

# THE NEW METRICS

## *Tracking Today's Post-Traditional Students*

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### INTRODUCTION

*The real stories of college students behind cumulative metrics reveal the complexity of finding, enrolling, retaining, and teaching post-traditional students.*

Daniel was an outstanding high school student who excelled throughout his academic career, combining that success with volunteering at a local Boys and Girls Club, tutoring math students, and achieving excellent standardized test scores. Kyle enrolled at one of the top-tier institutions in California. His path was clear—major in engineering and graduate in four years to move into a lucrative career in the tech sector. Kara, on the other hand, immediately started college when she graduated high school. She dropped out of her college coursework after three semesters for a job opportunity and started a family shortly thereafter. Kara had always felt like a hypocrite when telling her daughter about the importance of a college education. She hit a dead end in her job and decided a college credential was her only way to better economic promise. She enrolled at a university that accepted all her previous college work and enabled her to take most of her remaining classes online. Because of her work and home obligations, she was not able to take enough classes to become a full-time student and qualify for financial aid. In order to afford the courses, she took two classes a semester, never skipping a term. She was ecstatic when she graduated at age 40 with her degree, seven years after re-entering college. Daniel and Kara highlight some of the dramatic differences in needs, motivations, and changing definitions of success between traditional and post-traditional students.

**The purpose of this paper** is to present context for the consideration of retention and graduation rates as an indicator of institutional effectiveness and student success, particularly when considering the post-traditional student, so those measures may have real meaning for consumers (parents and students), employers, regulators, and lawmakers, as no single question is more researched than that of student retention (Berger, Ramirez, & Lyons, 2012). Whether referred to as retention, attrition, persistence, or departure, deconstructing the reasons why a student begins the higher education experience and departs prior to earning an academic credential continues to perplex even the most seasoned researcher, administrator, and policy maker. Peer-reviewed journals and relevant news outlets are filled with a multitude of ways to ask the retention question. Studies have focused on one or any combination of the following attributes: gender, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, athletics, sororities and fraternities, residential or commuter, major, and public or private institutional type. Close on the heels of the retention question are explorations into the rates at which an institution graduates its students within an acceptable timeframe. The bulk of retention and graduation research has focused on the traditional first-time, full-time student, as that data set is most readily available and provides the most common denominator across institutional types (Astin, 1997; Grebennikov & Shah, 2012; Talbert, 2012).



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## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The federal government began collecting data on activities of United States institutions of higher education as far back as 1869. Those first reports included enrollment data, degrees earned and conferred, faculty composition, financial standing of the institution, and library holdings. From the mid-1960s through the mid-1980s, data was collected through the Higher Education General Information Surveys (HEGIS). Data elements included many of the earlier points but were expanded to include faculty salaries, professional staff, student charges (tuition and fees), residence and migration, financial aid, and special data categories for land grant institutions and engineering programs. In 1974, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) was created as the “keeper” of educational statistics and data. The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) was phased in during the late-1980s with the 1985-86 Institutional Characteristics (IC) survey (Fuller, 2011). In The Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act of 1990, IPEDS began reporting on graduation rates, including the addition of what is referred to as GR150 (graduation at 150% of normal time) and GR200 (graduation at 200% of normal time). This initiative was an unprecedented effort by the federal government designed to provide consumer information. In 1992, participation in IPEDS became part of the agreement for financial aid eligibility as a result of changes in Title IV of the Higher Education Authorization (HEA) amendments.

## INSTITUTIONAL DATA AS CONSUMER INFORMATION PROTECTION

As a result of mandates in 1998 HEA amendments, data collected by NCES through IPEDS was required to be a part of a “consumer information” program, commonly referred to as the College Navigator (<http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>), which allowed parents, prospective students, policy makers, and the media to explore the thousands of colleges and universities that submitted their federally mandated data sets to NCES. The latest iteration, revealed by the College Affordability and Transparency Center in early 2013, is the College Scorecard ([www.whitehouse.gov/issues/education/higher-education/college-score-card](http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/education/higher-education/college-score-card)). The College Scorecard is a web-based infographic of key data points from the NCES to demonstrate an institution’s affordability and value. In an effort to devise a data system that would work across the thousands of institutions required to report, the NCES uses the simplest common denominator—first-time, full-time students.

For IPEDS, “retention” is the measure of first-time, full-time students who started in a particular fall term and were enrolled the following fall term. For example, if College A enrolled 100 students in Fall 2012 and 83 of those students enrolled in Fall 2013, then the calculated retention rate would be 83%. IPEDS graduation rate data then takes measure of that same original set of first-time, full-time students and the rate at which they graduated at the 6- and 8-year point (150% of time and 200% of time respectively). Any student in that original group who might successfully complete a degree at another institution is not counted in the graduation rate. Recall our students Kyle and Kara from the introduction. Only Kyle will be considered a successfully graduated student in the IPEDS data. None of the institutions Kara attended without graduating will be given “credit” for Kara’s subsequent success. Unfortunately, for a number of institutions, College Navigator and the College Scorecard provide an incomplete, and often incorrect, measure of institutional performance (Laitinen, 2013; McMillian, 2013).

**A report to the Secretary of Education states that “the current federal graduation rate is incomplete and does not adequately convey the wide range of student outcomes.”**

**Committee on Measures of Student Success, 2011.**

As a result of The Committee on Measure of Student Success, the NCES employed consultants to conduct advisory board meetings to consider recommendations of the committee and make specific policy recommendations for changes to IPEDS reporting. The advisory board recommended that the committee adjust needed data elements to report on non-first-time undergraduate students. Changes to institutional reporting, said the advisory board, must include students receiving a formal award/credential in the following subcategories:

- Subsequently enrolled at the reporting institution
- Subsequently enrolled at another institution
- Subsequent enrollment unknown

In addition, reporting should include those who did not receive a formal award/credential in the following subcategories:

- Still enrolled at the reporting institution (persistence)
- Subsequently enrolled at another institution
- Subsequent enrollment unknown

A report to the Secretary of Education states that “the current federal graduation rate is incomplete and does not adequately convey the wide range of student outcomes” (The Committee on Measures of Student Success, 2011). While the committee was specifically addressing issues facing two-year and community colleges, the implications of weakness in the current methodology for tracking retention and graduation rates cannot be overlooked, particularly when considering post-traditional students, active-duty military students, and Veteran students. The danger is not in collecting the data, but rather the implications for policy and practice when the data is misunderstood or used inappropriately (Astin, 2004; Laitinen, 2013). In today’s accountability climate, the question is not whether an institution will participate in demonstrations of its effectiveness, but rather will they proactively engage in the process to contribute to the appropriate measures instead of passively waiting for those methodologies to be dictated by forces outside of more local controls (Ewell, 2009).

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## RETENTION AND GRADUATION RATES: WHY DO WE CARE?

Almost half of all students who enroll in higher education have no credential by the end of six years (HCM Strategists, 2013). Why? Do retention and graduation rates truly provide insight into an institution's effectiveness? If so, many agree that current measures are not the most appropriate. Then how can those data points be best analyzed to appropriately indicate effectiveness? When considering these questions, one must understand the external factors that make retention and graduation an important metric, the role of the institution in retaining and graduating students, and the complexities of student behavior.

### EXTERNAL FACTORS ON THE RETENTION AND GRADUATION CONVERSATION

President Obama outlined the need to re-establish the United States' dominance in educational attainment before a joint session of congress in January 2009. In so doing, he cast a spotlight on the issues of retention and graduation in a way previously left only to higher education researchers and administrators. The economic impact of postsecondary education was brought to the forefront of political and social commentary. Soon following President Obama's declaration, the Gates Foundation expanded its focus on access, increasing funding for projects as well as programs that use technology that help adult and minority students graduate while reducing costs and improving community college completion rates. The Lumina Foundation created "Goal 2025," outlining that 60% of Americans will have a high-quality postsecondary credential by 2025, stating, "College attainment is now a central topic in the public conversation at the national, state, and local levels" (Matthews, 2012).

Nationally, 38.3% of the 25- to 64-year-old population has earned a college credential at the associate's level or higher. An additional 22.1% have some college completed but no credential, 27% have a high school diploma or equivalent, and the remaining 12.6% had no high school diploma or equivalent. The national attainment goal of 60% cannot be reached without support for the 22.1% who have started a postsecondary program but departed without a degree. The importance of completion is evident when we look at regional evidence as well.

By 2020, 65% of jobs in the U.S. will require some kind of postsecondary credential (Crellin, Kelly, & Price, 2012; Lumina Foundation, 2013). Even during the Great Recession, growth of jobs for bachelor's degree holders actually increased while jobs for those with an associate's degree or high school diploma decreased by nearly seven million positions (Lumina Foundation, 2013). **Gaps in higher education attainment have become untenable.**

**"College attainment is now a central topic in the public conversation at the national, state, and local levels"**

**Matthews, 2012**

**ETHNICITY/RACE DISTRIBUTION**

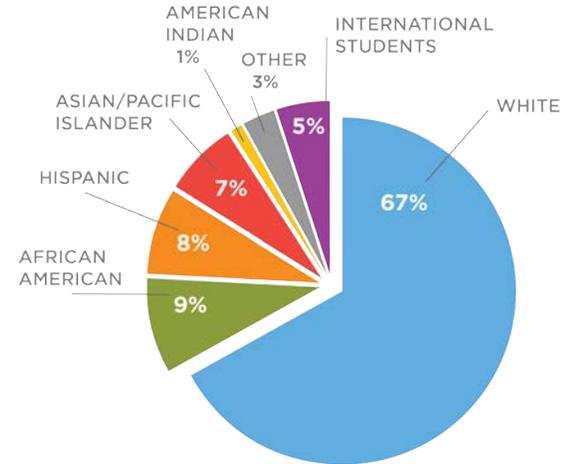
*In the representative comparison of the national distribution of race with credentials awarded, the differential among races for bachelor’s degree attainment is significant. Of the degrees awarded in 2008 for those aged 25-29, Whites were awarded 67%, African Americans earned 8.9%, Hispanics received 7.5%, Asian Americans 6.6% and American Indians were awarded 0.7%, with those of unknown race earning 2.8% and international students earning 2.9% (Kim, 2011).*

Significant consequences will arise, economic and moral, if the continued pattern of higher education attrition and lack of attainment persists. Economically, those who earn a bachelor’s degree can typically earn \$1 million or more over a lifetime of earnings when compared to a wage earner with only a high school diploma or some college but no credential (Burnsed, 2011). If the 2025 goal of degree attainment is reached, per capital personal income, will increase by \$1,800 and states will see increases in revenue by nearly \$67 billion nationally (Crellin et al., 2012). Morally, the patterns of enrollment and academic achievement continue to split along lines of race and socioeconomic standing. Delays or defeats in earning a postsecondary credential perpetuate a cycle of hardship as the economic and social gap widens. Increasing credential attainment, particularly high-quality credentials, is a national imperative (HCM Strategists, 2013; Matthews, 2012; Selingo, 2013; Lumina Foundation, 2013).

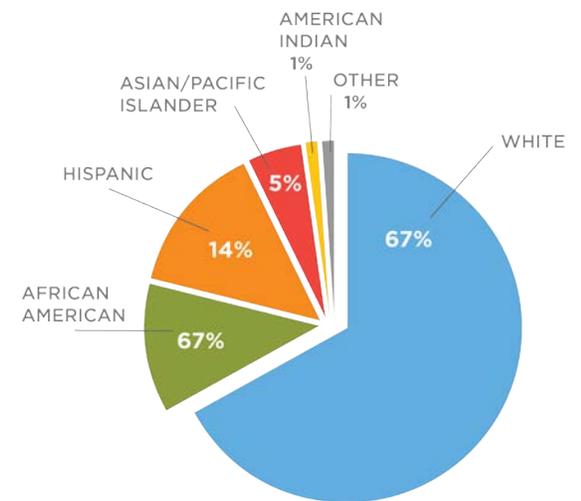
**RETENTION, GRADUATION, AND THE INSTITUTION**

The retention and graduation puzzle can be viewed from a variety of lenses when considered at the institutional level. Determining what is an appropriate retention and graduation rate for any given institution is a challenge when the student profile at the time of admission has as much impact on retention and graduation rates as what an institution might “do” while the student is enrolled (Kalsbeek, 2013a). It is important to recognize, as Astin did in his 1990 work, that “differences in retention rates are a function not only of the types of students attracted by certain kinds of institutions but also the type of environment provided by the institution and how well that particular environment is designed to fit the needs of students enrolled at that institution” (Berger et al., 2012). Ultimately, one must address whether retention and graduation rates are important because they represent institutional effectiveness or because they represent student success.

The dawn of the Student Right-to-Know Act of 1990 mandated reporting of institutional retention and graduation rates with the underlying assumption that the higher the retention and graduation rate, the higher the quality of the college or university (Astin, 1997). Because the national standard of measure for these two data points is not ideal, it is difficult to conclude that they are appropriate measures of institutional quality (Scott, Bailey, & Kienzi, 2006). There have been a number of research efforts attempting to identify an “ideal” retention/graduation rate for institutions (Adelman, 1999; Astin, 1997; Bowen,



**Figure 1:**  
National Distribution of Race/Ethnicity  
(U.S. Census Bureau, 2011)



**Figure 2:**  
Bachelor’s Degrees Awarded by Race/  
Ethnicity (Kim, 2011)

Chingos, & McPherson, 2009) in response to the fact the NCES reported that data can be a misleading representation of the institutional capacity to retain students (National Center for Educational Studies, 2011). Most projects gravitate toward the use of one or more factors student profiles—such as high school GPA, race, gender, and parental education—as it is possible to calculate, with a high level of predictability, an institutional graduation rate using that data and regression analysis (Astin, 2004). The “quality” of the institutional retention rate is demonstrated through the size of gap between the expected retention rate and actual retention performance. In other words, an 80% or 85% retention rate is only “good” if the profile of the student body indicates the retention capacity of the institution is below the 80% or 85% level. It can be concluded that those who admit a highly selective student body should also demonstrate higher baseline retention rates (Astin, 2004; Bowen et al., 2009).

It is possible to determine a probable institutional graduation rate simply by using one component of student profile: the average ACT to SAT score of an incoming class (Kalsbeek, 2013b). However, that same test score on an individual basis is a poor predictor of completion (Bowen et al., 2009) as it does not account for the multitude of variables inherent in student behavior and the diverse circumstances that life can present in the course of an undergraduate career. Factors such as socioeconomic status, gender, race, and geographic proximity to the institution also correlate to retention and graduation capacity (Kalsbeek, 2013b). Although there is a direct correlation to retention rates, adjusting the incoming class profile is not always an apropos solution for improving student retention. Colleges and universities with a mission to serve academically underprepared students, part-time students, or those who have familial and other financial responsibilities while attending school are most likely to have lower graduation rates (Scott et al., 2006).

Increasing rates of departure from higher education institutions “negatively affect the stability of institutional enrollments, budgets and the public perception of the quality of colleges and universities” (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). The cost to recruit a student to enroll with the right institutional fit is significant. Volatility in ongoing student enrollment has a direct link to the institutional effort to plan for budget and resources, particularly at highly tuition-dependent colleges and universities. Increased attrition means increased costs—both directly and indirectly. Clearly, from a financial perspective, there is a vested interest for the institution to admit and serve those students who are most likely to be retained and graduate. “From a college’s perspective, the increased costs and educational problems caused by a high dropout rate are in no way mitigated by the knowledge that some dropouts will earn degrees elsewhere” (Astin, 2004). Financial implications of retention are also critical for students. Those who leave higher education before obtaining a college credential are more likely to do so under extensive debt burdens that are impossible to manage without career options that assist in paying down that debt (Selingo, 2013), making timely college completion one of the most important issues facing today’s student population.

**“From a college’s perspective, the increased costs and educational problems caused by a high dropout rate are in no way mitigated by the knowledge that some dropouts will earn degrees elsewhere”**

**Astin, 2004**

### RETENTION, GRADUATION, AND THE STUDENT

While the role of colleges and universities in the departure puzzle must be considered, attention must also be given to the group that is most important in this dialog—the student. There is a long-standing tension between retention and graduation from the institutional lens, and efforts to improve those rates at the campus level tend to focus on serving the student but rarely acknowledge the behavior of the student. Tracking enrollment behavior is challenging at best and getting to the real reasons why a student departs is dependent on self-reported information, when and if it can be collected. Individual student progress toward attainment has been seldom studied piece of the departure puzzle, until recently when the National Clearinghouse undertook a national view of student attainment (Shapiro et al., 2012).

Through new reporting requirements, the NCES is now encouraging institutions to explore, beyond their own campus, enrollment patterns of students who leave before earning a degree (RTI International, 2012). This is an important step as it will finally account for what is often most overlooked in retention and graduation research—the impact of student choice and behavior (Kalsbeek, 2013c). “The college is only one actor; the student is the other” (Scott et al., 2006). As the higher education sector finds itself market-driven, the reality of students as consumers is reflected in enrollment behavior based on convenience factors (Adelman, 1999; Zemsky, Massy, & Wegner, 2005). For the vast majority of students, those outside of the qualifications that garner the attention of highly selective colleges and universities, matters of geographic location to “home,” course schedule offerings (particularly for post-traditional students), and cost are the primary considerations when selecting a higher education institution (Kalsbeek, 2013c). The rise of online education, particularly in the form of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and free or low-cost methods of credit attainment, adds an additional layer of complexity to tracking student progress and attainment. The rules of student enrollment behavior have experienced a seismic shift as more and more students move from one institution to another or earn college credit outside of the “norm” of what is expected.

**The rules of student enrollment behavior have experienced a seismic shift as more students move from one institution to another or earn college credit outside of the “norm”...**

### THE IMPACT OF STUDENT SWIRL

The consequences of today’s more mobile student will mean that nearly two-thirds of those who earn a baccalaureate degree will have attended two or more colleges in that educational process (Soares, 2013). In fact, more than one in five students (22.4%) actually complete their degree at an institution other than where they first enrolled. “The ‘linear-matriculation’ image of the college student still influences policy formulation and educational practice at all levels, despite the reality that the majority of 18- to 24-year olds, not to mention older students, do not experience a college education in a linear fashion” (Borden, 2004). The idea that students move in a non-linear fashion from a 4-year institution to 2-year, from one 4-year to another 4-year, and in some cases back again, or concurrently enroll, is often referred to as “student swirl” (Borden, 2004). In an environment where the coin of the realm is based on first-time, full-time retention and graduation rates, student swirl can strike fear in the hearts of the heartiest researcher or administrator. How then does one

account for the success of students who move at will from one institution to another, across sectors, or across geographic boundaries when there is no single data system that can track and account for these students?

The National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), a non-profit service originated to provide enrollment to student loan providers to facilitate re-payment, has become the most comprehensive student unit record available to researchers. It covers nearly 94% of the national enrollment in postsecondary education. With that data at their fingertips, researchers from the NSC recently published a report (Shapiro et al., 2012) on degree completion based on enrollment and attainment at the student unit level rather than the institutional-only focus constraints of the IPEDS data. The results are eye opening. Completion rates based on the NSC study indicated improvement across the entire sector, regardless of institutional type and student subpopulation (Fain, 2012). Based on Fall 2006 data, the NSC research found an additional 12.1% of the population with postsecondary credentials above the first-time, full-time IPEDS reporting for that same year (42%) (Shapiro et al., 2012).

The implications of these findings “suggest that emerging policy initiatives should look to more nuanced and targeted measures of student success” (Shapiro et al., 2012). The clarity provided in reports such as this have also fueled the ongoing debate about a national student unit record system that ideally could tie across federal agencies and provide not only enrollment pattern data but more accurate attainment figures, and connect with employment data that could essentially answer the questions posed by gainful employment regulations (Nelson, 2013). The opportunity to track individual student persistence not only provides a clear sense of true degree attainment but allows institutions to demonstrate their effectiveness in two ways: by providing a quality educational opportunity with academic credit that can be used toward other programs and degrees at other institutions, and by accepting transfer credit for students who might find the academic programs and campus environment a better fit for their academic and professional goals.

### **HIGHER EDUCATION’S “HIDDEN MAJORITY”— THE POST-TRADITIONAL STUDENT**

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According to the NCES, in 2009 only 15% of enrolled undergraduate students were “traditional students”—those who went to college immediately following high school, attended full-time, and were financially dependent on their parents (Soares, 2013). With dynamic enrollment patterns that surpass the capabilities of current collection methodologies and the shifting demographics of today’s student population, it becomes critical that public policy and institutional practice account for the largest group of undergraduate students, those who have historically been thought of as nontraditional and are, to be more inclusive of the breadth of this student group, now referred to as post-traditional. “Post-traditional learners are individuals already in the work force who lack a postsecondary credential yet are determined to pursue further knowledge and skills while balancing work, life, and education responsibilities” (Soares, 2013). Currently, more than one-third of all undergraduate students

are over the age of 25. Forty-seven percent of the students are considered “independent” for financial aid purposes, which means they are either 24 years or older, married, responsible for legal dependents, orphans, wards of the court, or Veterans. Nationally, 32% of the students are working full-time and almost a third of all undergraduate students work more than 35 hours per week while enrolled. 23% are parents with one in eight of those students living as a single parent (Center for Law and Social Policy, 2011).

Within the post-traditional student population, there are numerous student sub-populations with a number of indicators putting them at risk of not completing college. Students from underrepresented, minority groups comprise 36% of the post-traditional student population. Forty percent of students are considered low income and must not only pay for tuition and other school-related costs, but must also fund housing and food through financial aid while enrolled. Forty-six percent of today’s student enrollment attends college part-time by necessity, and as studies have indicated (Complete College America, 2011; Shapiro et al., 2012; Soares, 2013), part-time enrollment is one of the strongest predictors of departure.

Between 2009 and 2019, it is expected that adult enrollments will increase nearly 23% while traditional-student enrollment in higher education will increase by only 10% (Kelly & Strawn, 2011). This “new normal” post-traditional student deserves specific attention as serving this population will be a fundamental necessity to reach the goals for national degree attainment and success (Fong, 2012; Tilghman, 2012). The completion goal is so aggressive that it would be impossible to reach without fully acknowledging the working-age population, those who are age 25-64, and supporting academic success for degree attainment (Soares, 2013).

#### **TIME TO COMPLETION: THE POST-TRADITIONAL STUDENT NIGHTMARE**

Hand in hand with any graduation discussion is one centered on the time to completion. While most speak of a bachelor’s degree as a four-year program, only 38% of all full-time, first-time students complete within four years of beginning college (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011). That number increases to 58% at the end of six years. At eight years, there is little additional progress with only 2% more earning a bachelor’s degree, bringing the total to 60% (Complete College America, 2011). The economic costs of delayed graduation are staggering. For the traditional student, every year spent in college beyond the four-year time period, the student incurs additional tuition expenses and delays the opportunity for post-graduate earnings. For the post-traditional student, life continues to go on—work, family—but no credential often means limited earning potential and career trajectory. Yet, time to degree as a measure of success has little meaning for this population.

Employing predictive models for retention and graduation based on student profile means it is actually easier to predict for a four-year graduation rate than a 6- or 8-year rate (Astin, 2004). In most cases, particularly for institutions with strong student profiles, significant increases in graduation rates beyond the four-year rate are often a great indication of

15% of undergrads are “traditional” first-time, full-time

1/3 of undergrads are age 25 or higher

47% of undergrads are “independent”

32% of undergrads work full-time; 1/3 work over 35 hours per week

23% of undergrads are parents; 1 in 8 are single parents

institutional behavior and policy rather than student behavior (Astin, 1997). Examples of institutional behavior and policies that could delay graduation might include a lack of intentional student engagement activities in and out of the classroom, administrative policies that contribute to delays in registration and financial aid, or academic policies such as course scheduling and availability that make it difficult for the student to get the courses he or she needs to graduate. For institutions that enroll post-traditional or underrepresented student populations, lengthy time to a degree may not indicate a problem in and of itself. Consider Kara, our working mother and part-time student. Kara had no choice but to enroll part-time to manage her family obligations and finances to pay for school. Having an option to enroll part-time and online meant she was able to successfully complete her degree. For Kara and others with similar challenges, longer time to graduation is a function of the student profile, whose success may be directly related to an institution's mission and student access goals (Massy, 2011).

Time to degree, as a standalone measure, should not be an indicator of institutional effectiveness, however it does serve as a measure of risk for non-completion. Even if measured at 200% of standard time to completion, only 25% of all part-time students earn a college credential (Complete College America, 2011). This low completion rate becomes particularly troublesome for those who have departed any pursuit of higher education with some college credit but no credential. However, if still enrolled, the student may be making progress toward graduation, albeit at a very slow pace, and may eventually earn a college credential. For those institutions who serve post-traditional students, stories of the student who takes 10 to 20 years to finally complete are not unusual (Tilghman, 2012). In some cases, particularly for post-traditional students, measures of progress might be much more telling rather than measures of time and persistence. “Simply compare the dictionary definitions for ‘persistence’ and ‘progress’—doggedness and endurance on the one hand versus movement, growth, and development—and the potential for reframing institutional thinking and action” (Spittle, 2013). Tracking persistence allows for a measure of the ebb and flow of a given cohort of students. However, the real indicator of success, particularly as it relates to graduation, is the progress a student makes toward completing degree requirements and advancing toward the goal of degree attainment. One of the strongest indicators for non-completion in the first-time, full-time student population is the student who might have been retained from one fall to the next but who did so without earning enough credit hours to move from freshman to sophomore standing (Spittle, 2013).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

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As discussed, the data models used in current retention and graduation research have not been proven accurate for non-traditional/post-traditional and commuter student populations (Braxton et al., 2004). There is currently no shared vocabulary to provide any consistent measure or to serve as a benchmark tool for this population (Fong, 2012; Tilghman, 2012). This is troubling as the majority of programs that serve this student population, outside of the for-profit sector, are institutions with a traditional student population base that often

guides the predominate culture on campus, making the post-traditional the hidden student. For a full institutional picture, post-traditional student data needs to be considered, a critical factor given that the mythology of the traditional student has long existed but has not been the prevailing reality in recent years.

Efforts are being made across professional organizations and consortia to create a shared understanding of retention and graduation data in a way that is most helpful to consumers, legislators, and regulators. One such effort is undergoing testing in the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). After attempting to capture post-traditional student data through voluntary participation in a data collection process that was made available to a group of institutions testing a redesigned accrediting process, WASC staff found that most institutions, particularly the larger publics, only focused on the measure required by IPEDS—the first-time, full-time student. In a follow-up to that project, members of the Senior College and University Commission formed a task force to explore alternative measures. The commission was challenged to make consistent decisions about institutional effectiveness during the accreditation process and the status quo of data reporting was insufficient for that purpose. Using a model developed by John Etchemendy, provost at Stanford University and WASC Commissioner, a balance sheet was created to identify the equilibrium between credits earned in a given year and credits awarded toward the Bachelor's degree to create a performance ratio.

Using this data, along with credits “lost” by those who are no longer enrolled, an institution can calculate an absolute graduation rate that is often a much better indicator of institutional effectiveness in graduating students than the IPEDS-reported rate. Clearly not a measure of individual student success and not accounting for time to degree, the balance sheet is seen as an opportunity to discuss institutional effectiveness across the region in a way that is not currently possible. A small pilot of 15 public and private institutions identified that the calculated IPEDS graduation rate of highly selective institutions was nearly identical to the calculated absolute graduation rate of the balance sheet. Institutions with a high transfer population rate or that serve a large number of post-traditional students found the calculated absolute graduation rate was a considerably better, and more accurate, demonstration of institutional effectiveness. One urban, public institution in Southern California with IPEDS graduations that hover around 25% for a six-year rate were able to demonstrate an absolute graduation rate of 73%. At this time, WASC is conducting a larger pilot with the full region in preparation for the 2015 annual report, where reporting data for the balance sheet will become an annual requirement.

There is very little agreement on the best way to measure retention rates due to the difficulty of creating a standard formula to fit a single institutional type, much less one that can provide a standardized measure across all institutions. One researcher states, “Despite the recent attention, measuring college student retention remains complicated, confusing, and context-dependent” (Hagedorn, 2012). Complexity should not deter those who are deeply concerned about institutional effectiveness and student success. Conversations and test data models are being conducted across the country. The dialog and activity has just begun.

**“... measuring college student retention remains complicated, confusing, and context-dependent.”**

Hagedorn, 2012

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