

News Release

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National study of non-first-time students shows disturbing completion rates

In the first national effort to benchmark the persistence patterns of non-first-time college students, researchers found that only 33.7 percent of non-first-time students completed their degree, compared with 54.1 percent of first-time students. The number of adult learners who re-entered higher education between 2005 and 2008 but have not completed their degree (2,535,946) would almost fill the city of Chicago.

The results come at a critical time as leaders across the country work to increase college attainment rates among working adults. According to the organizations partnering on the study, the idea that a disparity in outcomes exists between non-first-time (NFT) and first-time (FT) students is not new. But, now that the data quantifies the size of the disparity, and highlights the differences in state completion rates, it raises concerns about how effectively our nation's higher education system addresses the needs of returning students.

"One thing is certain," says Dave Jarrat, vice president of marketing at InsideTrack, who organized the study, "if our nation expects the more than 30 million adults with some college but no degree to complete a credential, we need to do a much better job supporting them once they've made the decision to re-enroll."

Not surprisingly, the findings show that six- to eight-year completion rates for NFT students at four-year private non-profit institutions are significantly higher (52.5 percent) than at two-year public institutions (27 percent). At two-year public institutions, which enroll the largest number of returning students, completion rates are 26 percent lower for NFT students than for FT students. At both four-year public and four-year private non-profit institutions, there is a 27 percent difference.

The data also indicate that some states are doing a much better job than others at getting returning students to the finish line. For example, large states such as Texas, New York and Florida have NFT student completion rates of 37 percent to 40 percent. California, which accounts for approximately one in five returning student enrollments, has one of the worst completion rates for NFT students, at 24 percent. The District of Columbia has the highest completion rate for returning students at 57 percent, but accounts for only 0.1 percent of NFT student enrollments.

"Clearly non-traditional students need more time to work through the process. They have to balance work and life challenges," says Robert Hansen, CEO of the University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA). "But why are some states better at serving adult students over an extended period of time? Are there best practices at the state and institutional level that can be replicated?"

The initial findings are based on analysis of data from the National Student Clearinghouse for a cohort of 4.5 million students who re-enrolled in college between August 15, 2005 and August 14,

2008 after at least one year away from higher education. The group is also analyzing a second cohort of 7 million students who re-enrolled between August 15, 2008 and August 14, 2013. Both data sets include results segmented by level of institution, age, gender, geographic location, enrollment intensity and the type of degree being pursued.

One counterintuitive finding in the data, returning students who combine full-time and part-time enrollment over the course of their academic career have 9 percent higher completion rates than first-time mixed-enrollment students.

“The data that’s been collected is an important first step to inform how student affairs professionals can strategically support post-traditional students,” says Kevin Kruger, president of NASPA – Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. “We are pleased to be working with our partners to address a critical gap in our understanding of how these students are engaging higher education so we can ensure effective supports for them.”

According to Cathy Sandeen, vice president for education attainment and innovation at the American Council on Education (ACE), the group has just begun its analysis. It plans to release additional findings at the Summit for Online Leadership & Strategy being hosted by UPCEA and ACE in San Antonio, Texas, January 20-22, 2015, following discussions with educational leaders and others throughout the fall.

“We’ve just scratched the surface in analyzing this data and look forward to engaging our colleagues across the higher education community in a meaningful dialogue on the important issues it raises,” notes Sandeen.

The benchmarking initiative is a cooperative effort between ACE, InsideTrack, NASPA, UPCEA, and the Clearinghouse. It was designed to begin addressing the lack of publicly available data on the success of adults returning to college.

Afet Dundar, associate director at the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center noted, “This project highlights one of the biggest strengths of the Clearinghouse data: the ability to analyze the education pathways of a student population that has not been explored.”

About ACE

Founded in 1918, ACE is the major coordinating body for all the nation's higher education institutions, representing more than 1,600 college and university presidents, and more than 200 related associations, nationwide. It provides leadership on key higher education issues and influences public policy through advocacy. For more information, please visit www.acenet.edu or follow ACE on Twitter @ACEducation.

About InsideTrack

Society thrives when students succeed. Since 2001, InsideTrack has used a proven combination of coaching, analytics, consulting and technology to unlock potential in millions of students and the institutions they attend. We invite you to join the leading colleges, universities, foundations and others working with us to enhance the transformative power of higher education. Please visit us at www.insidetrack.com and follow us on Twitter @InsideTrack.

About NASPA’s Research and Policy Institute

NASPA’s Research and Policy Institute (RPI) intentionally links research, policy, and effective student affairs practice in support of student success and the strategic priorities of the association. The RPI generates scholarship and conducts policy analysis to articulate student affairs contributions to student success, learning, and development; interprets information to advance practice and policy conversations; and connects the research and policy activities of NASPA members to increase reach and impact. To learn more and access publications, blog postings, and data resources, please visit www.naspa.org/rpi.

About UPCEA

UPCEA is the association for professional, continuing, and online education. Founded in 1915, UPCEA now serves most of the leading public and private colleges and universities in North America. With innovative conferences and specialty seminars, research and benchmarking information, professional networking opportunities and timely publications, we support our members' service of contemporary learners and commitment to quality online education and student success. Based in Washington, D.C., UPCEA builds greater awareness of the vital link between adult learners and public policy issues. Visit www.upcea.edu.

About the National Student Clearinghouse

The National Student Clearinghouse (a nonprofit formed in 1993) is the trusted source for and leading provider of higher education verifications and electronic education record exchanges, handling more than 700 million verification requests and 250 million education record exchanges annually. The Clearinghouse serves as a single point of contact for the collection and timely exchange of accurate and comprehensive enrollment, degree, and certificate records on behalf of its more than 3,600 participating higher education institutions, which represent 98 percent of all students in public and private U.S. institutions. The Clearinghouse also provides thousands of high schools and districts with continuing collegiate enrollment, progression, and completion statistics on their alumni. Visit www.studentclearinghouse.org.