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The Student Swirl

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By Jeff Selingo

College campuses are full of long-held assumptions about how academe works. A perilous one for the future of American higher education is that high-school students pick a college, enroll, and—two or four years later—graduate from the same institution.

That pathway hasn't been the norm for a majority of college students for quite some time, and the findings from two major projects released in the past few weeks reveal that student behavior in obtaining a college credential is becoming even less predictable: It's much more of a "swirl" than a straight path (a phenomenon identified by Clifford Adelman in the 1980s). That swirl has important implications for policy makers and college leaders.

The first data points come in a new report on a group of students we know very little about from government statistics: transfers.

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, which gets information basically in real time from institutions, found that one-third of students transfer from one college to another before earning a degree. More than a quarter of transfers cross state lines, and perhaps most important, they are more likely to switch from a four-year college to a two-year one rather than the other way around (another long-held assumption in higher ed).

All of those transfer students are essentially invisible to the federal government when it comes to tracking them to graduation.

The other recent report to note was a new Web site, unveiled this week by The Chronicle, that shows completion rates in American higher education. The statistics on the site for individual colleges confirm what many of us already knew: The way the federal government measures college completion is deeply flawed. It doesn't count part-time students. It doesn't count transfers. By one estimate, the rate ignores up to 50 percent of all enrolled students.

For policy makers, the implications of those and other findings are fairly obvious. Without getting a handle on how today's students consume higher education, people who work in Washington and in state capitals will continue to put in place ideas that are based on outdated assumptions about a linear student pathway.

Indeed, because the data on students are collected from colleges using many assumptions about how colleges worked in the 1980s, it's impossible to figure out what's even happening

today. That's why the Clearinghouse statistics are so revealing. For colleges, the implications are less clear but perhaps more worrisome. Because of technology, students have more choices than ever on how and where to get their education. They apply to more colleges than ever, and now seem less "brand loyal" once they get to a campus. If they're unhappy, are struggling academically, or can't afford tuition for their sophomore year, they're leaving.

For now, they are going to other institutions because they don't have many alternatives if their goal is to earn a degree. While some transfer students might be interested in piecing together a degree from a mix of traditional and emerging providers—for cost and convenience reasons—it's basically impossible to do that now.

The regulatory system, through accreditation, recognizes degree-granting institutions, not individual courses. The institution, not the student, is at the center. As the Clearinghouse noted in its report on student mobility, students need to be seen as the "unit of analysis," while "institutions are viewed as steppingstones along a diverse set of educational paths."

We've seen in the disruption of other information industries in recent years that change has resulted in the decline of the middleman—record companies, newspapers, and book publishers. The relationship is increasingly between the producer (in the case of higher ed, the professor) and the consumer (the student). It makes physical campuses and institutions less important, at least to those students who need to move around.

The music, newspaper, and book industries didn't have government protections like higher ed does. And it's unlikely that the higher-ed establishment will agree to allow non-institutions into the system if the new players don't look like what's already there.

So that leaves students, parents, and perhaps employers to demand that alternatives be recognized. This will be a slow process and won't touch some well-established, gold-plated names in higher ed or perhaps those who truly differentiate their offerings. But the remaining institutions shouldn't just assume that they'll be able to continue to raise prices and the students will come, take courses during a traditional academic week and year, and graduate a few years later.

Jeff Selingo is editorial director of The Chronicle of Higher Education.