

Editor's Note

The Dismal State of Graduation Rates

For the past two years during my son's semester breaks I ask him how his high school friends are doing at their respective colleges. It's become our biannual state-of-the-state of how things change from high school dreams to higher education reality. And every semester he gives me the rundown on who has left school, and most importantly, the reasons they departed the institution they were so excited about freshman year.

Here's a sampling of why they left: One parent yanked his son from a big southern state university because he was partying too much and his grades went from bad to worse. Another left a small, mid-Atlantic Catholic college because he had problems with a couple of rowdy students on his dorm floor. Another left a large northeast university because her roommate stayed up all night drinking, causing my son's friend much stress, which caused her grades to slip. Still another who went to a prestigious engineering school in New York state departed after one year because he said he had nothing in common with the other students and there wasn't much to do on campus. Another very bright friend who went to his dream school in the Midwest didn't last his freshman year because a chronic disease he had under control went haywire due to the stress of academic rigors coupled with being far from home. Still another dropped out of a Delaware School for economic reasons and is now mowing lawns by day and delivering pizzas at night.

None of the students above will graduate in four years.

Sobering, isn't it? But not surprising. Considering that nationally, IHEs fail to graduate nearly half of their degree-seeking first-time, full-time freshman within six years, my son's friends--and their parents--are destined to stumble through various colleges for six years. These statistics, which were recently released by the Washington, D.C.-based Education Trust (www.edtrust.org), found that only six out of every 10 freshmen obtain a bachelor's degree within six years.

Obviously there are numerous personal, family, social, and monetary reasons that students do not graduate on time. Universities can't take the fall for many students who opt to leave school for whatever reasons. But there is no question that IHEs can do a lot more to intercede before students make the decision to leave school.

Our higher education system is "failing to graduate the numbers of students needed if we are to continue to compete in a global economy," said Kevin Carey, author of the report, "A Matter of Degrees: Improving Graduation Rates in Four-Year Colleges and Universities" (available online at www.edtrust.org). And what should be even more disturbing is that graduation rates are even worse for low-income and minority students. The report found that while 63 percent of all students graduate in six years, the six-year rate for African Americans is only 46 percent; 47 percent for Latinos, and 54 percent for all low-income students.

"For both moral and economic reasons we must change the way we do business in higher education in this country," said Carey.

The good news, according to the report, is that more students in the U.S. are entering two- and four-year institutions than ever before, but graduation rates have not increased at the same rate. In fact, many institutions lose one out of every four students they enroll in the freshman year alone. Imagine if a corporation lost one out of every four employees every year--management would be fired for such dismal retention rates.

"These devastating facts make clear the need for a renewed and comprehensive focus on higher education outcomes," said Kati Haycock, director of the Education Trust.

The report did point out that some IHEs are addressing the issue and have higher than average graduation rates. **Elizabeth City State College** (NC), the **University of Northern Iowa**, and **University of California, Riverside** were mentioned as examples. And **East Carolina University** and **Binghamton University** (NY) were cited for working hard to improve graduating performance.

The report does make recommendations on what IHEs can do to improve student retention and improve the six-year graduation rate. I urge you to read the report, and suggest ways to *University Business* to address the issue and find solutions to the problem. We'll report on this issue in coming months with best practices and case studies from those IHEs that are tackling the problem head-on.

You should also read "The Database Gets Personal" in this issue, which details how many IHE's are utilizing their databases to better communicate with students, and read "Why Not More Three-Year College Degrees?" this month's Controversy essay by John F. Brennan, president of **Green Mountain College**.

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