The President should comment on actions being taken to improve two-year retention among African-American students.

As noted in our testimony, Salisbury University’s four-year average, second-year retention rate ranks third among our national performance peers. An important related statistic, SU’s six-year African-American graduation rate far exceeds our peer average and is the highest of all the comprehensive institutions in the USM.

Still, the second-year retention rate for the 2008 cohort of African-American freshmen has continued to improve to 78.26 percent compared to the 2007 cohort’s 75.96 percent. Salisbury University continues to work on a number of interventions to insure that we progress on the retention of African-American students.

SU has instituted the Powerful Connections Program, a semester-long mentor and orientation program, orchestrated through Multicultural Student Services. The program offers a variety of activities from pre-matriculation throughout the end of the first year to assist under-represented students with a successful transition to college-level work, as well as facilitate their sense of connectedness to the University community.

An additional success and retention measure fully implemented in fall 2008 was the University’s mid-semester reporting program, which is designed to encourage early and frequent feedback to students from faculty regarding their course progression.

Regardless of these initiatives, in our experience, the two most important factors in retaining African-American students are our ability to award significant financial aid and to provide sufficient academic support. As we have stated clearly and repeatedly in this testimony, the resources that SU has available to fund financial aid and our Center for Student Achievement are insufficient. Until those resources are expanded, we will be severely limited in our ability to increase—or even maintain—our current African-American retention and graduate rates, despite our many efforts to do so.

The President should comment on the implementation of SU’s achievement gap plan, particularly in light of recent budget constraints.

Without additional funds, the University’s ability to implement many aspects of the planned strategy to close the achievement gap will be seriously impaired. The Center for Student Achievement will remain in operation, but it is understaffed and running at one-half of its needed budget. We will continue to seek alternate funding sources to keep retention programs viable and have recently applied for a TRIO grant, which is currently under review.

Examples of critical programs needed include, but are not limited to, broadening support for freshmen in challenging courses by offering structured study sessions led by talented peer students; creating a targeted summer bridge program designed to facilitate the academic transition of new students; expanding Living-Learning Communities to provide a safety net for students in a supportive learning environment; and increasing tutorial services to better address student academic needs.

Salisbury University’s goal of narrowing the achievement gap cannot be met without the necessary resources, either through additional direct State appropriation, tuition revenue, or grants. We remain committed to pursuing additional resources for this purpose.

The President should comment on University efforts to improve diversity in light of recent findings that African-American student retention has declined.

As stated in our testimony, SU’s overall retention rate declined slightly last year. However, our African-American student retention rate actually improved last year.

Salisbury University’s Strategic Enrollment Plan places a high priority on recruitment and retention of minority students. Some of the examples include targeted recruitment and marketing in ethnically diverse high schools and specialized campus visitation programs. Retention initiatives include expansion of the Powerful Connections freshman mentor program, mid-semester grade reporting, and math placement.

The President should comment on the decision to level fund need-based undergraduate institutional aid in fiscal 2011 despite the planned 3 percent undergraduate resident tuition increase, and on the level of need SU meets for the neediest students. The President should also comment on the significant number of institutional awards provided to students that did not file a FAFSA.

The economic downturn has not only negatively impacted the operating budget of the University, but it also has had negative ramifications on the earnings of endowments within the Salisbury University Foundation, Inc. Since many of these endowments fund scholarships, those that were unable to achieve sufficient funds in FY 2010 were unable to meet their pre-existing commitments for student financial aid. As a result, the University has fulfilled those pre-existing commitments by institutionally funding the Foundation commitments for FY 2010. It is anticipated that the...
University may have to extend this funding into FY 2011 as well. Because of SU’s low levels of overall funding support as described in the earlier part of this testimony, our operating funds must overwhelmingly be used to pay employee salaries and benefits, utilities, and other operating costs. As a result, SU is not able to package financial aid at the levels that other USM institutions do.

The institutional aid listed in Exhibit 7 includes need-based aid, merit-based aid, and tuition waivers. The inclusion of tuition waiver costs, which represents 45 percent of the total awards, skews the data because filing a FAFSA is not required to qualify for this benefit. Examples of tuition waivers include those granted to USM employees and their dependents, senior citizens, and students in inter-institutional programs. Among USM institutions, SU has a negative net flow of tuition exchange. In other words, more students come to take courses for credit at SU than SU students choose to go elsewhere. For the institutional awards provided to students that did not file a FAFSA, 80 percent of these are tuition waivers. The remaining 20 percent are merit and mission awards based upon academic scholarship criteria and not on demonstrated financial need.

The President should comment on the impact of the University’s enrollment practices on access to students transferring to SU from other institutions, particularly community colleges, and on the University’s ability to manage unplanned enrollment growth despite existing budget constraints.

Transfer students are an important part of Salisbury University’s enrollment plan. Unfortunately, due to high demand and budget constraints, we have been unable to accommodate all of these students. For the last two years, SU has been forced to close admission to transfer students. In fall 2009, 749 transfer applicants and potential applicants were turned away. Similarly, this spring an estimated 388 transfer applicants were denied the opportunity to enroll.

SU had planned on a class of 1,200 new freshmen in fall 2009. Due to a higher yield rate than statistically expected, SU’s freshman class resulted in 1,276 students. In-state yield increased over 2.5 percentage points, as Salisbury University is increasingly an institution of first choice. This yield change accounted for our additional new freshmen.

To respond to this increase in freshmen, the University hired nine adjunct faculty members and converted residence hall lounges into living spaces. Based on changing yield statistics for the previous year, we are taking steps to reduce the freshman class size next year to approximately 1,200 students, despite the fact that applications are at an all-time high.

Limited resources to hire additional instructors resulted in less growth for the spring 2010 semester in comparison to fall 2009. As a result, SU reduced its new undergraduate enrollment in the spring by 25 percent (140 undergraduate students). Further, the full-time equivalent (FTE) figures, the basis for campus budgeting, grew at a slower rate than headcount due to changes to SU’s undergraduate curriculum. At this more conservative pace, the FY 2010 annualized FTE increased at a rate of 2.7 percent compared to the headcount rate of 3.6 percent.

Enrollment projections, submitted in February 2010, indicate that for fall 2010, SU is planning .5 percent undergraduate growth. The .9 percent undergraduate growth referred to in the analyst’s comments was based on last year’s enrollment projections and is no longer valid given the current budget. The actual .5 percent increase (37 undergraduate students) is based on SU’s increased retention rather than an increase in new students.