Over the past several years, we have focused on increasing graduation, improving graduation rates (thereby, closing the achievement gap), and enhancing the overall success of our students. The Office of Planning, Assessment, and Accountability (OPAA) has reported that we have experienced varying levels of success as it relates to a number of students graduating, as well as graduation rates. Our six-year graduation rate has fluctuated over the past few years, increasing from 35 percent in 2013 to 41 percent in 2015. Over the past seven years, we have seen a 33 percent increase in the number of students graduating. Retention rates (strong correlates of graduation and graduation rates) have not experienced dramatic improvements. The second-year rate for the 2014 cohort is 72 percent. In order to have a realistic opportunity to improve the graduation rate, it is widely accepted that the second-year retention rate needs to exceed 80%. The same level should be targeted for the remaining cohorts.

During the past decade, we implemented a number of activities designed to address the critical problems associated with second, third, and fourth-year retention. The one activity that has great promise is the use of Starfish’s early-warning system that allows faculty members and advisers to identify students at-risk. It has been shown that this system can help student retention between the first and second year by 5 to 15 percentage points. Starfish’s potential positive results are widely hailed throughout higher education. In 2014, The White House invited Starfish officials to its higher education summit on student success. Additionally, The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is funding research on how Starfish and other vendors can make a difference on student success. The University’s version of Starfish, iCAN, has been available to faculty for a number of years. However, it can only be accessed through Blackboard, the University’s Learning Management System. The fact that all faculty members are not using this system limits our potential success.

Given the significance of retention and college completion here at Bowie State University, it is imperative that we fully embrace our retention mitigation strategy, i.e., the early-warning system. Accordingly, I am announcing that all faculty members will be expected to establish a “minimum presence” on Blackboard. More specifically, all faculty, especially faculty teaching undergraduates, will be expected to post syllabi on Blackboard; record attendance in Blackboard; and use the Grade Center to post grades. Additionally, faculty will be expected to use the early-warning system, iCAN, and assist the University community in flagging students in academic distress.

Let me be clear, I am not asking faculty to transition to the online teaching platform. Many BSU faculties offer online courses and others are planning to do so. I do encourage faculty to consider the online platform because we continue to enroll students who desire more online courses. Nevertheless, I need to emphasize that the objective of this minimum presence expectation is to facilitate use of one of our key strategies designed to enhance student success. I will not be disappointed if one of the consequences of this effort is more faculty offering online courses.

It is desirable to have all faculty establish this minimum presence by the start of the fall semester. This might appear to be overly ambitious. However, there must be a collective sense of urgency as we seek to enhance student success. We have several members of the faculty already using Blackboard. Many will simply need to extend their utilization to include iCAN. To facilitate this, we will conduct education/training sessions prior to the start of the semester. Similar sessions will be available for persons currently not using Blackboard. We will also host several sessions throughout the semester to ensure that we escalate the effort to positively impact retention and graduation. We will assist you in learning how to use this tool.

There must be a collective sense of urgency as we seek to enhance student success. I am confident both in the commitment and conviction of this faculty. We will work together to reinvigorate our focus on student success. Thanks for your continuing commitment and hard work for the wonderful students at Bowie State University.

Weldon Jackson
Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs