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March 2, 2012

Students Who Don't Count

By Sara Lipka

The people we tend to call "traditional" students finish high school, march to college, and keep at it until they graduate, more or less on schedule.

National data-collection systems are set up to track the progress of those people: first-time, full-time students who enroll in the fall and get degrees from the places they started, in at most three years for an associate degree or six for a bachelor's.

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Seven experts assess the meaning behind the measurements.

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But the traditional road is less and less traveled. Of the five million students who started college in the fall of 2009, 2.4 million of them didn't fit the federal definition, according to the U.S. Education Department.

Nearly 40 percent of all students in college then were enrolled part time, the department's data show. And many students from that entering class have probably since transferred. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, a third of students who started college in the fall of 2006 transferred at least once in the five years that followed. At the same time, colleges increasingly serve adult students who may have earned some credit in the past and now want to finish a degree.

Transfers, part-timers, and students who take a break and re-enroll either later or elsewhere—even if they graduate—don't count.

That group would include President Obama, who started at Occidental College, in Los Angeles, in 1979. As a rising junior, looking to find a larger community of black students, he transferred to Columbia University. He got his diploma in 1983, and both institutions consider him an alumnus. But by national standards, first used in the mid-90s, he wouldn't even be a graduate. He'd be nothing.

Same goes for the front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination, Mitt Romney. He went to Stanford University in the fall of 1965, but he left the following summer on his Mormon mission, spending more than two years in France. Back in the United States, he enrolled at Brigham Young University in 1969 and graduated two years later. But he wouldn't count either.

The seven people profiled here are attending college on their own terms. Work, military service, and shifting goals have interrupted their college experiences, but they have been determined to graduate. Still, they don't count.

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