

Moving to a Better Measure

by Brendan J. Kennedy

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) found in a recent report that “a common criticism of our current graduation rate metric is that it is based on an outmoded model of student behavior that assumes linear and timely progression through a single institution.”

In other words, the way in which we describe the graduation rate at our colleges and universities is outdated and obsolete.

The graduation rate at a college or university has traditionally been computed solely on a “first-time-full-time” population. It has not included part-time students, students who have attended college elsewhere before attending the reporting institution, or students who began their studies in a term other than fall.

These part-timers, transfers and non-fall enrollees are a growing segment of the college student population, particularly at public institutions, but are not counted when an institution’s graduation rate is calculated.

The report noted that “this model fails to recognize the increasingly common ‘swirling’ behavior that involves alternating full- and part-time attendance, enrollment in multiple institutions, transfer, and stopping out (interrupting one’s studies for a semester or more). By not taking into account students’ actual enrollment behavior and by failing to encompass much of what institutions do, current graduation rate data lead to misleading conclusions about institutional performance.”

That is the crux of the matter. Drawing conclusions from data that fail, by definition, to reflect what is actually occurring is fraught with peril. Such reliance, the AASCU report adds, “fails to take into account variation in institutional mission and the characteristics of entering students. This effectively blames institutions whose missions are more student-access oriented.”

The universities of the Connecticut State University System (CSUS) – Central, Eastern, Southern and Western – are precisely such institutions, committed to both access and success, drawing students of varying academic histories.

Nearly half of CSUS students are the first generation in their families to attend college, and many are from low-income families or traditionally under-served populations. An increasing number began at a Connecticut Community College or transferred from a private college or university, either elsewhere in Connecticut or outside the state.

Years ago, when graduation rates were first reported to government agencies, it was assumed that enrolling students were just out of high school and young. They came from families, if not prosperous, that would at least be the primary source of support for the student, and the student would remain at the same institution in a continuous four-year block through graduation.

That is much less true today. Clifford Adelman, then a Senior Research Analyst with the U.S. Department of Education, reported in 2006 that nearly 60 percent of undergraduates are multi-institutional. Community college has become a more common starting point on a path to a bachelor's degree, with transfer rates increasing 10 percent nationwide between 2000 and 2004. Across CSUS, the increase has been 51 percent since 2001.

Under the current statistical model for "graduation rate," neither the "original" school nor the "finishing" school can include the graduating student. A new measure called the *Undergraduate Success and Progress Rate* attempts to respond to the need for better data. Part of the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA), a recent initiative developed by AASCU and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC), it includes transfers as well as first-time students. Central, Eastern, Southern and Western participate in this initiative.

It reports on student persistence beyond one institution, tracking students throughout a six year period. This allows an institution to include students from a given fall cohort who, after six years, either graduated or are still enrolled at their institution, as well as currently enrolled students who initially began at another institution and those who began at their institution and subsequently graduated elsewhere.

At Central Connecticut State University, to its credit, the graduation rate under the traditional definition has increased from 40 to nearly 50 percent in recent years, due to the steady work of students, faculty and administrators. As defined under the VSA, however, the success rate jumps to near 75 percent.

Although not a perfect measure, the VSA method does a better job of reflecting the percentage of students who persist in higher education, taking into account the impact of a specific institution. While it does not include students who started either on a part-time basis or outside of the fall semester - or those who continue beyond six years - it moves closer to reflecting how an institution responds to the academic needs of today's students.

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