

Not Always by the Numbers

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Statistics used to determine the graduation rates from Connecticut's state universities not only fail to reveal the whole truth, but can be quite misleading.

Consider these scenarios:

A student attends a local community college for two years, then transfers to Central Connecticut State University, where she graduates after completing her fourth year in higher education.

Another student enters Western Connecticut State University as a freshman, but mid-way through sophomore year must leave school due to a family illness. After a year, he is able to return, but only part-time. The student juggles job, family responsibilities and education, but manages to graduate seven years after freshman orientation.

A third student begins freshman year at an out-of-state university, but decides by year's end that the campus is too large, and transfers to Eastern Connecticut State University, where the environment is more to her liking. She graduates with honors three years later.

A biology standout in high school decides to enroll at Central. After fresh-

man year, his family moves to New Haven, and he transfers to Southern, going on to earn his bachelor of science degree one semester early by taking classes each summer.

These circumstances are not unlike situations that occur regularly at the four Connecticut State University System institutions — Central, Eastern, Southern and Western — as well as colleges across the country.

Under the standard and widely-used definition to compare college and university accountability and effectiveness, the "graduation rate" based upon these examples would be, astonishingly, zero. Four students have graduated, but nonetheless the graduation rate is zero.

How can that be? It is because the graduation rate is calculated solely based upon full-time students who begin their education at an institution and graduate from that same institution within six years. If you don't go wire-to-wire at one university and graduate within six years, for statistical purposes, you simply don't count at all.

Significantly, even using this method, the graduation rates at the four state system universities continue to im-

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prove and all exceed the national average. Initiatives developed to propel that progress even further are underway, and working.

Does it make sense then to criticize a perceived low graduation rate when a university can graduate hundreds of students, year after year, who are not counted.

We live in a time when college costs have risen beyond the reach of many families, when changing academic interests or real-world experiences often lead to transferring schools, when part-time students stretch their education to balance demands of jobs and family and when young people are told to prepare to change jobs many times.

We need to be careful before leaning so strongly on a single statistic that may not capture the full scope of what a university offers its students, and omits countless satisfied customers.

Nearly half the state system's students are the first generation in their families to attend college. Many succeed, often by sheer force of will, but some will not. Some will stop their education, only to resume later as their personal circumstances permit.

An increasing number of community college students are also being attracted to continue beyond their associate's degree (up 51 percent since 2001).

That is good news for Connecticut, but does not move graduation rates at all.

Should universities be penalized, in the statistics game, for being attractive and viable options for students who transfer in? Consider this: nearly nine in 10 state system graduates remain in Connecticut after graduation.

Regardless of when they arrive, or how long it takes to complete their education, they tend to stay in overwhelming numbers. For them, graduation opens up the opportunity of better paying jobs and more satisfying careers, even if they are never counted in the university's "graduation rate."

It is unlikely that this statistic, as now defined, will disappear. It should, therefore, be better understood for what it is and what it is not. It has the potential to obscure considerable accomplishments. The numbers can be right, and still lead us to conclusions that would be wrong.

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This article was published on November 29, 2009

Hartford  **Courant.**



Connecticut State University System
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