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The Rise and Fall of the Graduation Rate

By *Jeff Selingo*

A college's graduation rate is such a basic consumer fact for would-be students these days that it's difficult to imagine that the federal government didn't even collect the information as recently as the early 1990s.

If not for two former Olympic basketball players who made their way to Congress and wanted college athletes to know about their chances of graduating, we might still be in the dark about how well a college does in graduating the students it enrolls.

Making Sense of Graduation Rates

College Completion

Who graduates from college,
who doesn't, and why it matters.

College Completion Web Site

How important are completion rates? *The Chronicle's* new site presents the numbers, puts them in context, and allows you to compare rates across the nation.

Completion in Context

[The Students Who Don't Count](#)

The growing group of transfers, people who take a year off, and part-time students are not included in national data about who finishes college.

[Do Completion Rates Really Measure Quality?](#)

Seven experts assess the meaning behind the measurements.

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In the late 1980s, the two basketball players, Rep. Tom McMillen and Sen. Bill Bradley, wanted to force colleges to publish the graduation rates of their athletes. Although the NCAA eventually agreed to publish the information on its own, the idea still made its way into a broader disclosure bill in 1990 that also required colleges to publish crime rates at their institutions. By then, the graduation-rate provision was expanded to include all students. The thought was that you can't compare athletes without knowing the rate for everyone else on the campus.

It would be another five years before colleges actually started to report their graduation rates because of debates among federal regulators over exactly how to collect this information.

More than 15 years later, the debate over how to measure college graduation rates and what they measure rages on.

Even before the Education Department settled on regulations in the mid-1990s, the definition that they were working from in the law was quickly becoming outdated. The law defined the rate as the percentage of full-time, first-time students who enrolled in the fall and completed their degree within "150 percent of normal time"—six years for students seeking a bachelor's degree.

"The definition made sense for what higher education was in the late 1980s, full-time and residential," says Terry W. Hartle, who at the time was working for Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, a major figure in higher-education policy making.

During the 1990s, higher education was in a state of rapid transition, with more students going to college part time and transferring between institutions, and more adults returning for their degrees. What were called nontraditional students then are today's traditional students. But very few of them are captured by the federal definition of the graduation rate.

"What everyone underestimated was how challenging of an idea this was going to be to implement and how quickly it was going to be obsolete," says Mr. Hartle, now senior vice president for government relations at the American Council on Education.

Every year, the method by which the government measures the graduation rate gets further and further from what's actually happening on campuses. For example, about one-third of students now transfer from the college where they started, according to a recent report from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

A better way of collecting graduation rates is already well known: a "unit-record" tracking system that would follow students from institution to institution for the full length of their college careers. Attempts to create such a system were defeated in Congress several years ago, in part by lobbyists for private colleges who worried about the privacy of student records.

"We have a battle between two competing goods, better data on one hand and privacy on the other," says Sarah A. Flanagan, vice president for government relations at the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities.

What's puzzling about the opposition by some in the higher-education establishment to collecting more accurate graduation data through a unit-record system is that under such a method the rates at most institutions would probably improve.

One theory about why some private-college presidents oppose an improved system is that it would most likely raise the bottom-line numbers at public colleges. That would close the gap between the two groups and raise questions about the argument perpetuated by less-selective private colleges that they cost more but at least their students get their degrees on time.

Input vs. Output

But even if we were able to publish improved data, the question will remain whether the rate actually measures the quality of an institution. Colleges that continue to do poorly, even under a better measurement, will still offer other excuses. A likely one is that the rate depends too much on the types of students an institution admits.

Indeed, several higher-education experts have long argued that while the graduation rate is often hyped as an output measure, it's really an input measure, like SAT scores and class rank. But Vincent Tinto, a professor of education at Syracuse University and one of the nation's leading experts on college completion, says that even institutions with similar selectivity in admissions have substantial differences in graduation rates.

"There is a lot more to the ability of colleges to graduate their students than is reflected in the students they admit," says Mr. Tinto, the author of a forthcoming book on the subject, *Completing College: Rethinking Institutional Action* (University of Chicago Press).

When giving advice to prospective college students and their parents, Mr. Tinto tells them to seek out an institution's graduation rate and "then ask what is it for students like them." That's an

important figure for colleges to supply to applicants, Mr. Tinto says, given that rates differ within institutions based on factors like gender, race and ethnicity, and major. And one dimension the rate doesn't capture, he adds, is student intention. Some students enter an institution, especially two-year colleges, planning to transfer.

One place you sometimes see wide variances between graduation rates is within state public-college systems, although they often have comparable admissions standards. Take Pennsylvania, for example, where graduation rates of the 14-campus public-college system range from 24 percent (Cheyney University) to 65 percent (West Chester) and many points in between. To the system's chancellor, John C. Cavanaugh, the rates are nothing more than "efficiency of throughput." They might tell him that some campuses provide more academic support services to students, but they don't "answer the question: What do students know, and how well do they know it?"

True, graduation rates don't determine the quality of a degree. Yet students who start college but doesn't finish are typically no better off than those who never even started, and in some cases might be worse off, if they took on debt. Given the subsidies they give to colleges, federal and state governments have a stake in making sure that students finish what they started. And a college credential remains one of the only signals to the job market that a potential employee is ready.

"In a society that cares about the credential, finishing college matters," maintains Mark Schneider, a former U.S. commissioner for education statistics and now vice president at the American Institutes for Research. "Employers don't advertise they want six years of college. They want a degree."

Policy Pressure

A major fear on the part of higher-education leaders who play down the impact of the graduation data is how, and by whom, the rate is used. At least some college officials support using a graduation measure as a comparative consumer tool. For example, more than 300 public four-year colleges have joined the [Voluntary System of Accountability](#) program, which has devised a new completion metric that includes transfer students, using data from the National Student Clearinghouse.

What worries some higher-education officials is that measurements adopted as useful tools for consumers could turn into an accountability stick for the government.

"Most of the student unit-record systems," Ms. Flanagan says, "are being built for policy, not consumer information." Translation:

Politicians want not just transparency for consumers, but they also want to reward institutions that do well and punish those that don't measure up.

While Mr. Cavanaugh of the Pennsylvania state system supports a unit-record system, he too worries about the policy implications, especially for graduation rates. "You don't want to end up with the higher-ed version of No Child Left Behind," he says, in which the jobs and salaries of individual faculty members are dependent on the academic success of their students.

"Most faculty members went through grad school learning that rigor is how many students you fail, not how many you graduate."

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 **tardigrade** 21 hours ago

Rigor is **why** you fail students, not how many you fail.

8 people liked this.

 **robanatigan** 7 hours ago

"Employers don't advertise they want six years of college. They want a degree." This reminds me of the classic Chinese proverb, "Three in the Morning":

"When the monkey trainer was handing out acorns, he said, 'You get three in the morning and four at night,' This made all the monkeys furious. 'Well, then,' he said, 'you get four in the morning and three at night.' The monkeys were all delighted."

3 people liked this.

 **11167997** 3 hours ago

The article obviously misses a lot, a lot those of us who work on accurate data reporting have been making noise about since Bradley and McMillen, two Rhodes scholars, gave us this distinctly ludicrous piece of accounting---and in the name of athletes, not everybody. If the Education Department had published my "Light and Shadows on College Athletes" (1990) six months earlier (well, to be fair, if I had finished it six months earlier), we might never have had the Student Right-to-Know Act. At the least, it might have made more sense than it did. What the study showed, using the first NCES transcript-based national longitudinal study (that ran for 12 years after high school graduation) was that college athletes in major sports graduated at the same rate as everyone else---but that it took them longer to do so. Surprise? Also---and this is critical to what this story misses---that they graduated ANYWHERE, not just at their first institution of attendance.

So, we come to the fact that the Graduation Rate Survey does not count President Obama as a college graduate. And he represents 1 out of 5 (yes, you read that correctly) of students who start at a 4-year college (full time or part time) and earn a bachelor's degree in 8 years who earn it from a

DIFFERENT school than the one in which they began. How do we know this? From the same kind of transcript-based longitudinal study that NCES has now run 3 times in 3 decades and is about to do again. Transcripts don't lie, and we have a highly mobile population, something this article might have acknowledged. National longitudinal studies obviously don't provide institutional graduation rates, but they give you a good hint of what you will find when you start taking account of these people, stop penalizing the institutions at which they began, and start recognizing them at the institutions from which they ultimately earn their degrees. Until we take account of horizontal transfers---let alone vertical ones (community college transfers are non-people in the Graduation Rate Survey)---we're going to have miserable data and miserably distorting data. Vince Tinto (an old and good friend) and I went over this in the course of his writing "Completing College," and I trust he has given it the prominence it deserves.

8 people liked this. [Like](#)



snachbar 1 hour ago

This may sound like a novel idea, but why doesn't the Federal government take steps to recognize best practices and positive achievements instead of trying to find a "one-size fits all" solution to the problem of degree completion. The Federal government does awards programs and ceremonies very well.

Consider this. The executive branch and the education community, both educators and advocates, could create a commission similar to the one that administers the Baldrige Awards for the Department of Commerce. Each year, the commission could award an attractively sculptured trophy for Institutions of Excellence. Public and private, for-profit and non-profit, institutions would be eligible. There are plenty of experts who could set benchmarks for the schools as well as define best practices.

There are plenty of schools that have already earned high regard. James Madison University and the University of Mary Washington, both in Virginia are two examples. While they take many "very good" students with SATs between 1100 and 1200, the four-year graduation rates at both are equal to UCLA. They deserve their due.

[Like](#)



teachfordamasses 1 hour ago

All we need to do to improve graduation rates is pass everyone in every class. Surely we all recognize that the pressure to improve graduation rates is resulting in giving higher grades for less work to more students. Wait ten years and the new outcry will be that we have meaningless degrees.

6 people liked this. [Like](#)



bbr123 43 minutes ago

When enrollment is up students who are not doing well are dismissed. When enrollment is low students who are not doing well, who write down any type of excuse, are readmitted.

If regular admissions gives an institution the numbers they want, students who did not qualify are not admitted. When enrollment numbers are low students are admitted who do not meet regular admissions standards.

I am sure the data they used does not have this clearly marked.

[Like](#)



drkenlee 33 minutes ago

I can guarantee a stellar graduation rate by accepting only the top 1% with perfect SAT or ACT scores. The real value of higher education is the value added to students with no such credentials.

So perversely, those campuses that add the most value per student may have the lowest graduation rates. I would not penalize any faculty that takes on the much harder task as it is a very important path to achievement of the American dream.

1 person liked this. [Like](#)



hankwalker 30 minutes ago

The obvious concern is when admissions selectivity and graduation rates are not correlated. Most public universities have minimal selectivity in admissions, so demands for high graduation rates would naturally lead to decreased rigor. In some cases, graduation rates have nothing to do with selectivity or rigor, but are about breadth of opportunities. I went to Caltech, and it has a relatively high loss rate simply because some students decide they do not want to major in science or engineering. I regularly had friends who transferred to UC Santa Barbara since it was next to the ocean, there were twice as many women as men (there were 18 women in my class of 180), and my friends said they worked half as hard and got straight A's. A graduation rate metric captures none of this.

1 person liked this. [Like](#)

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