practices.

**Table 1. Percentage of Students who use the A-LEC by EPR and MPR**

Number of times students use the A-LEC	Fall 2022		Fall 2023	
	EPR	MPR	EPR	MPR
<b>0</b>	1326	1333	1254	1278
<b>1 to 2</b>	258	241	260	226
<b>3 or more</b>	51	64	78	88

## Expand Canvas-Based Tools

Continuing to develop Canvas-based early alert mechanisms (e.g., Tableau Dashboards, Dropout Detective) will help identify at-risk students in real time. Instructor adoption of the Canvas gradebook should also be improved to support these tools.

# Academic Advising Pillar Recommendations

## Transition to Professional Advisors

Transitioning to professional advisors across all schools is recommended to create a more consistent advising experience. This will require school-based implementation teams to establish plans and timelines, along with the development of standardized roles for directors of undergraduate studies, academic advisors, faculty mentors, and advising supervisors.

Survey results reveal significant gaps between the perceived importance of advising tasks and faculty capabilities, as seen in the table below. This highlights the need for professional advisors to ensure consistent support while also clarifying other key roles (e.g., directors of undergraduate studies, etc.).

**Table 2. Advisor Survey: Faculty Capability and Importance Ratings**

Responsibility Items	Training Priority
Advise students on course selection that fulfills Common Curriculum requirements.	High
Advocate for changes in academic policies or procedures to better serve students.	High
Assist students in determining if they are eligible to complete transfer work after enrolling at SMU.	High
Assist students in understanding how previous transfer coursework applies to their current program.	High
Help students resolve enrollment holds and issues.	High
Maintain accurate records of student interactions and academic progress in Advising Notes.	High
Maintain department website, oversee department's social media, and/or edit/create content for department newsletter.	High
Provide guidance on career options and how to connect their academic choices with future career goals.	High
Review transcripts and Degree Progress Reports to ensure students are on track to meet graduation requirements.	High
Train/support faculty as advisors/mentors.	High
Help students develop academic plans that align with post-graduate career goals.	Medium
Communicate important deadlines, opportunities, and policy changes to students.	Medium
Discuss resources for student well-being (health, counseling, etc.)	Medium
Engage in ongoing professional development to stay current on best practices in academic advising.	Medium
Help students build schedules and enroll in courses.	Medium
Implement strategies to enhance student retention and success.	Medium
Initiate outreach efforts to connect with students, especially those at risk or in need of additional support.	Medium
Schedule department classes, assign rooms, and monitor seats.	Medium
Update department's courses and requirements in undergraduate catalog.	Medium

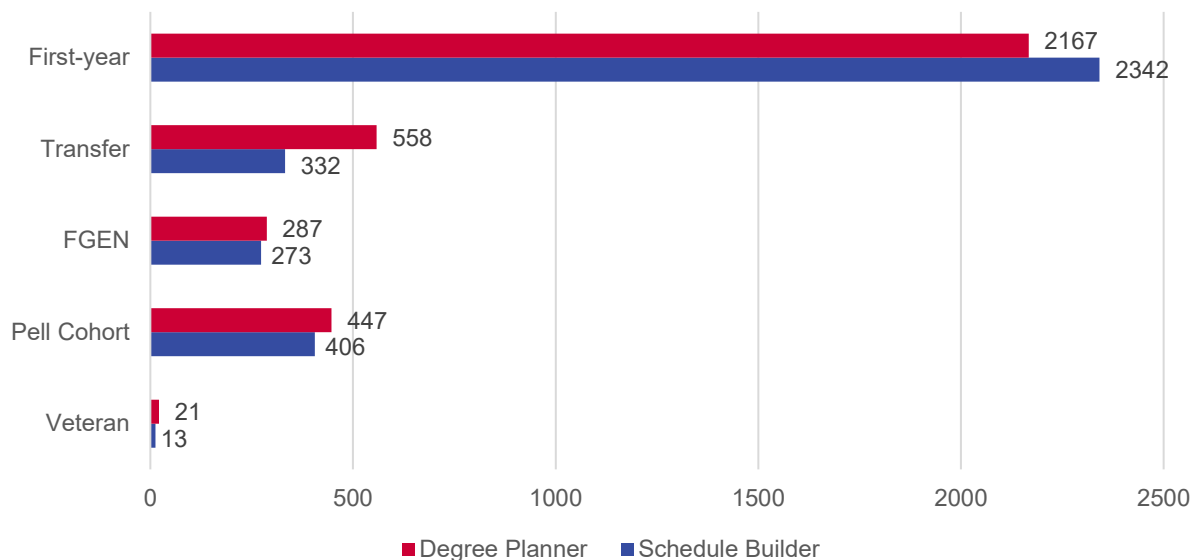
Advise students on course selections that fulfills major and minor requirements.	Low
Refer students to campus resources such as tutoring, counseling, and career services.	Low
Direct/prepare department graduation ceremony.	Low
Interpret and explain academic policies and procedures to students.	Low
Monitor students' academic progress and intervene when necessary.	Low
Oversee/organize the undergraduate honor society meetings and ceremonies.	Low
Refer students to other faculty about research projects, distinction papers, graduate study, etc.	Low
Refer to other faculty for research projects, distinction papers, graduate study, etc.	Low
Report on the undergraduate program at department meetings.	Low
Supervise internships and/or research.	Low

### Expand Training and Tool Use

Advisor training should be enhanced to include Retention Alert, Schedule Builder and Degree Planner. Increasing advisor participation in regular training and encouraging greater use of Degree Planner in the advising process is also crucial. Additionally, advisor appointment and degree planner data should be analyzed to identify potential equity gaps in access and usage.

Students from first-generation and Pell-eligible groups show a higher adoption of academic planning tools, reinforcing the importance of expanding training and access to these resources.

**Graph 2.** Student Usage of Degree Planner and Schedule Builder by Cohort Type



## First-Year & Gateway Courses Pillar Recommendations

### Course Redesign

Faculty support is needed to ensure access to Critical Reasoning (CR) and Civic and Individual Ethics (CIE) courses. Monitoring the availability of seats in these courses is essential for ensuring

student progress. Course redesign should continue with a focus on identifying and reducing unintended equity gaps.

Course redesign efforts have resulted in a marked decrease in DFW rates, particularly in Chemistry, as illustrated in the table below. This progress supports the continuation of redesign initiatives.

**Table 3. DFW Rates Overtime Course Redesign Departments and Courses Table**

Course/Term	1197	1202	1207	1212	1217	1222	1227	1232	1237	1242
ECON 1311	14.7%	3.8%	16.4%	22.7%	13.4%	38.4%	13.0%	33.9%	18.7%	21.9%
ECON 1312	5.8%	1.6%	4.0%	12.8%	7.1%	1.6%	4.8%	2.0%	4.4%	6.9%
CHEM 1301	9.6%	1.2%	3.5%	3.7%	8.9%	3.0%	13.0%	9.1%	7.5%	15.1%
CHEM 1302	15.2%		39.0%		39.0%		15.6%		19.5%	
CHEM 1303	30.9%	6.3%	24.4%	13.6%	35.7%	37.8%	41.6%	44.4%	16.0%	25.3%

### Support Faculty Development

The Student Engagement Institute (SEI) should be formally integrated into the Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE), with budget support planned for the next two years. Faculty should receive ongoing training in best practices to enhance student engagement, reduce DFW rates, and foster inclusive teaching.

The Student Engagement Institute (SEI) this year focused on the development of Critical Reasoning (CR) courses as part of SMU's Common Curriculum. The attendees were SMU faculty members who worked collaboratively to design and prepare these CR courses for offering in fall 2024.

### Conclusion and Looking Forward

Over the past three years, SMU in Four has successfully enhanced student learning and the overall undergraduate experience, with significant progress across the Early Alert, Academic Advising, and First-Year and Gateway Courses Pillars. These improvements have been especially impactful for SMU's diverse student populations. More equity gap exploration will continue in the final years of the QEP.

Looking ahead to Year Four, our efforts will focus on implementing the recommendations from Year Three. Enhanced practices will be transitioned into permanent structures. For example, aspects of the Early Alert Pillar will be integrated into the Office of Student Success & Retention. Similarly, a new professional advising model will be supported by the newly hired Assistant Provost for Student Advising and Academic Success Programs. A key metric for evaluating the progress of the Academic Advising Pillar will be the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), scheduled for spring 2025.

As we refine our strategies and move forward, we remain committed to improving retention, graduation rates, and fostering an inclusive academic community where all students can thrive.

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For more than 100 years, SMU has shaped minds, explored the frontiers of knowledge and fostered an entrepreneurial spirit in its eight degree-granting schools. Taking advantage of unbridled experiences on the University's beautiful campuses and SMU's relationship with Dallas – the dynamic center of one of the nation's fastest-growing regions – alumni, faculty and more than 12,000 graduate and undergraduate students become ethical leaders in their professions and communities who change the world.