

Exploring Challenges & Opportunities: Final Report

This BST project included 32 volunteers from the Purdue community who formed eight teams, each assigned to a specific student population. Project leaders were Erica Lott and Jimmy Cox. Each team of three or four volunteers developed a plan to interview students using the general protocol created by the project leadership team. All students were asked the same four questions:

1. What experiences have contributed most to your success at Purdue?
2. What challenges do you face in graduating on time (whatever “on time” means to you)?
3. Was there ever a time you considered leaving the university?
 - a. If yes: If you don’t mind sharing, can you provide more information about the experience and what prompted you to remain at the university?
 - b. If no: What about Purdue has kept you at the university?
4. What would you do differently if you could start your first year over again?

Groups could ask additional questions relevant to their specific population. Some teams also interviewed Purdue faculty and staff about their student population. Common questions asked:

1. What has been your experience with students that have left the university or considered leaving the university?
2. What are some patterns that students face that prevent them from graduating in a timely manner?
3. What advice would you give to incoming students?

One team that planned to interview students in their fifth or sixth year at Purdue was not able to complete the project. The other seven groups created posters that were shared first with the project team and then at the annual retreat. Below are key observations and insights from each group as well as pictures of their final posters.

Some common themes that emerged across multiple groups:

- Social capital is important. Students frequently reported that when they faced challenges, having key people on campus who they perceived as in their corner, or who could connect them with the help they needed, made all the difference. Social capital could come from a strong connection with a faculty member or staff member like an academic advisor, or it could come from peers in student organizations.
- Many students reported that they did not expect to need much help academically and/or did not expect Purdue to provide academic support. This often means that they aren’t likely to take in information about resources available when they first hear about it at the start of the semester, and then later when they do need help, they aren’t sure where to turn.

First Generation Students

Team members: Caitlin Diehl, Liz Flaherty, Karen Jacobsen, Isabel Jimenez-Ueche

Interviews: The team spoke with seven students

Observations & Insights:

- It is hard to know who is a first-generation student because the information is based on student self-reports, and students do not always know what the term means or whether their parents have earned a degree.
- Students they interviewed had low expectations about what kinds of academic support they could expect from Purdue. Since they did not expect to find help, they usually did not go looking for it.
- When asked about factors that contributed to their success, the most common answers were friends or classmates and faculty or staff.
- The biggest challenge reported was introductory STEM courses, which made several students consider leaving Purdue.
- What kept students here who considered leaving was personal connections with Resident Assistants, friends, faculty and staff, and a general sense of not wanting to let people down who had supported them.

First Generation Students

Team Members: Caitlin Diehl, Liz Flaherty, Karen Jacobsen, Isabel Jimenez-Ueche

Responses to survey questions are summarized below and frequency of occurrence for specific responses is provided in parentheses. We interviewed 11 students.

Factors Contributing to Success

- Friends or classmates for social support (36%)
- Staff and faculty (36%)
- Educational support: SI, open labs, etc. (27%)
- Campus organizations: clubs, Greek life, ROTC (18%)
- BGR (9%)

"Having pretty open discussions in classrooms and kids being willing to help each other."
"Relationships with friends and staff."

Challenges to Graduating On Time

- Not a concern (55%)
- Adding a second major, changing majors, CODO, adding a minor (18%)
- Adding additional/extra courses (field courses, study abroad) (18%)
- General STEM courses (9%)
- Financial constraints (9%)
- Not asking for help (9%)

Considered leaving Purdue?

- No (55%)
- Kind of (27%)
- Yes (18%)
- Challenges with intro courses (27%)

What kept you at Purdue?

- Purdue support system (RAs, friends, services, faculty, staff, etc.) (83%)
- Personal motivation - not let people down (family or scholarships) (50%)

Do differently during your 1st year?

- Get more involved (36%)
- Study more/go to class (27%)
- Improve my time management (27%)
- Believe more in my abilities (9%)

"Try and be more active in the department."
"Go to class. I didn't go to class at my first semester...I had a problem thinking I was getting points for going so I figured, what's the point?"

What helped you stay on track to graduate on time?

- Advisors, MyPurduePlan (36%)
- Other students (9%)
- Summer classes, AP credit, dual credit (27%)
- Personal goals/self motivation (18%)
- Clubs, ROTC: (9%)

"Working with advisors, going to office hours, but at the same time having space to be independent and do things my way."

Expectations for support to achieve academic goals

- No expectations (36%)
- Self motivations/personal goals (36%)
- Making friends (18%)
- Help rooms/tutors (9%)

"I don't think I really had any expectations. I wasn't expecting anyone to hold my hands and be like, 'do this, let's do this'."
"Clubs and making friends were my main things. Finding people with the same goals as I did and when things go tough, I had people to push me through it."
"I thought it would be up to me to get it all done, but they have help rooms."

How do you feel about support at Purdue?

- Positive response (It met my needs) (100%)

"It's been good and satisfied my needs."
"Made some pretty awesome friends. I think my friend group is what has helped a lot. My roommate would make me stay up and do homework."
"Happy. Thankful. Glad, Thankful for the support."
"Good. Feel like everyone backs me up regardless of if I want to stay or leave."
"I like all the academic resources available."
"I've been lucky to have great professors who really care about their students, care about me."
"Very good, the advisors help a lot, CAPS is also very good, and the peer teachers and TAs also help."

How do you learn about support at Purdue?

- Faculty/syllabi/in class (73%)
- Classmates in major or clubs (46%)
- Advisors (27%)
- Boiler Guide or online (27%)
- BGR (18%)

"My advisor has been helpful in providing lists of help, tutors, people, etc. She knew who to send me to. Professors also provide advice or suggestions for tutors or resources."

First generation student experience at Purdue

- Had a family member (usually sibling) that could share experience (56%)
- No effect (44%)
- No source of advice (11%)

"Helps having a sister in a similar major because she provides textbooks, notes, tools, etc."
"Wasn't any advice specific to what college was like, no 'when I was in college...'"
"Would like more school-sponsored events to help people struggling with a class or personal issues, tutor sessions that are better advertised."

Summary – the social structure of the university experience (making friends, developing relationships with advisors, staff, and faculty) was a common theme across the questions related to student success for this group.

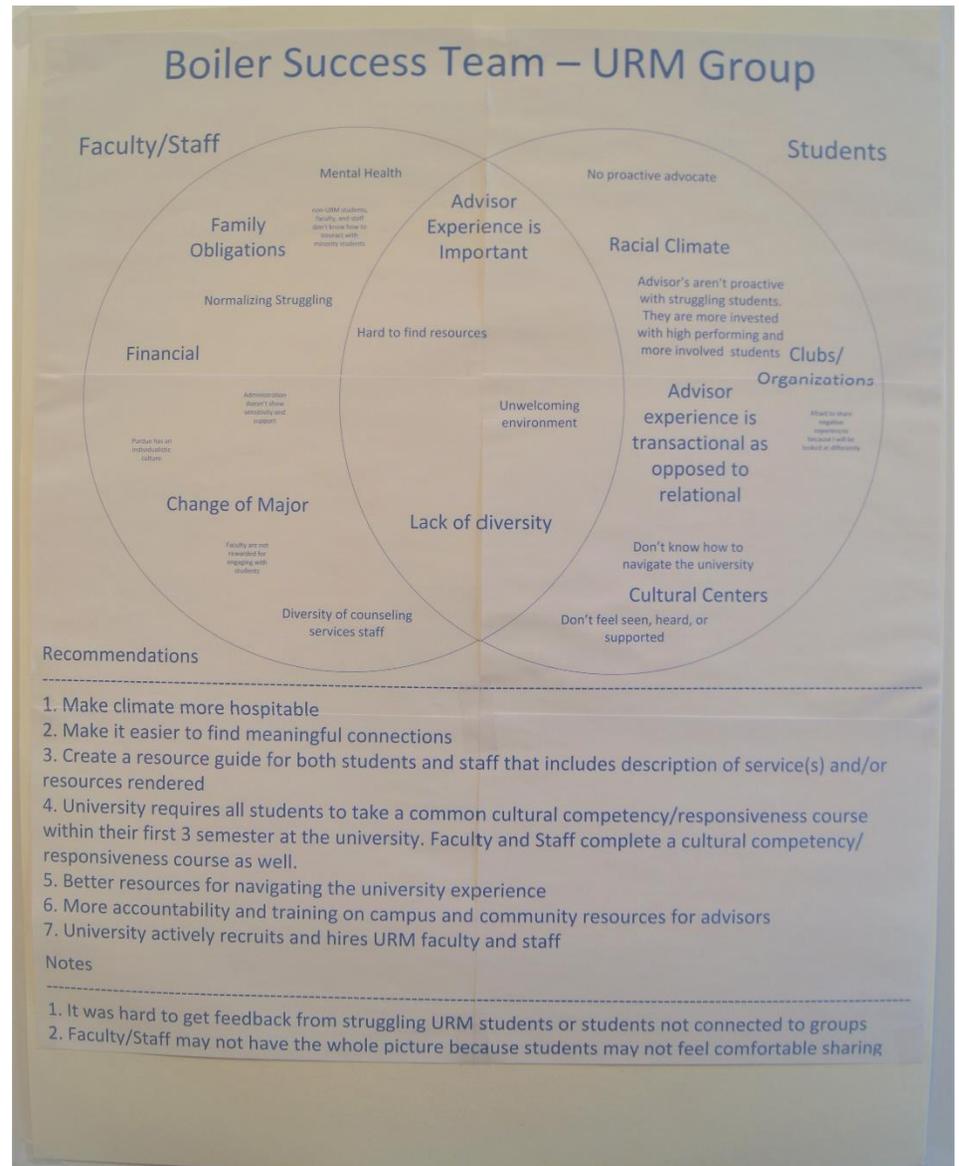
Underrepresented Minority Students

Team members: Brittany Allensworth, Jason Fish, Elliot Friedman, Jacquelyn Thomas-Miller

Interviews: The team spoke with six students and a few faculty and staff members as well

Observations & Insights:

- All but one of the students this team spoke with considered leaving Purdue due to the racial climate they experienced. They said they would have left if not for the cultural centers and student organizations they belong to that create a safe space to be themselves and not the only one who looks like them. The theme of social capital came up in general; this group said it was important to find connections on a campus that doesn't always feel welcoming.
- It was difficult for this group to find students to speak with because students felt like they have been ignored in the past and had no reason to believe they would be listened to this time.
- Several faculty members declined to be interviewed because they said they had so little experience with underrepresented students. One said that in her entire department of 500 students there are only 3 URM students.
- Students expressed that they don't always feel comfortable sharing their personal experiences with others; this means that faculty and staff may not understand the true lived experience of these students because they never hear the entire story.
- Another theme that came up is that addressing the needs of URM students must involve non-URM students, faculty, and staff. Creating a welcoming and inclusive climate should be part of everyone's responsibility.



CODO Students (Students who have changed majors or plan to do so)

Team members: Annie Jarrard, Mary Beth Lencke, Ashlyn Ruff, Ashley York

Interviews: The team spoke with 21 students and 8 staff members

Observations & Insights:

- Students mostly had a negative experience trying to change majors, and the poster below illustrates some of the hurdles that students face. CODO students very often feel lost, and like they have to figure everything out on their own. Support from their current advisor or an advisor in their new major makes all the difference but is not always present.
- All but four of the students said they face challenges to graduating on time. The most common problem was getting into pre-requisite courses for their desired major.
- More than half of the students said they had no expectations of academic support and were not aware of available resources.
- Most students said they had considered leaving the university; they felt alienated, classes too difficult, homesickness, financial problems.
- Staff said they thought students who leave do so because of poor grades and general lack of academic preparation.



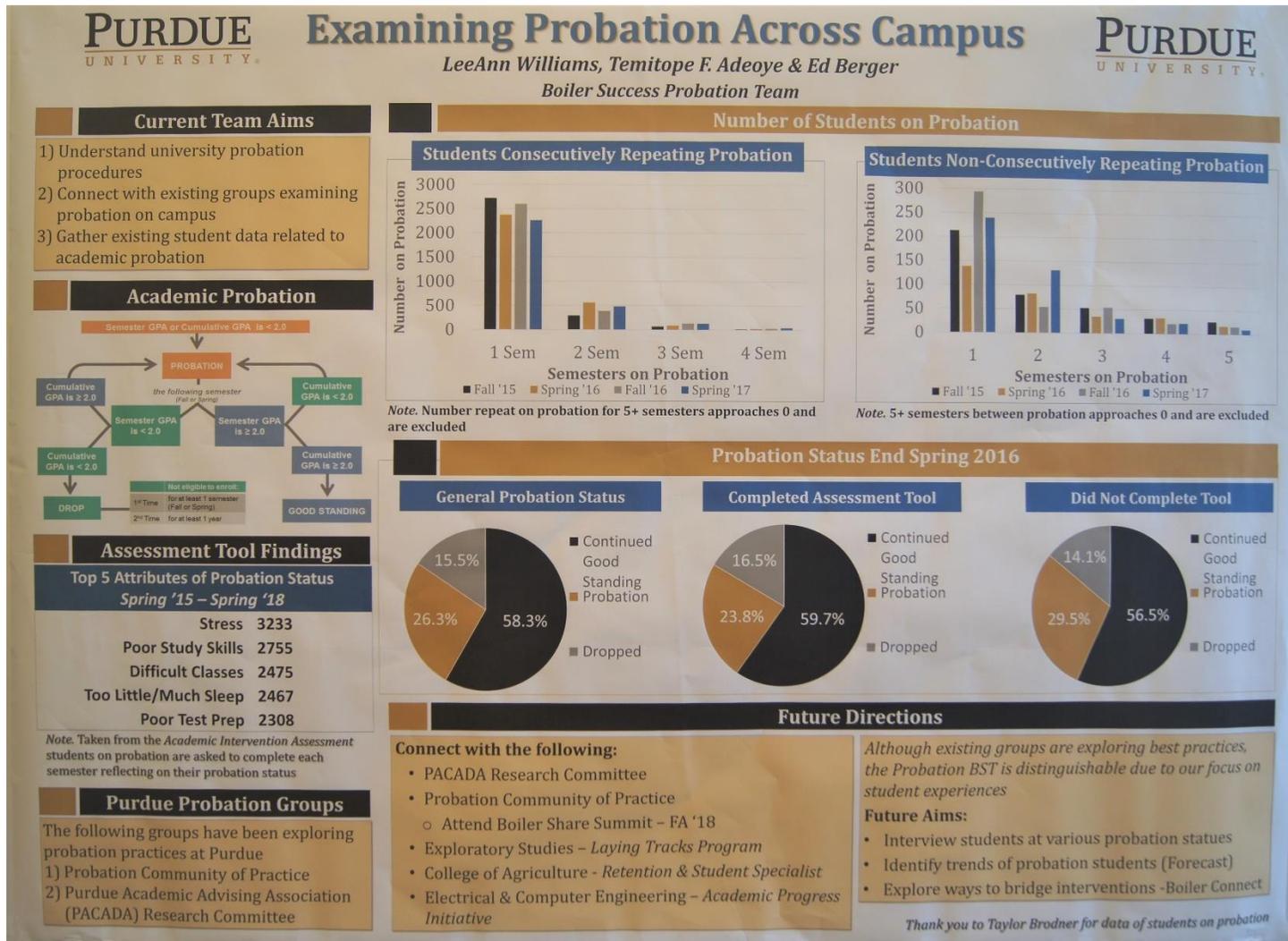
Probation Students

Team members: Temitope Adeoye, Ed Berger, LeeAnn Williams

Interviews: Rather than interview students, this team reviewed university policies and data from a probation survey

Observations & Insights:

- Top five causes of probation cited by students: stress, poor study skills, difficult classes, too little/too much sleep, and poor test preparation.
- The team spoke with members of the Community of Practice on Probation which developed the probation survey. One of their goals is to understand all of the things we as a campus ask students on probation to do. It could be helpful to condense the number of times a student has to meet with people to discuss their failure and instead focus on how to improve in the future.
- The team highlighted some areas that are experimenting on different approaches and said it would be helpful to study their effectiveness.



Students Near Graduation

Team members: Baylee Crum, Cassia Dean, Sally Luzader, Jennifer McDonald

Interviews: This team spoke with approximately 40 students, most of whom were attending a "Senior Send-off" event.

Observations & Insights:

- Social capital was a theme that emerged from this group as well. When asked which experiences most contributed to their success, the most common response was joining clubs and student organizations, because those allowed them to feel connected to others on campus who supported them.
- When asked what they would change about their first year, many students said they wished they had gotten involved more quickly. They came in thinking it would be better to just focus on classes for the first year but in retrospect wish they had balanced that with greater involvement right away.
- Most students said they never considered leaving Purdue. For those that did, loneliness, an intense curriculum, or not having a major were the reasons they cited.
- The team also asked students how prepared they felt for life after college. Students generally felt prepared for their careers but less certain about their ability to make adult decisions like budgeting.



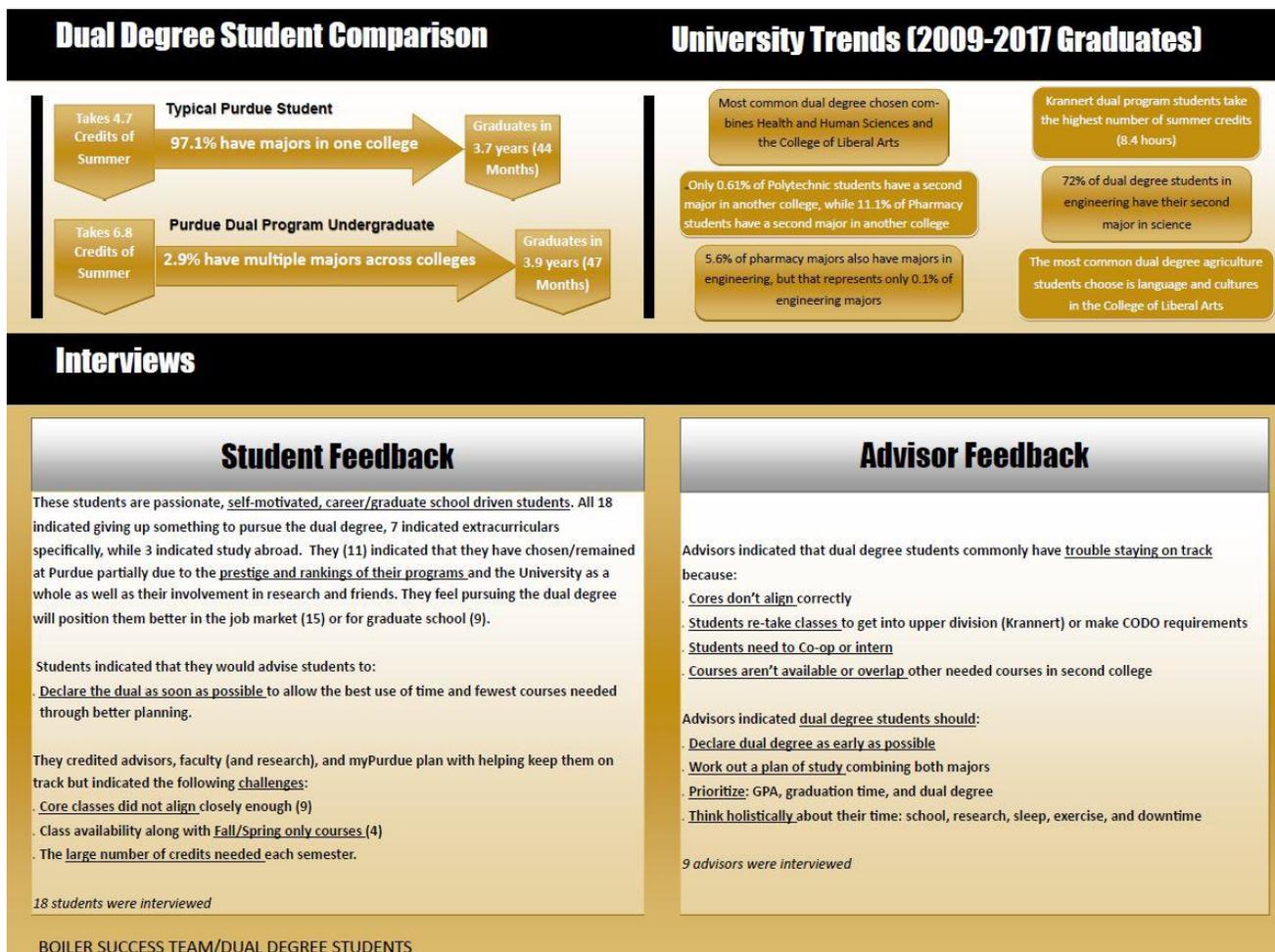
Dual Degree Students

Team members: Lupita Acosta-Roberts, Kelly Blanchard, Angela Goldenstein, Prudie Miller

Interviews: This team spoke with 18 students and 9 academic advisors

Observations & Insights:

- This group clarified that dual degrees are different from double majors; dual degree means majors in two different colleges or schools at Purdue.
- Students reported difficulty because core classes often do not align well across their two majors. Additionally it was challenging when their advisors did not know much about requirements in their other major or how to fit the two sets of requirements together.
- Advisors reported that dual degree students sometimes have to retake courses if a course taken for one major does not fulfill a requirement in the other, or if required courses either are not available when the student needs them or are in conflict with each other.
- Students reported that being more closely connected to their advisors, and having advisors who communicated with each other, helped them.
- The team had two primary recommendations: First, students who plan to complete a dual degree should declare it as soon as possible. Second, the form they fill out to declare their dual degree should be clearer about the potential challenges and extra time it might take to graduate.



Low-Income Students

Team members: Ellen Barbour, Lori Pence, Dwight Snethen

Interviews: This team interviewed 11 students and combined their stories into one narrative.

Observations & Insights:

- Many low-income students face challenges that are not as common for their peers and that don't go away when they arrive at Purdue: working long hours, often at an off-campus job, to pay for living expenses and class materials; struggling socially because they have less time and money to get involved and meet friends; feeling alone and like no one else on campus understands their experiences; family that lacks capacity to support financially and often going through their own struggles that students want to help with.
- Students reported that sometimes they would rather allow advisors or other Purdue faculty and staff to think they are a "slacker" for not getting involved or doing as well as they could in class than admit that they're struggling with financial problems.
- Students also said it can be hard to trust anyone with their story and that they're not used to advocating for themselves.
- Low-income students said they don't know how or where to get help. Once they do find a faculty or staff member they can trust, they rely on that person, but it's hard for any one person to be aware of all the potential resources and support available.

Boiler Success Team—Low Income Students

Year 0

- Limited access to rigorous HS curriculum and AP courses
- Transfer courses (dual degree) not accepted by Purdue
- Minimal to no guidance in college prep/application process
- Limited exposure to majors & careers

Year 1

- Financial aid deficient in covering food and housing
- Deficient financial support forces students to work—reducing time spent on studying and campus engagement
- Deficit in social or cultural capital—hinders ability to navigate campus culture, resources, and advocate for oneself
- Increased incidents of acute mental, emotional, and health issues
- All of the above impedes on cultivating a strong support system
- Major fit— not aligned with interests and/or not prepared for rigor—retake classes or CODO
- Benefits: Genuine connection with faculty, staff, and/or students for support is imperative

Years 2-4

- Year 1 challenges do not go away
- Year 1 benefits must continue
- Academic, financial, and/or personal predicaments cause students to back slide or fall off the mountain
- Limited or no safety net for mistakes, failure, or crisis

