

# Committee on Measures of Student Success

## Background Paper

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## **Introduction**

At the recent White House Summit on Community Colleges President Obama reiterated his administration's goal to add 5 million more community college graduates by the year 2020.<sup>1</sup> In several public appearances, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and other federal officials have spoken about the importance of understanding how students progress through college and the need for high quality and reliable data on completion and graduation that can be used by both policymakers and consumers for decision making purposes. At the SHEEO Higher Education Policy conference held in August 2010, Under Secretary of Education Martha Kanter reinforced the administration's focus on developing a "college completion culture":

*"We have to look at measures of achievement that are linked to student success — milestones like completing the freshman year, personalized learning portfolios to help students leverage their talents for success in college and in life. We have to know much more about remediation, which types of remediation accelerate achievement, how students persist in college, what credits they accumulate and what courses they complete, as well as how long it takes for them to graduate. If all our institutions and states pledge to make college completion a top priority, we will be able to incentivize a 'college completion' culture that moves more students to attain their degrees and a society that will become far more globally competitive."*

Intertwined with this focus by federal policymakers are initiatives among states, college systems, institutions, foundations, associations and others aimed at increasing the number of students who complete college. The efforts include a range of strategies, such as improving students' readiness for college, developing linkages between state data systems in order to track student progress, and increasing the supports and services available to assist students in completing college.

An important indicator to measure how many students graduate from college is the completion and graduation data institutions report each year through the Graduation Rate Survey (GRS) in the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Under the Student Right to Know Act of 1990 institutions must make available to current and prospective students the rate students complete academic programs. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), approximately 57 percent of full-time, first-time students at 4-year institutions completed a bachelor's degree within 6 years of

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<sup>1</sup> Remarks by President Obama at the White House Summit on Community Colleges held October 5, 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/10/05/remarks-president-and-dr-jill-biden-white-house-summit-community-college>.

beginning their studies.<sup>2</sup> At two-year institutions, about 37 percent of first-time full-time students received a degree or certificate within 4 years of beginning their studies.<sup>3</sup> While this graduation rate is widely cited by policymakers and others, there are concerns that it does not accurately reflect student outcomes at colleges and universities, particularly for two-year institutions.

The Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (HEOA) authorized the creation of the Committee on Measures of Student Success to advise the Secretary of Education on how to assist two-year degree-granting institutions of higher education in meeting completion or graduation rate disclosure requirements outlined in section 485 of the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended. Specifically, under the statute, the Committee:

- Will develop recommendations for the Secretary of Education regarding the accurate calculation and reporting of completion or graduation rates of entering certificate- or degree-seeking, full-time, undergraduate students by two-year degree-granting institutions of higher education.
- May also recommend additional or alternative measures of student success that are comparable alternatives to the completion or graduation rates of entering degree-seeking full-time undergraduate students, taking into account the mission and role of two-year degree-granting higher education institutions.

The recommendations must be provided to the Secretary no later than 18 months after the first meeting of the Committee. As required by law, the Committee consists of 15 members that represent higher education institutions, experts in the field of higher education policy, state higher education officials, students, and other stakeholders from the higher education community. To meet the timeframes and goals of the Committee, the U.S. Department of Education has planned up to four meetings of Committee members that will be open to the public and may establish up to two working groups to assist the Committee in carrying out its duties.<sup>4</sup> The purpose of this background paper is to provide information on how completion and graduation rates are currently calculated, a summary of the current efforts in the higher education community to develop alternative measures of student success, and an outline of next steps for the Committee.

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<sup>2</sup> Knapp, L.G., Kelly-Reid, J.E., and Ginder, S.A. (2010). *Enrollment in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2008; Graduation Rates, 2002 & 2005 Cohorts; and Financial Statistics, Fiscal Year 2008* (NCES 2010-152). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: NCES. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2010/2010152rev.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Knapp, Kelly-Reid, and Ginder (2010).

<sup>4</sup> The working groups shall be composed of five members, a majority of whom shall be voting members of the Committee, whose expertise is needed for the functioning of the working groups. In addition, membership of the working groups may include outside experts or Federal employees.

## **Technical Assistance on the Accurate Calculation and Reporting of Graduation Rates**

The first focus of the Committee is to provide recommendations on assisting two-year institutions in meeting graduation rate disclosure and reporting requirements. Each year institutions must make available to prospective and enrolled students the completion and graduation rate of first-time, full-time, certificate- or degree-seeking undergraduate students. The graduation rate is calculated for a cohort of these students who complete programs within 100, 150, and 200 percent of the normal time required (e.g., students that completed a 2-year program within 2, 3, and 4 years or less). For institutions with a mission to prepare students for transfer to another institution prior to completing their program, these institutions must also disclose the number of students who successfully transfer to another postsecondary institution. Institutions have reported these completion and graduation rates by gender and race/ethnicity. The HEOA included a provision requiring that completion or graduation rates be further disaggregated by:

- Students who received a Pell grant;
- Students who received a FFEL loan (except for unsubsidized Stafford loans) but did not receive a Pell grant; and
- Students who did not receive a Pell grant or a FFEL loan.

Graduation rates are one of about forty higher education disclosure requirements that an institution must meet. A “***disclosure requirement***” is information that a postsecondary education institution is required to distribute or make available to another party, such as students or employees. A “***reporting requirement***” is information submitted to the U.S. Department of Education or other agencies. Disclosure and reporting requirements sometimes overlap. For certain topics, such as graduation rates, institutions are required to make information available to students or others and to submit information to the U.S. Department of Education. To comply with this disclosure requirement NCES created the IPEDS GRS component where institutions report on cohorts of first-time full-time degree- or certificate-seeking students and the numbers of students in the cohort that complete within 100, 150, and 200 percent of the normal time required. The GRS component also collects information about the number of students who transferred out of the institution within 150 percent of the normal time to completion, if the mission of the institution includes providing substantial preparation for students to enroll in another eligible institution.

Over the last two years NCES has undertaken several efforts to improve data collection and reporting of graduation rate data. In 2010, a working group of the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative (NPEC) issued several recommendations designed to reduce the

confusion and complexity surrounding reporting graduation rate data.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, the group recommended that NCES (1) clarify instructions and definitions associated with the GRS, and (2) use IPEDS training to share best practices for creating cohorts, identifying and counting students to exclude from the cohort, and identifying completers. Another NPEC working group issued a report in November 2009 with guidance to institutions on how to comply with federal higher education disclosure requirements and make disclosure required information more accessible to consumers.<sup>6</sup>

To further improve completion and graduation rate data, NCES could develop draft guidance for how two-year institutions can comply with the HEOA provision that requires the disaggregation of graduation rates by gender, race/ethnicity, and for students who receive Pell grants, received a loan but no Pell grant, and students who did not receive either a Pell grant or loan. Similar language has been drafted to help schools meet the provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and could serve as a guide for this Committee. The guidance could also address how institutions comply with language in the HEOA related to cohorts that include a small number of students. The law states that institutions should disclose graduation rates

*“if the number of students in such subgroup or with such status is sufficient to yield statistically reliable information and reporting will not reveal personally identifiable information about an individual student. If such number is not sufficient for such purposes, then the institution shall note that the institution enrolled too few of such students to so disclose or report with confidence and confidentiality.”*

### **Additional or Alternative Measures of Student Success**

The second focus of the Committee will be to consider possible alternatives to measuring success other than, or in addition to, the current completion and graduation rates. Using the data reported by institutions to IPEDS, NCES calculates graduation or completion rates for individual institutions and transfer-out rates for institutions with a transfer mission. Many policymakers, institutions, and researchers have noted the limitations of these measures, particularly for two-year institutions. For example, graduation rates exclude part-time students— about 59 percent of community college student enrollment in the fall

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<sup>5</sup> The National Postsecondary Education Cooperative was established by NCES to promote the quality, comparability, and utility of postsecondary data and information that support policy development at the federal, state, and institution levels. The report on improvements to graduation rates can be found at: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2010/2010832.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> The complete report can be accessed at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2010/2010831rev.pdf>.

of 2008. Others also question whether a graduation rate is the sole indicator of student outcomes at two-year institutions that have a mission to prepare students for transfer, have open admissions policies, and have students who may concurrently enroll at multiple institutions. Community colleges and other two-year institutions also offer career and technical education in which a successful outcome may be more related to their future employment rather than earning a degree. For example, measuring the impact of earning a certificate or college credits on students' wages may be a more telling indicator of success rather than just measuring if the student graduated.

States, foundations, associations, and other organizations have initiated several efforts focused on increasing student completion. These initiatives have proposed a number of alternative measures of student success, as well as other ways to disaggregate graduation rates for various student subgroups. The initiatives range from targeted efforts within certain sectors of institutions or within a state to more broad and national efforts that encompass many states. Several initiatives focus on increasing completion and graduation rates of low-income students, a subgroup for which completion data have not been historically available. For example, the Access to Success Initiative, a project of the National Association of System Heads and the Education Trust, works with 24 public higher education systems to eliminate access and completion gaps for low-income and minority students. The systems measure how many students aged 18 to 34 (including full-time and part-time, first-time and transfer students) successfully transfer to a bachelor's program, earn a certificate, or earn an associate's degree.

While the various initiatives may represent different groups or institutions, there are common themes in the alternative measures that they have identified, such as measuring student progress towards important milestones or analyzing the time it takes a student to complete a degree. For example, some of the initiatives calculate or propose calculating the average number of credits a student has earned after one year of enrollment or the average number of credits it took to earn a degree or certificate. Many of the initiatives also focus particularly on the success of students not adequately prepared for college-level coursework, a large segment of the student population at many two-year institutions. Since institutions spend considerable resources and time by providing remedial education designed to prepare underprepared students for credit-bearing coursework, several of the initiatives include measures focused on how many students complete remedial education and then the subsequent entry-level credit-bearing course. One initiative, the Voluntary Framework of Accountability also proposes using measures of students' wages in post college employment. The proposed measures would assess whether graduates of career or technical education earned a livable wage. Table 1 summarizes a few selected initiatives and the student success metrics that are being used or have been recommended.

Representatives of some of the initiatives will present at the Committee’s first meeting and will provide more detailed information.

**Table 1. Selected completion-focused initiatives and success measures identified**

<b>Initiative</b>	<b>Student Progress and Persistence Metrics</b>	<b>Outcome Metrics</b>
<p><b>Voluntary Framework of Accountability</b> American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) in collaboration with Association of Community College Trustees and College Board</p> <p>Creating a voluntary framework for measuring student success at community colleges. Metrics will be piloted at institutions that apply to participate.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Successfully reached credit milestone thresholds within a timeframe</li> <li>• Persisting: still enrolled at same institution after a tracking period; or made a lateral transfer</li> <li>• Course success rate</li> </ul>	<p><b>Academic</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete degree or certificate</li> <li>• Transfer to 4-year institution</li> <li>• Still enrolled and making academic progress</li> </ul> <p><b>Employment-related</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Annual percent of graduates passing licensure examinations</li> <li>• CTE degree and certificate graduates either employed with livable wage or enrolled in further education</li> <li>• Wage growth of graduates (median incomes)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Complete College America</b></p> <p>Organization funded by several foundations that includes 23 alliance states. These states have committed to common metrics to be used to measure progress statewide and for 4-year and 2-year institutions in the state.</p> <p><b>National Governors Association Compete to Complete</b></p> <p>Adopted same metrics as used by Complete College America</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completion of remedial course in a subject and subsequent completion of college level course in same subject</li> <li>• Completion of first-year “gateway” courses in math and English</li> <li>• Credit accumulation within first academic year</li> <li>• Successfully completing courses attempted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete degree</li> <li>• Transfer rates from two-year to four-year institutions</li> <li>• Average length of time to complete degree/certificate</li> <li>• Average number of credits earned to complete degree/certificate</li> </ul>
<p><b>Achieving the Dream Community College Counts</b></p> <p>A multi-state effort that includes more than 100 colleges in 22 states. Achieving the Dream works with both community colleges and state and federal policymakers to increase student access and success.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete developmental courses and move on to credit-bearing courses</li> <li>• Enroll in and complete gatekeeper courses, such as introductory math and English</li> <li>• Complete the courses they take, earning a grade of C or higher</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Re-enroll from one semester to the next</li> <li>• Earn certificates and degrees</li> </ul>

**Note:** The NGA has recommended that states use the progress and outcome metrics outlined by Complete College America and provides recommendations on how to move forward in collecting the data needed to calculate these metrics. For example, NGA recommends that states clarify definitions of the completion metrics to ensure uniformity in collecting data across institutions and where possible directs states to collect through statewide databases the necessary data so that metrics can be calculated.

## **Next Steps for the Committee**

Moving forward the Committee will meet up to three more times to discuss the two focuses of the work: (1) providing technical assistance on completion and graduation rates and (2) options for alternative measures of student success. The Committee will need to make recommendations to the Secretary of Education regarding these two issues as outlined in the statute and could do so in a number of ways. For example, the Committee could review guidance drafted by NCES for how two-year institutions can comply with the HEOA provision that requires the disaggregation of graduation rates by gender, race/ethnicity, and for students who receive Pell grants, received a loan but no Pell grant, and students who did not receive either a Pell grant or loan. To address the issue of alternative success measures, the Committee will want to familiarize itself with the various efforts underway to address student success and consider them when developing potential recommendations for additional or alternative measures. The Committee could propose measures that are not currently being disclosed or reported by institutions. The Committee could make recommendations to the Secretary of Education that institutions disclose certain information or be required to report information to the U.S. Department of Education. In addition, the Committee could consider measures that may not be under the purview of the federal government, but about which the Secretary of Education could provide incentives to institutions and states to collect data. As recommendations are developed, the Committee should be cognizant of how those recommendations would impact institutions, states, and other stakeholders.

The following questions could be used by the Committee as it discusses the two issues.

- How can current data collected by the federal government be improved to better capture student outcomes at two-year institutions?
  - Should data for certain student subgroups be collected?
- Have the current initiatives related to student completion identified important indicators of student success for two-year institutions? What other measures are needed?
  - What are the barriers for institutions to report data for the student success measures outlined by current initiatives?
  - Are there other subgroups (i.e., cohorts of students, types of faculty) that should be analyzed?
- Do current state and system level efforts provide a national picture of alternative outcomes?
  - If not, how could the federal government assist states and system efforts to provide a more robust picture of student success nationwide?
- What are the best methods for collecting and reporting data on alternative measures of student success?