

## **College Graduation Rates Are Stagnant Even as Enrollment Rises, a Study Finds**

*Tamar Lewin*

*Statistics on graduation rates for part-time or transfer students are largely invisible, a study by Complete College America says.*

A report to be released on Tuesday by a group seeking to raise college graduation rates shows that despite decades of steadily climbing enrollment rates, the percentage of students making it to the finish line is barely budging.

The group, Complete College America, is a nonprofit founded two years ago with financing from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Lumina Foundation and others. Its report, which had the cooperation of 33 governors, showed how many of the students in states completed their degrees, broken down into different categories, including whether enrollment is full- or part-time, or at a two- or four-year institution.

The numbers are stark: In Texas, for example, of every 100 students who enrolled in a public college, 79 started at a community college, and only 2 of them earned a two-year degree on time; even after four years, only 7 of them graduated. Of the 21 of those 100 who enrolled at a four-year college, 5 graduated on time; after eight years, only 13 had earned a degree.

Similarly, in Utah, for 100 students who enrolled in a public college, 71 chose a community college, 45 enrolling full time and 26 part time; after four years, only 14 of the full-time students and one of the part-time students graduated. Of the 29 who started at a four-year college, only 13 got their degree within eight years.

Because of gaps in federal statistics, students who enroll part time, or transfer have been nearly invisible, said Stan Jones, the president of Complete College America.

"We know they enroll, but we don't know what happens to them," he said. "We shouldn't make policy based on the image of students going straight from high school to college, living on campus, and graduating four years later, when the majority of college students don't do that."

Currently, federal education statistics generally focus on first-time full-time students. But according to the report, about 4 of every 10 public college students attend part time — and no more than a quarter of part-time students ever graduate.

"It's really, really hard to get your hands on completion rates for nontraditional students," said Judith Scott-Clayton, of the Community College Research Center at Teachers College. "If somebody pops in and takes a community college class and they don't finish, you don't know whether they were ever planning to get a degree."

Among older students, as well as those who are awarded Pell grants, and black and Hispanic students, the report said, fewer than one in five of those attending college part time will earn a degree in six years.

"Time is the enemy of college completion," the report said. "The longer it takes, the more life gets in the way of success."

One factor, Mr. Jones said, is the increasing practice of amassing more credits than are required for a degree.

Another factor is the large number of students mired in noncredit remedial classes that the report calls the "Bermuda Triangle" of higher education. Half of all students studying for an associate degree, and one in five of those seeking a bachelor's degree — including many who graduated from high school with a grade point average of 3.0 or higher, previous research has shown — are required to take remedial, or "developmental" courses, and many of them never move on to credit-bearing courses, much less graduation.

The report recommends that states adopt financing incentives to push colleges to pay more attention to completion rates.

And it highlights strategies that have helped to increase graduation rates. Among those strategies are embedding remedial instruction in the curriculum, rather than requiring separate courses, and offering programs that students attend in a block, with a predictable schedule and a cohort of other students seeking the same credential.

The report praises Tennessee's 27 Technology Centers, where the degree completion rate is 75 percent. Tech students, with an average age of 32, sign up for a program, not individual courses, and they come for seven hours a day, Monday through Friday, with classes ending by 3 p.m., allowing them to hold an evening job or care for their children after school. Instead of separate remedial courses, the centers have a required foundation course, in which each student learns skills needed for a program.

"A student might come in not knowing why they need to learn trigonometry, but when they're studying machine technology or drafting technology, they'll see why, and I think that helps," said Carol Puryear, director of the Tennessee Technology Center at Murfreesboro. "Our mission is really work force development," she said, "and about 85 percent of them get a job when they graduate."

Mary Spilde, the president of Lane Community College in Oregon, said that while her state has dozens of new initiatives on the issue of remedial, or "developmental" education, there is not yet good evidence showing which approach works best.

The report also cites as another example of good practice the City University of New York's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs, which help students complete associate degrees more quickly with block scheduling, student cohorts and other support. The graduation rate is three times that of students who do not participate in the programs.

**Fonte: New York Times, New York, 27 Sept. 2011, Education, online.**