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### **New National Tally of College Completion Tries to Count All Students**

*By Katherine Mangan*

For years, higher-education leaders have argued that dismal college-completion rates fail to capture the single mother who could squeeze in only a few classes per semester or the serviceman who started at one college and finished years later at another. On Thursday, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center released a report that takes account of the circuitous but ultimately successful routes that students often take toward a college degree.

The report, "Completing College: A National View of Student Attainment Rates," concludes that when such nontraditional but increasingly common patterns of enrollment are considered, the national completion rate jumps to 54 percent, from 42 percent. Among full-time students, 75 percent earn a degree or certificate within six years.

While those numbers are lower than most educators would like, they aren't as alarming as the figures that state and federal policy makers have decried in calling for policies that tie budget allocations to colleges' graduation rates.

Many students who are balancing classes with family and work obligations attend more than one institution and take longer to earn a certificate or degree, the report points out. "Conventional measures of success, such as graduation rates for institution-based, first-time full-time degree-seeking cohorts, are insufficient for recognizing the distinctive pathways these students take, or for understanding the particular risks and supports that shape their academic careers," it says.

That clunky series of hyphenated conditions is familiar to anybody who relies on the federal government's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System and the limited proportion of students it counts. Although the Department of Education announced in April that it would soon include part-time and transfer students in its graduation-rate tallies, changes in data collection will be [a slow process](#). Of course, many higher-education types would like to [track all students](#)

through a federal unit-record system, but opponents have blocked such a project, citing privacy concerns.

So for now, most graduation-rate studies focus on the college rather than the student, reflecting only institutional success in retaining full-time students who start and finish at the same place. That practice has continued even as fewer than half of students now meet the traditional profile. The rest aren't counted, even though they may have graduated.

The National Student Clearinghouse report, which was supported by a grant from the Lumina Foundation, is based on data from 3,300 colleges and universities. It traces the six-year pathways of students who entered college for the first time in 2006 with the hope of earning degrees or certificates and follows them through transfer between colleges and sectors and across state lines. (Using a six-year period for all students, whether they're seeking a two-year or a four-year credential, departs from the norm of measuring success within 150 percent of "normal time," or three years for an associate degree.)

The report signals various ways that successful students can fall off the graduation radar. For instance, more than one in five who completed a degree did so after transferring, and thus were invisible in most college-completion calculations. Some 15 percent of students who started at a two-year college finished within six years at a four-year college, and of those, nearly two-thirds did so without first earning an associate degree.

"Consequently, community colleges often do not receive credit" for those students, the report points out.

### **'Selling a Dream'**

One of the most troubling findings of the study, according to several experts who reviewed it, is the poor completion rate for part-time students.

Two-thirds of those whose entire college careers were spent attending part time dropped out without earning degrees, according to the report. (See a [related chart](#).) Students under age 24 had the most trouble.

"As a nation, we have been selling a dream that doesn't really exist—that large numbers of students can go part time on a regular basis and complete a degree," says Donald R. Hossler, a professor of educational leadership and policy studies at Indiana University at Bloomington.

When aspiring students say they aren't sure they can afford a higher education, counselors often encourage them to work and attend college part time. But the students may not be told how hard that juggling act can be, says Mr. Hossler, who was the founding executive director of the clearinghouse and now consults for it.

Students who might have succeeded in college but who overcommit to long hours at work "often end up on a trajectory toward dropping out," Mr. Hossler says.

"We need to take a good, hard look at whether we should change incentive structures," he says, perhaps giving full-time students more financial aid and restricting eligibility for students who fall below a certain number of credit hours. Those ideas may sound paternalistic, he says, but giving working students a more realistic picture of their chances of success could "save them from themselves."

### **Success by Sector**

Prospective college students aren't the only ones who could benefit from more nuanced reporting of completion rates. States that rely on federal data to formulate education policies may also have a distorted view, says Mr. Hossler.

Although the federal completion rates leave out many students, those statistics often factor into discussions of accountability and decisions to base funds on performance.

"Policy makers receive a deeply distorted view of how well the colleges are doing, and many college presidents are under intense criticism for low graduation rates" that are based on incomplete data, says David S. Baime, senior vice president for government relations and research at the American Association of Community Colleges.

But while the new report from the clearinghouse generally paints two-year colleges in a more favorable light, not everyone is convinced that it's something to cheer about.

"The results, for community colleges, are still low, and the public four-year colleges could be better," says Stanley G. Jones, president of Complete College America, a nonprofit advocacy group working to increase college-completion rates.

The report doesn't break out those rates for subgroups, but Mr. Jones says he has a good idea. "For minority students and first-generation students, we're still nowhere close to where they should be."

Over all, the new report is more accurate, showing "modestly better rates," although that's in part because community-college completion is usually shown over three years rather than six, says Mr. Jones, a former higher-education commissioner in Indiana.

At the same time, he says, too many students attending college part time are dropping out, or taking too long to graduate, and the report confirms that. "Life has a tendency to get in the way," he says. "People take a semester off thinking they'll come back, and they never do."

The report also compares completion rates for students who start at different types of institutions. Not surprisingly, it says that those who enrolled at four-year private nonprofit institutions were the most successful, with 71.5 percent of them completing a degree from the same or a different institution within six years. The lowest completion rate—36.3 percent—was for students who began at two-year public colleges.

In the absence of a federal unit-record system to track students, the National Student Clearinghouse may be poised to fill that role. Mr. Hossler would like to see it do so, by working with the Education Department to disseminate annual statistics about college completion. He stresses that he is speaking as an individual, and not for the clearinghouse.

On Thursday afternoon, its researchers will speak at a Congressional briefing on Capitol Hill, presenting their findings to representatives from the Senate and House education committees.