

COLLEGE COMPLETION DECLINING, TAKING LONGER, UCLA STUDY SHOWS

Fewer college students today are completing college in four years than was the case a decade ago, according to a new national study just released by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles. Among freshmen who entered baccalaureate-granting colleges in Fall 1994, only 36.4 percent were able to complete their bachelor's degrees within four years (compared to 39.9 percent a decade earlier and 46.7 percent in the late 1960s). The degree completion rate jumps by nearly two-thirds—to 58.8 percent—if students are allowed six years to complete college, and to 61.6 percent if those who are still enrolled after six years are counted as "completers."

Degree completion rates vary substantially according to the race and sex of the student and especially by the type of institution attended. The highest four-year completion rates are enjoyed by Asian (38.8 percent) and white (37.6 percent) students, while the lowest rates occur among "under-represented" minority groups: Mexican-Americans (21.3 percent), American Indians (21.6 percent), Puerto Rican-Americans (23.6 percent), and African-Americans (28.9 percent). Four-year completion rates are higher for women (39.7 percent) than for men (32.6 percent). (Although these rates increase by 20-25 percent for each racial or gender group when six-year completion is considered, group differences are maintained.) Within each racial group, women have higher six-year degree completion rates than men do, except among American Indian students, where the rate for men is slightly higher (43.9 versus 41.1 percent for women).

Four-year degree completion rates for individual institutions vary widely: from a high of 89 percent to a low of one percent. Six-year rates range from 96 percent to 18 percent. Private institutions of all types consistently show higher retention rates than do public colleges and universities, regardless of the retention measure used. The highest four-year completion rate—69.1 percent—is found among students attending private universities, whereas the lowest rate—24.3 percent—occurs among students at public colleges. The four-year completion rate for students at public universities—28.1 percent—is also substantially lower than the four-year rates for students enrolled at all types of private four-year colleges: Roman Catholic (46.4 percent), other religiously-affiliated (51.0 percent) and independent (56.3 percent) "The fact that these public-private differences decline somewhat when six-year rates are used suggests that students in the public colleges and universities are taking longer to complete their degrees," says Professor Alexander W. Astin, co-author of the study and Director of the Higher Education Research Institute.

The chances of completing college in four or six years varies widely according to the student's level of academic preparation. Those who earn an A or A plus grade average in high school have four- and six-year completion rates of 58.2 and 77.5 percent, respectively, compared to rates of only 8.0 percent (four-year) and 20.0 percent (six-year) for students who earn C averages. Similar differences are found with scores on standardized college admissions tests: among students whose composite score on the SAT is at least 1,300, four- and six-year completion rates are 62.3 and 76.5 percent, respectively, compared to only 18.2 and 39.8 percent for students whose composite score is less than 800. The largest differences are observed when school grades and test scores are combined: students with A averages and scores of 1300 or above have four- and six-year completion rates of 68.9 and 82.6, respectively, compared to 7.8 and 20.4 percent for students with C averages and test scores below 800.

"These data," says Astin, "suggest that it would be unwise, and possibly misleading, to compare the raw degree completion rates of different institutions without taking into account the level of academic preparation of each institution's students when they first enroll." For this reason, the report provides tables that allow individual colleges and universities to compute an "expected" degree completion rate based on the academic preparation and other characteristics of their students at the time they first enroll. When adjustments are made for these expected retention rates, institutional differences diminish substantially. For example, although the actual four-year rates of private universities are more than 40 percent higher than those of the public colleges (67.1 versus 24.3 percent), this difference diminishes to about 15 percent when expected rates are taken into account. Thus, when the actual degree completion rates of different types of institutions are compared after adjusting for expected rates, four-year rates of public colleges and universities fall only 11 and 15 percent, respectively, below their expected rates, and the actual rates of different types of private institutions are between 2 and 6 percent higher than their expected rates. When six-year rates are used, the actual and expected rates for public institutions differ by only 5 percent. "These results," says Astin, suggest that students who choose a public over a private institution will run a slightly greater risk not only of not completing their bachelor's degree, but also of taking longer to complete that degree."

Academic preparation also helps to explain many of the differences in degree completion rates among racial groups. The relatively low six-year completion rate for African-American students, for example, appears to be entirely attributable to their lower level of academic preparation.

The study is based on 56,818 students who entered 262 four-year colleges and universities in fall 1994 and whose degree attainment and enrollment status was determined in fall 2000. Results were statistically adjusted to reflect the entire population of freshmen entering baccalaureate-granting institutions in fall 2000. The full report, Degree Attainment Rates at American Colleges and Universities (prepared by Alexander W. Astin & Leticia Oseguera), is available from the Higher Education Research Institute, Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, University of California, Los Angeles (call 310/825-1925 or email HERI@ucla.edu)