



Editor's Note

Graduation Rates, Part II

My Editor's Note last month ("The Dismal State of Graduation Rates") sparked a conversation with many readers. I based my column on a report from the Education Trust as a springboard for my not so flattering commentary on the dismal state of graduation rates. The statistics I cited (63 percent of first-time, full-time degree seeking college freshmen graduate within six years) were aggregate numbers for both public and private four-year IHEs. The report also cited that only 37 percent of students obtain a B.A. in four years.

The Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) contacted me and provided me with data that said that 79 percent of students at independent IHEs receive a B.A. in four years, compared to 49 percent for public IHEs. But 79 percent seemed way too high, so I checked with the Dept. of Education. Their data reported that only 48.6 percent of private IHEs graduate in four years, and for public IHEs, the rate was 26 percent. The 79 percent figure, the CIC later told me, is based on "students who actually received a bachelor's degree."

The differences in the percentages depend on the source of the data. The Dept. of Education data is based on the IPEDS (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System), which surveys institutional rates; those students who enter an institution in a given year. The CIC data is drawn from BPS (1995-96 Beginning Postsecondary students: six years later) data, which is gathered by the National Center for Educational Statistics. The BPS data is gleaned from both student and institutional rates. The student rate is gleaned from those students who enter an IHE, and then are surveyed throughout the course of the education--even if they transfer--and as they enter the work force.

The varying results of the different data depended on the sampling universe; years the data was collected; the exclusion of students who were not pursuing a degree; transfer students, and other factors.

Regardless, the end result is that private IHEs do indeed graduate more students within four and six years than public IHEs--but by what percentage depends on how you look at the various data. I was curious to see who had the highest graduation rates and went to that venerable source of educational information: *US News & World Report*. Their annual survey of schools with the highest graduation rates had Princeton and Williams College as tied for first with an impressive 92 percent out-the-door rate. Only two public IHEs, the U.S. Naval Academy and U of Virginia, cracked the top 36 list.

Richard Ekman, president of the Council of Independent Colleges said in a letter to the *New York Times*, commenting on a May 27 article, "Study Faults Colleges on Graduation Rates" the following:

"Private institutions have higher graduation rates because (a) faculty members see themselves first and foremost as teachers and are devoted to their students' success; (b) classes are small and are offered regularly, therefore students can take the courses needed for graduation; (c) the values and traditions of many private institutions (some religious, some not) encourage students' and faculty members' commitment to learning."

I think Mr. Ekman is accurate on his second point. But I believe his first and third points can be said equally of the majority of IHEs.

As I said last month, improving graduation rates should be a major focus for public IHEs, but I've also learned that statistics don't always tell the whole story. One letter writer said that he had heard that one Michigan public university had a graduation rate of 20 percent, which I didn't believe, so I called the school to find out. A school official told me that its six-year graduation rate was in the 40 percent range, but viewed that as acceptable considering the majority of students were low-to-middle class commuters, held full-time jobs, and stretched out their education more than six years (some 10, he said) to balance family and work. And statistics from the Dept. of Education found (obviously) that students with family incomes of more than \$70,000 have the highest four- and six-year graduation rates.

The CIC uses its higher four- and six-year graduation rates as a marketing tool to entice prospective students and parents to do the math--examine the real cost of a college education. That is, the total cost for a four-year degree at a private IHE versus total cost of six years at a public IHE.

That is a legitimate argument. And in today's tough economic climate, many students and parents only look at public IHEs because of cost alone. Of course, the question of value is always in the eyes of the beholder. And, certainly, public IHEs can enhance their value by continuing to work on increasing their overall graduation rates.

University Business welcomes reader feedback. You can write to **Tom Halligan** at thalligan@universitybusiness.com
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