

Program facing new challenges

Diversity goals, higher standards, leader's retirement will force refocusing of mission

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Just over a decade ago, the Groups Student Support Services program was facing an uncertain future.

Fewer than a quarter of its students were graduating from Indiana University, and the program had developed a negative image. An outside review called for changes.

And changes were made, officials say, including a tighter focus on academics and more attention to providing advising and mentoring services as long as students remain at IU.

"It doesn't look anything like it looked 10 years ago," said Janice Wiggins, director of the program since 1996.

Graduation rates have doubled. A review last November said Groups was meeting its goal of helping first-generation college students succeed, "and doing so in a fashion that can be held up as a model for other institutions to emulate." This spring, the Education Policy Institute, a Washington, D.C., organization, highlighted Groups as a "best practice" for promoting student success.

But new pressures may bring additional expectations and changes to the 38-year-old program. IU trustees called early this year for doubling the number of students from under-represented groups, primarily blacks and Hispanics, by 2014. At the same time, the campus has toughened admissions requirements and is trying to improve the student "profile" as measured by test scores and high-school rank.

That could mean refining the role played by Groups, which in a typical year is responsible for bringing in about half of the new black students at IU Bloomington.

Steve Ferguson, president of the IU trustees, said the board is serious about increasing student diversity. "That's an important part of the trustees' January statement and something that the whole board is very supportive of and has priority on," he said.

Meanwhile Wiggins - credited in the 2005 review as the "charismatic, nurturing and tenaciously hard working Groups director" responsible for much of the program's success - has said she plans to retire in the next year, forcing IU to look for an effective successor.

A head start

Established in 1968, Groups has served more than 9,000 students, giving them a head start to IU with a six-week summer program and offering counseling and advising help while they stay at the university. It targets first-generation college students, those without a parent who completed a four-year degree. Most Groups students are from low-income families; a few qualify because they have a disability.

About half the Groups students fully meet IU admissions requirements, Wiggins said, while others may have taken the



Groups director Janice Wiggins, right, is congratulated by Indiana University chemistry professor Michael Edwards after a quilt was presented to Wiggins during a luncheon to conclude the 2006 summer Groups program. After 10 years leading the program, Wiggins is retiring. Jeremy Hogan | Herald-Times
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right high-school courses but fallen short on grades. Some are also in the Hudson Holland honors program, and at least one was a Wells Scholar, winner of an elite award for new IU students.

Since the early 1970s, Groups has been partially funded by U.S. Department of Education TRIO grants. It's one of over 1,000 funded Student Support Services programs in the U.S.

But IU provides the bulk of the funding. The campus budget for Groups is \$3.25 million, said Neil Theobald, senior vice provost for budgetary administration and planning. The TRIO grant, funded until 2010, adds \$420,000 a year.

Wiggins said the grant is a "cushion" that helps the program. But some IU officials question whether federal money is essential.

Charlie Nelms, vice president for institutional development and student affairs, said rules tied to the federal grant prevent Groups from doing recruiting and high-school outreach that could make it more effective. He noted the Bush administration has tried to eliminate TRIO programs, including Upward Bound and Talent Search but not Student Support Services.

"A program this important should not be operating at the whims of whoever's in Congress," Nelms said.

Pushing for graduation

The 1996 review of Groups found that one-third of its students were leaving IU with academic problems within two years. And even among students who kept up their grades, it found, fewer than half were graduating. Only 20 percent of Groups students who started in 1989 graduated in six years.

That number has steadily increased, current officials said: The graduation rate for Groups students who started in 2000 was 50 percent.

IU's overall six-year graduation rate is about 70 percent, but Wiggins said many Groups students face financial pressures that make it hard to keep up with their peers. Some work 20 to 30 hours a week, she said. Some leave IU Bloomington for regional campuses, where they can live with family and pay lower tuition.

But many of the students, she said, get their degrees even if it takes 10 years.

"They stop out but they come back," she said. "It sticks with them, wanting to get this degree."

Nelms said that situation points to a need for more targeted financial aid. The Groups summer program is free, but Groups students ultimately rely on the same mix of need-based state and federal grants, part-time jobs and loans as other students.

As for finding an eventual successor to Wiggins, Nelms said having the program on a solid footing should attract strong candidates and help with a smooth transition.

But, he added, "Janice Wiggins is going to be very, very difficult to replace."

Groups voices

"They stop out, but they come back. It sticks with them, wanting to get this degree."

Janice Wiggins, director of the Groups program at IU

"My Groups experience was probably my roughest time. It was so intense. But I was so prepared in the fall."

Wakisha Malone, of Muncie, who started as a Groups student in 1995

"I made up my mind that first day, if someone thought I was eligible to get into this college, the only way out was to get a degree."

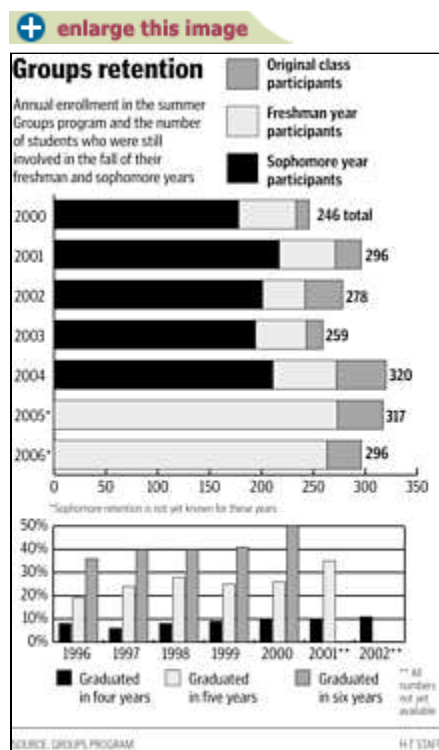
Lindsey Smith, director of the Monroe County Department of Child Services

"A program this important should not be operating at the whims of whoever's in Congress."

Charlie Nelms, IU vice president for institutional development and student affairs

"I had the best summer of my life."

Shelley Deaton, of Columbus, who started in the Groups program in 2001



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