

A Better Yardstick?

Measuring Graduation Rates in an Age of Swirling Students

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We do a disservice to our students, our institutions and society in general, when we accept only one way of moving through college.

For the past few decades, college graduation rates have remained stable—and apparently low—throughout the United States. Policymakers, politicians, the media and others want to know why more students are not completing their degrees within the traditional four- to six-year timeframe and why higher education has not done more to improve graduation rates.

To better understand what is happening, institutional researchers have been collecting data that show interesting patterns of student movement across colleges and universities in the United States. These patterns do not suggest the failure of higher education. Rather, they demonstrate that the system works in new and powerful ways to provide access and help students meet their educational goals and societal needs. But, to measure these effects, we need to focus on the new ways that students progress through college.

For a growing number of institutions, the cohort of students used to measure graduation rates—the traditional full-time freshman beginning college in the fall—no longer represents the majority of new students. In the Connecticut State University System (CSU), for example, new full-time freshmen in the fall semester represented only 41 percent of all entering new students in academic year 2003-04. For Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, this percentage is even lower—just one-third of new students arrive as a freshmen starting in the fall. The State University System of Florida similarly reported that only 39 percent of its 1997 cohort fell into this category.

In addition to looking at the characteristics of new student enrollment, institutions also report on freshman- to sophomore-year retention rates—a key accountability measure. CSU has been analyzing its retention rates for many years. We have found that about 74 percent of CSU students return as sophomores to the institutions where they began as freshmen a year earlier. But because Connecticut does not have a state-level student unit record system, we could not be sure

where those other students were going after freshman year. Through the National Student Clearinghouse, we found out that instead of dropping out, an additional 12 percent of former CSU freshmen enrolled elsewhere, raising the *persistence* rate among these students to 86 percent. Students may not be staying in our universities, but they are persisting by continuing their studies in other institutions. We also found that students who came from out of state and did not stay in one of our four universities most likely returned to their home state.

These data confirm that student movement through higher education is not linear, but often involves multiple stages or shifts toward alternative, more appropriate destinations. Instead of a single-lane highway to a degree, students move along a multiple-lane highway with connecting access roads and side streets.

The multilane highway promotes access because it provides multiple points of entry and a wider range of educational options to students. These points of entry include first-time enrollment in the spring semester, part-time attendance, transfers, dual enrollment and distance education.

These patterns of attendance reflect new challenges facing students and present new challenges for institutions and educational systems. But many of these patterns also reveal major improvements in access to higher education. For example:

- Students can now take courses at locations that accommodate their travel constraints. This is particularly true for growing numbers of nontraditional and low-income students.
- Working students can select academic schedules that accommodate their work and family schedules.
- Students can fine-tune or broaden their education by taking advantage of diverse educational settings and distance education offerings.
- Students can take courses at lower-priced institutions than the one from which they ultimately intend to graduate—an important factor for low-income students.

- Working students who do not need or want to complete a full degree program can acquire the new skills and competencies demanded in today's fast-changing workplace

Moreover, research on student attendance patterns demonstrates that the traditional cohort methodology used to measure graduation rates is misleading because it does not follow the student through multiple institutions.

Forty-six percent of the 2003-04 bachelor's degree completers at CSU entered the system as transfers, rather than first-year freshmen. CSU is not an exception: Victor Borden, associate vice chancellor for Information Management and Institutional Research at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, notes that two-thirds of the undergraduate degree recipients at his institution started their postsecondary careers at another college or university. In reporting graduation rates, not one of these transfer students will be counted as completers for the institution at which they first started or for the institution that grants them a degree. Although these students successfully complete their higher education, they are lost in the reporting system.

Policy Implications

Multiple patterns of attendance introduce a higher degree of complexity in the higher education landscape that is poorly understood by the public and even by many higher education institutions. The newly revealed pattern requires more flexible and explicit alignment of academic programs. It demands more effective academic interactions and collaborations among institutions and programs. It introduces major changes in student advising and student life, and, perhaps most importantly, challenges many of the common assumptions we make about students.

Most educational policy has been developed based on the needs of students using the one-lane highway, now a minority, instead of the increasing population of students exploring the multiple points of entry and advancement the system presents.

For instance, agreements between community colleges and four-year

Graduation Rates and Workforce Development

Multiple points of entry and multiple times of entry also enhance the ability of non-traditional students and practitioners to enter or continue their higher education at convenient moments in their careers. It is critical to exploit this scenario in order to respond to the demand of workers in areas of workforce shortages.

For example, we know that to address the nursing shortage, we need to provide access to further education for individuals practicing at many levels in this heavily differentiated workforce. The knowledge and skills of certified nursing assistants, licensed practical nurses, registered nurses, bachelor's-level practitioners and master's-level practitioners should explicitly map into pre-college and college points of entry into nursing preparation. Those with a license or degree at a given level should always be able to accumulate credits at convenient times to access the next professional step. Still another innovative approach permits entry to the nursing profession through accelerated programs, thus enabling students who did not originally major in the field to practice nursing within a short time. The more effective the education system in providing multiple access points and times, the higher the likelihood that a workforce shortage crisis can be resolved. Similar training and promotion systems are commonplace in the corporate world and are the basis for professional advancement.

Teacher shortages can also be alleviated by providing multiple points of entry to individuals at the paraprofessional and professional levels. We can invite college graduates to go back to school and get certified to teach, create pathways to the teaching profession starting at the associate level through solid articulation agreements with community colleges, and provide alternative routes to certification for experienced professionals in fields other than education.

Waiting for students to enter college in the fall semester and move through higher education in the traditional, linear way simply will not produce the numbers of graduates needed to end shortages in these or other critical areas.

—E.L., A.S., G.B.

colleges are based on the assumption of a linear transition from associate to bachelor's degrees in existing programs. The data, however, have also shown significant "reverse transfer" from four-year colleges to community colleges. Are these reverse-transfer students complementing their education in ways that a rigid, linear system does not permit? Are they sharpening their basic skills and then returning to the four-year institutions or graduate school? Are they seeking to acquire work-related skills they did not think relevant before?

Thanks in part to the Internet, many students have become knowledgeable consumers and are finding the best options to achieve their educational goals. They may even have found bet-

ter and more cost efficient ways to attain their educational goals and complete their degrees than is recognized.

Higher education is becoming analogous to industries that assemble products in different places in an effort to maximize efficiency without compromising quality (the Airbus 380 airplane is a good example). Students are, in many instances, assembling their degree in different places. These students are acquiring knowledge and skills that need to match the expected learning outcomes of each degree program. So it is particularly important that quality assurance frameworks be provided for students who earn credits at different institutions.

For example, Alexander McCormick, senior fellow at the Carnegie

Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, points out that student mobility and the portability of credits create the need to ensure “educational coherence” of undergraduate programs.

Multidirectional transfer policies and agreements should be developed to ensure that credits previously earned are not lost. Both credit transfer for specific course content and robust maintenance systems that include assessments such as electronic portfolio systems are needed to facilitate the portability of credits and ensure quality and coherence of learning. Such systems should truly reflect the wide scope and the progression of student learning in any higher education program. The evidence of the learning should go much beyond standardized testing approaches and should ideally include a battery of summative and formative assessment reflective of learning in a swirl environment. It must be recognized that a much more comprehensive approach is needed than has been normally required in traditional transfer and articulation agreements.

System Accountability

The traditional measure of graduation rates cannot continue to be the sole indicator of institutional effectiveness.

Having many points and times of entry needs to be recognized as an effective measure of institutional access and of successful transfer and articulation policies. Traditional accountability measures tend to disregard transfer data; transfer students are not counted in graduation rates. Performance measures should recognize the importance of having successful transfer opportunities. Institutions should create compatible systems that track student progress, even if they leave. Groups of institutions have already created common ways to follow student progress. The Joint Commission on Accountability Reporting (JCAR), for example, has produced a Technical Conventions Manual that serves as a basis for all member institutions to report on student academic advancement, transfer, graduation and licensing pass rates. Institutions such as Northeastern Illinois University in

Chicago have adapted the JCAR guidelines to create more accurate definitions in the regular reporting of student academic advancement.

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Additionally, it is important to encourage scholars and institutional researchers to examine why multiple attendance patterns have developed, particularly among first-generation, low-income and nontraditional students.

Understanding the complexities of student attendance patterns will help higher education do a better job with retention and graduation of traditional and nontraditional students. We do a disservice to our students, our institutions and society in general, when we

accept only one way of moving through college and, as a consequence, limit access. The performance of many comprehensive institutions is inadequately measured when we disregard the success of nearly half of the students who graduate. A more complete view of the system will also provide a more accurate description of current trends in access, retention and graduation in higher education. And it will certainly underscore the need to strive for a higher education system that, while maintaining its academic rigor, can also become more student-oriented, more flexible and more interconnected.

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