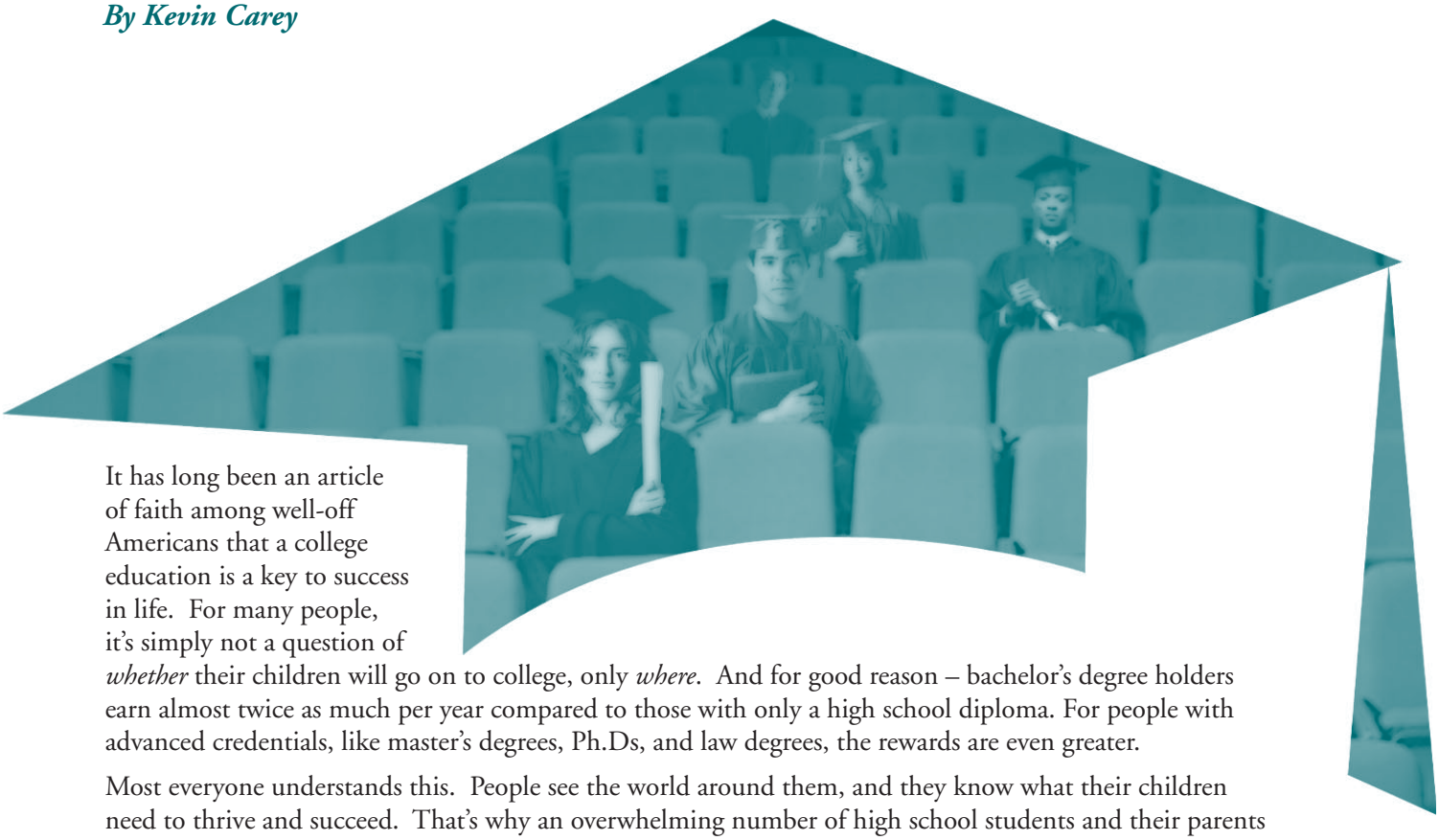
One Step from the Finish Line:

Higher College Graduation Rates are Within Our Reach

By Kevin Carey



It has long been an article of faith among well-off Americans that a college education is a key to success in life. For many people, it's simply not a question of *whether* their children will go on to college, only *where*. And for good reason – bachelor's degree holders earn almost twice as much per year compared to those with only a high school diploma. For people with advanced credentials, like master's degrees, Ph.Ds, and law degrees, the rewards are even greater.

Most everyone understands this. People see the world around them, and they know what their children need to thrive and succeed. That's why an overwhelming number of high school students and their parents expect to go on to college, and most of them do exactly that.[1] The college-enrollment rate for new high school graduates, less than 50 percent in the 1970s, is closer to two-thirds today.[2]

Unlike previous generations, these new collegians increasingly are comprised of women, middle- and lower-income students, and students of color. Upper-income White students still make up a disproportionate share of all undergraduates, but not to the extent that they once did. Great challenges remain in attaining equal access to the nation's colleges and universities, and policymakers at all levels need to keep focused on the special importance of need-based financial aid in closing remaining gaps in college attendance. That said, there has been real progress in boosting access to higher education.

This is all to the good. But it also obscures a critical problem. Too many students – *far* too many students – who start college never finish college. The raw numbers are staggering: Every year, more than one million first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students begin their undergraduate careers at four-year colleges and universities with every hope and expectation of earning a bachelor's degree. Of those students, fewer than four in 10 will actually meet that goal within four years; barely six in 10 will make it out in six years.[3] Hundreds of thousands of students, year after year, don't get the degree they want, work for, pay for, and

truly need.

These numbers represent lost opportunity on a massive scale. And the worst thing about them is that it's the same low-income and minority students who are finally able to enroll in college who are also the least likely to actually graduate. While less than 57 percent of new students at four-year campuses get a degree from their first institution within six years, the graduation rate is below 50 percent for African-American and Latino students. [4] These are the *most* academically prepared minority students our education system produces, and yet when they go to college, they are not likely to get their degree on time.

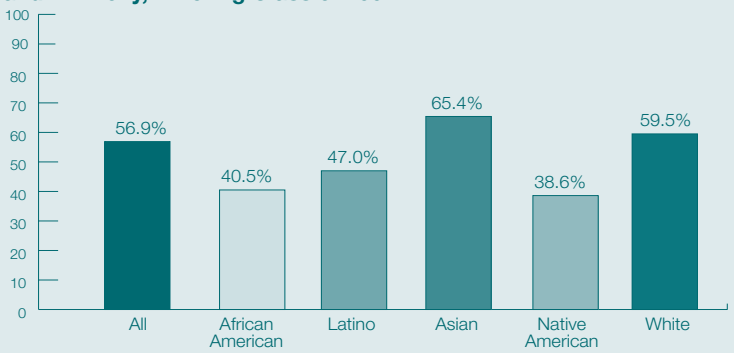
This loss of potential graduates could not come at a worse time. The pressures of global competition, once limited to lower-skill jobs, are steadily moving up the economic ladder. The well paid jobs that remain require far more in the way of knowledge, training, and skills than ever before.

While this nation's long commitment to higher education has yielded the world's best-educated workforce, recent data show that our competitors in the industrialized world are catching up – fast. A generation ago, countries like Canada, Japan, Great Britain, and Korea ranked far below the United States in terms of the percent of young adults with a four-year college degree. Since then, each of these countries has increased its B.A. attainment rate significantly, while the American rate has stayed virtually unchanged.[5]

All of this adds up to a problem of central importance to our education system, economy, and society at large. We cannot afford to keep wasting the aspirations and potential of countless young Americans. And the key role in this vital reform effort must come from the higher education system itself.

Graph 1

Institutional 6-Year Graduation Rates at 4-year Institutions, by Race and Ethnicity, Entering Class of 1997



Source: Education Trust calculations from U.S. Department of Education Graduation Rate Survey Data

To be clear: We know that there are many different reasons that students enroll in college but fail to earn a degree. Some of those reasons have to do with the students themselves, their financial resources, family circumstances, and motivation. Successful undergraduates need the kind of strong preparation in K-12 education that far too many students, particularly low-income and minority students, fail to receive. The decisions of state and federal lawmakers also make a difference, the policies they adopt and the resources they choose to spend, or not spend. All of these things matter, and none of them is under the control of the people who are responsible for running four-year colleges and universities.

But what those institutions do matters too. Colleges and universities are exceptionally complicated enterprises, requiring a high degree of skill, expertise, and good judgment to operate well. The people who run them make choices every day that greatly affect the lives of their students, and some of them do a better job of it than others. University leaders have many competing priorities to choose among – building endowments, pursuing prestigious research funding, creating flashy Division I athletic programs, just to name a few. Some have decided to marshal their resources and focus their energies to maximize learning and success for as many undergraduate students as they possibly can. Others, quite frankly, have focused elsewhere. For many students, these decisions and choices make all the difference in the world.

Analyzing Institutional Graduation Rates

The federal government collects graduation-rate information from every degree-granting college and university in the country through its annual Graduation Rate Survey (GRS). The latest GRS

data include not only overall graduation rates, but also four-, five-, and six-year rates for each major demographic group.

It would be easy, of course, to rank institutions from highest to lowest, concluding that those at the top made wise choices about how to use their resources and those at the bottom made poor choices. But such a ranking overlooks the importance of a range of factors outside of higher education, including student preparation and the availability of student financial aid, and could easily contribute to false judgments about how hard institutions are working on student success.

It would be equally easy, though, to err in the opposite direction, explaining away all institutional differences by simply looking for relationships between graduation rates and those other factors. It's a relatively straightforward process to conduct a regression analysis of graduation rates and conclude that some significant percentage of the variation is attributable to certain student characteristics.[6] You can, for example, "explain" part of the variation in institutional graduation rates by analyzing students' economic status – institutions with many low-income students have lower graduation rates than those with few.

There's a seductive logic to this, one that implicitly excuses whatever graduation-rate outcomes occur at the higher-poverty or less selective institutions. It's easy to become locked into a very deterministic, input-output model of higher education success. But in the end this approach is as unhelpful as a simple ranking from top to bottom.

Why? Because even when we used the results from regression analysis to help us hold all of these crucial factors constant–by comparing institutions only to quite similar institutions on measures like student preparation, size, selectivity, percent low-income students, and institutional support–*some institutions consistently outperform their peers*.

College Results Online

To identify these high performers, the Education Trust has created a new, interactive, Web-based data tool called **College Results Online** www.CollegeResults.org. It allows users to select any four-year public or private nonprofit college or university in the country and see how its graduation rates compare with those other institutions that are most similar, based on 11 factors that are statistically related to graduation rates, ranging from median scores on college-admissions exams to the percentage of students receiving federal Pell Grants (For more detail on how the Education Trust determines "similar" institutions, see text box on Page 4.)

College Results Online shows that very similar institutions often have very different graduation rates. These differences are not trivial. A typical analysis comparing one university to the 25 most similar institutions produces a range between the highest and lowest graduation rates of 30 percentage points or more. The highest-performing school can have a graduation rate *double* that of the lowest. For students, the impact of these differences between institutions that otherwise look the same is huge.

College Results Online also allows users to study graduation rates broken down by students' race, ethnicity, and gender within a single institution. That information – which has only recently become publicly available for all four-year colleges and universities – also reveals significant graduation-rate gaps between White students and students of color. Users can sort schools according to the size of their graduation rate gap, as well as examine how overall graduation-rates at individual colleges and universities increased or decreased over time.

This paper focuses on the unusually high-performing colleges and universities that are most successful in helping their students succeed. These are institutions that have much higher graduation rates than their peers – even *after* taking into account financial resources, student demographics, institutional mission, admissions selectivity, and a range of other external factors. A companion paper to this report, entitled *Choosing to Improve: Voices from Colleges and Universities with Better Graduation Rates,* describes in more detail what these high-performing colleges and universities are doing, highlighting the policies, practices, and decisions they've used to stand out from the crowd.

How the Education Trust Identifies "Similar" Institutions

Many of the graduation-rate analyses in this report are based on comparing graduation-rate outcomes at four-year colleges and universities to the outcomes of other, similar institutions, using the College Results Online Web site. To generate those comparisons, College Results Online compares a given institution to every other four-year college and university in the nation, one by one, based on how similar each institution is in terms of 11 factors that have been determined to be statistically correlated to institutional six-year graduation rates. Through this process, each institution receives a "similarity score" with a maximum possible value of 1,000. The 25 institutions whose similarity scores are closest to 1,000 are designated as "most similar" to the institution being analyzed.

The factors used to generate the similarity scores are listed below. Unless otherwise noted, the data are derived from the National Center for Education Statistics' Integrated Post-Secondary Data System (IPEDS)

- Estimated median SAT (or ACT equivalent) for the most recent freshman class.
- Admissions selectivity, as rated by *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges.*
- Carnegie Classification, which categorizes institutions based on their mission and structure – doctoral-granting research institutions vs. liberal arts colleges, for example.
- Sector, in terms of whether the institution is public or private nonprofit.
- Size, in terms of the number of full-time equivalent undergraduate students.
- Whether or not the institution is self-identified as a commuter campus, according to the College Board.
- Financial resources, measured by student-related expenditures per full-time equivalent undergraduate.
- Percentage of low-income students, estimated by the percentage of undergraduates receiving Pell grants.
- Non-traditional students, estimated by the percent of undergraduates age 25 or older.
- The percentage of part-time undergraduates.
- Whether the institution is a Historically Black College or University.

In generating the similarity scores, certain factors are more heavily weighted than others, based on their relative statistical effect on overall six-year graduation rates. In addition to the similarity-score calculation, College Results Online also has "filters" that exclude institutions from being listed in another institution's comparison list if there is a large enough difference on certain measures, even if the institutions are otherwise similar. For example, an institution with 2,000 students can't be compared to one with 20,000 students, a liberal arts college can't be compared with a doctoral-granting research university, etc. The Technical Appendix to this report contains a thorough description of these factors and the similarity-score process.

There are a few important things to keep in mind when looking at peer comparisons in higher education. First, no automated peer group methodology is perfect or incontrovertible. While College Results Online methodology is based on the recommendations of an advisory panel of national experts and incorporates a host of different data elements, its accuracy may vary from institution to institution, and is subject to differing opinions about what makes institutions "similar." In addition to automatically creating comparison groups, College Results Online also allows users to create their own custom groups.

Second, appropriate peer-groupings can vary depending on their purpose. This methodology was specifically designed for the purpose of comparing graduation rates for first-time, full-time, degree-seeking undergraduate students at four-year institutions. A different method might be appropriate for comparing faculty salaries, funding levels, regional competitors, etc.

Third, institutions vary in an absolute sense in terms of how many other, similar institutions exist for the purposes of comparison. For some colleges and universities, there are dozens of other institutions that are very similar. For others, there simply aren't. This can affect the utility of comparison groups for analytic purposes. For example, because Cal Tech has a median incoming freshman SAT score of more than 1500, fewer than 1,000 undergraduates, a strong science and engineering focus, and extremely high levels of per-student spending, College Results Online identifies no comparison institutions at all. Cal Tech is, literally, peerless.

Fourth, the methodology is designed to generate a list of those institutions that are most similar ***today***. It's based on the most recent available data regarding mission, enrollment, selectivity, etc. Graduation rates, by contrast, are implicitly a function of the nature of an institution and its students over a number of years, in this case from 1997 to 2003. In any one of those years, the list of "most similar" institutions might be different. Institutions and their students can change over time, sometimes significantly. This also can affect how institutions compare in terms of graduation rates.

The reforms these institutions have adopted and the success they have achieved give great hope that the graduation-rate problem can be addressed and overcome. But in a way, the very fact that their innovations and success were choices at all underscores a fundamental flaw in our higher education system. Graduation-rate success is optional, and it shouldn't be. A number of leaders have *decided* to improve, but few of them have *had* to improve.

This missing imperative to be better, this absence of real accountability for student success, is rooted in the underlying nature of how colleges and universities often perceive themselves and their students. Higher education institutions have traditionally tended to think of themselves as opportunity providers first and foremost: Students arrive at their doors; colleges instruct those students and judge what they've learned. Those who measure up get a degree; those who don't, don't. If some can't make it all the way through, well, that's at best a sign that the institution takes academic standards seriously, and at worse simply a reflection of the social conditions of the world beyond the ivy-covered walls. Either way, by this way of thinking, graduation rates have no real bearing on how well the university is being operated or the quality of experience and education it provides.

For decades, the thought process has stopped there, with the idea fixed in our minds that as more poor or under-prepared students walk in the door, graduation rates almost inevitably will go down. In fact, the very same data people use to draw these conclusions can be used to show that low-income students are more likely to end up in low-performing, under-resourced institutions—or to argue that our whole higher education system is collectively organized in a way that simply works better for some kinds of undergraduates than for their lower-income peers. In other words, instead of a certain kind of student dragging down some institutions, we could just as easily argue that some institutions are dragging down a certain kind of student.

Regardless of which way you look at the data, however, the bottom line is clear. To significantly improve college-graduation rates over time will require the best efforts of policymakers, high schools, and others outside of colleges and universities. But even while we work on securing change there, it is very clear from our analysis of the data in College

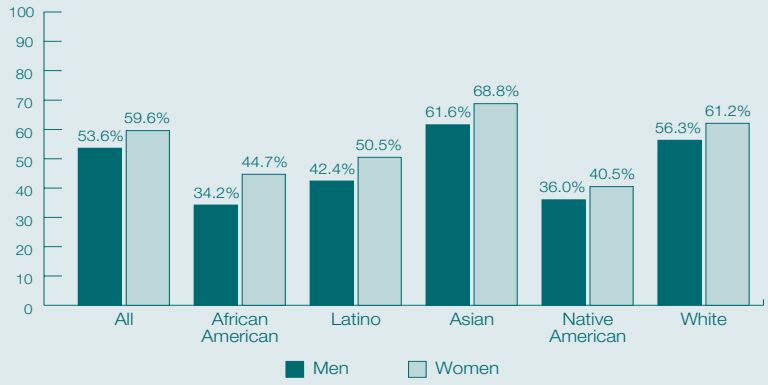
The Gender Gap in Graduation Rates

In addition to graduation-rate disparities between different racial and ethnic groups (See Graph 1), there are also significant differences between men and women. There has been some focus in recent years on gender differences in higher education among African Americans, and this is reflected in the graduation rate numbers – 44.7 percent of African-American women graduate from their first institution in six years, compared to only 34.2 percent of African-American men. But it's also worth noting that this trend repeats itself to varying degrees across every racial and ethnic category, with female students in each case having a significantly higher graduation rate than their male counterparts.

The gap in graduation rates between men and women often is discussed in terms implying that the central issue is male students doing poorly. But at a number of institutions it might be more accurate to say that the gap is caused by female students doing particularly well. For example, there are roughly 1,250 institutions listed in College Results Online database that reported graduation rates for African-American women. At more than one-third of those institutions, the six-year graduation rate for African-American women exceeds the institution's overall graduation rate. For Hispanic women, the proportion is even higher, more than 40 percent.

The fact that women are both more likely to enter college and more likely to finish once they get there leads to some very significant differences in higher education attainment between the genders. Of the more than one million collegians in the 1997 – 2003 GRS cohort, the number of women earning a degree from their original institution within six years exceeds the number of men who did the same by more than 85,000 students.

Institutional 6-Year Graduation Rates, Entering Class of 1997



Source: Education Trust calculations from U.S. Department of Education Graduation Rate Survey Data

Results Online that institutions themselves can make a very big difference right now. Because in every category of institution – from small, highly selective private colleges to large, open-access public universities – some colleges provide strong evidence that our current, unacceptably low national college graduation rate is not inevitable. We can do better, because some institutions already are.

More Attention Could Yield Big Results

To get an image of what could happen if more institutions matched the success of their high-performing peers, look at the data on **Graph 1**.[7] Only a little more than half (56.9 percent) of students who started as first-time, full-time freshmen in 1997 earned a bachelor's degree from their original institution within six years.[8] The rate for White students (59.5 percent) is almost 20 percentage points higher than for African-American students (40.5 percent), with low completion rates for Latinos and Native Americans as well.

What if we could do better – not just a little better, but *much* better? For example, the Census Bureau reports that there are currently about 890,000 African Americans between the ages of 25 and 34 who hold at least a bachelor's degree, roughly 18 percent of the Black population in that age range.[9]

If the nation could cut the graduation-rate gap in half between African-American and White students who begin their college careers as full-time freshmen at four-year institutions, the number of Black college graduates nationwide would grow by at least 10,000 per year. Over 10 years, that would produce another 100,000 African Americans with access to opportunities and jobs to which they're currently denied. If we went further, and closed the Black-White gap in college completion, we could produce another 200,000 African Americans with such access. Similar improvement for Latino students would mean another 20,000 Latino graduates in the state of Texas alone.

These might seem like pie-in-the sky numbers, but consider: Cutting the Black-White graduation-rate gap in half means boosting the African-American graduation rate by 9.5 percentage points. The high-performing institutions identified by **College Results Online** *routinely* outperform the typical graduation rates of their peers – both overall and for minority students – by that much or more. In other words, to produce another 100,000 African-American college graduates, we have only to match the success that a significant number of institutions have *already achieved.*

A concerted effort to learn how these higher performing institutions reached that level of success and to emulate those practices would represent a major, positive change in the culture and conduct of the nation's higher education system. For years, academic researchers have studied and documented what works in higher education: Paying careful attention to students in their first year, helping students feel connected to the campus, challenging them academically, providing one-on-one time with faculty. It's not that higher education hasn't responded to that research. Most colleges and universities have in fact put into place one or more programs based on these findings, including freshman seminars or summer bridge programs for under-prepared students.

But leaders of high-performing institutions don't limit themselves to initiating a few new programs. They work hard to raise student success to a high institution-wide priority, constantly analyzing internal data about student progress and engaging their academic departments in doing the same thing. One way or another, they make it everybody's business to ensure that barriers to student success are identified and removed, and the whole culture of their institutions reflects this priority.

The good news is that, after years of complacency, some parts of the higher education world are now starting to tackle these issues much more aggressively. This year, for instance, the leader of the University of Georgia system called for all system campuses to bring their graduation rates up to at least the national average within five years. The average six-year graduation rate in the Georgia system is 43.5 percent[10] – more than 13 percentage points below the national average.

Similarly, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) – whose members educate more than half of all undergraduates attending public, four-year schools – has launched an intensive study of a set of high-performing colleges

and universities to help identify practices other campuses can replicate to improve graduation rates.

These efforts signal a potential sea change in the higher education world, one where institutions are far more responsive and accountable to students and the general public, where colleges and universities are intensely focused on learning from research and their high-performing peers. If these badly needed changes are combined with other important reforms – more rigorous, high-quality preparation in K-12; improved funding for federal and state student aid programs; investing in the two-year institutions that educate a growing number of low-income students; a renewed focus on undergraduate learning – then there is every reason to expect that the yearly roll call of hundreds of thousands of college students failing to graduate can become a memory of the past, not a constant, damaging reality of the present.

Making the case for these basic changes won't be easy. Each will require tough choices and new resources. Success will necessitate a strong empirical foundation of data, to demonstrate definitively that real improvement for students is possible. And that foundation begins with the real-world evidence of those institutions where great improvements are already well underway.

In the following sections of this paper, we describe three kinds of institutions from which there is much to learn: institutions that have significantly higher overall graduation rates than their peers; those that are particularly successful in graduating under-represented minorities; and those that have made significant improvements over time. Even though these institutions compare very well to other, similar institutions, many also have room for improvement. However, we can still learn from their success even as they work to get even better.

High-Performing Colleges and Universities

The **College Results Online** Web tool shows that some four-year institutions have much higher graduation rates than other, similar institutions. The text box on Page 4 explains exactly how we define "similar," describing the statistical analysis and underlying process driving those comparisons. For an example of how this works, we show on **Table 1** the results for **Plattsburgh State**, part of the State University of New York (SUNY) system located in the northeastern corner of the state, next to Lake Champlain and not far from Montreal. With the exception of extremely cold weather and a corresponding enthusiasm for ice hockey (both the men's and women's teams advanced to the NCAA Division III "Frozen Four" in 2004), Plattsburgh State appears at first to be a very typical American university.

Plattsburgh State enrolled 5,130 full-time undergraduate students in 2003, more than most colleges but many fewer than the big national research universities. Its admissions selectivity was ranked "Competitive" by *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges 2005*. This is the most common rating, designating institutions that accept the majority of applicants, most of whom are in the top half of their high school class and have a combined SAT score or ACT equivalent between 1000 and 1100. Plattsburgh State accepted 62 percent of applicants in 2003, with an estimated median SAT score of 1045 in that year's incoming freshman class.

Plattsburgh is categorized as a "Masters I" institution by the nonprofit Carnegie Foundation. This means it has a wide range of baccalaureate programs and a significant number of graduate programs leading to a master's degree, but doesn't have an intense research focus or award PhDs. "Masters I" is the most common Carnegie classification, the designation for more than 45 percent of all public higher-education institutions. The overall six-year graduation rate at Plattsburgh was 58.9 percent in 2003 – very close to the national average and consistent with the graduation rates they've reported in previous years.

But when we compare their graduation rate to similar universities, Plattsburgh starts to look less typical. Table 1 shows Plattsburgh and the 25 institutions identified by **College Results Online** as most similar. Plattsburgh's six-year graduation rate is greater than 21 of those universities. When we scan Table 1 from top to bottom, we see how graduation rates can be very different among institutions that are otherwise a lot alike. Each institution on the list is a public state university and

Table 1 - Plattsburgh State and 25 most Similar Institutions

Name	State	Full-time Equivalent Undergraduates	Estimated Median SAT (or ACT equivalent)	Carnegie Classification	Sector	Pct. of Undergraduates receiving Pell Grants	Percent of Undergraduates who are under-represented minorities	6-Year Graduation Rate
Millersville University Of Pennsylvania	PA	6,369	1055	Masters I	Public	19.4%	9.0%	65.9%
University Of Northern Iowa	IA	10,959	1045	Masters I	Public	23.9%	4.6%	65.1%
Oregon State University	OR	14,504	1070	Doctoral/ Research Extensive	Public	27.8%	6.0%	60.6%
Shippensburg University Of Pennsylvania	PA	6,385	1040	Masters I	Public	20.2%	5.6%	60.5%
SUNY College At Plattsburgh	**NY**	**5,130**	**1045**	**Masters I**	**Public**	**32.6%**	**8.7%**	**58.9%**
Bloomsburg University Of Pennsylvania	PA	7,156	1020	Masters I	Public	25.9%	5.8%	58.5%
SUNY College At Oswego	NY	6,752	1085	Masters I	Public	36.8%	7.4%	56.3%
Winthrop University	SC	4,785	1050	Masters I	Public	27.9%	28.1%	54.9%
Winona State University	MN	7,040	1030	Masters I	Public	19.5%	1.6%	53.3%
Northwest Missouri State University	MO	5,043	1010	Masters I	Public	26.5%	4.4%	53.1%
University Of Wisconsin-Whitewater	WI	8,898	1030	Masters I	Public	18.6%	6.2%	52.3%
Frostburg State University	MD	4,372	1020	Masters I	Public	27.4%	15.0%	51.4%
Indiana University Of Pennsylvania	PA	11,500	1055	Doctoral/ Research Intensive	Public	36.0%	7.4%	50.9%
SUNY College At Cortland	NY	5,606	1050	Masters I	Public	28.6%	6.2%	49.8%
SUNY College At Brockport	NY	6,384	1085	Masters I	Public	34.2%	7.5%	49.3%
SUNY College At Potsdam	NY	3,387	1070	Masters I	Public	44.9%	5.3%	45.5%
University Of Wisconsin-Stout	WI	6,703	1010	Masters I	Public	25.0%	2.1%	45.5%
Emporia State University	KS	4,046	990	Masters I	Public	31.6%	8.3%	45.1%
Northern Michigan University	MI	7,831	1010	Masters I	Public	32.3%	4.6%	44.8%
Tennessee Technological University	TN	6,702	1065	Masters I	Public	29.9%	5.4%	41.3%
University Of Tennessee-Martin	TN	4,799	1010	Masters I	Public	32.8%	16.9%	39.8%
University Of Central Arkansas	AR	8,230	1065	Masters I	Public	36.4%	19.1%	39.5%
Francis Marion University	SC	2,944	955	Masters I	Public	37.5%	36.3%	37.8%
Georgia Southern University	GA	12,730	1045	Masters I	Public	29.5%	26.1%	37.4%
Stephen F Austin State University	TX	8,871	1025	Masters I	Public	30.9%	23.9%	35.4%
Western Oregon University	OR	4,132	975	Masters I	Public	33.0%	8.4%	31.0%

all but two have a "Masters I" academic mission. The estimated median freshman SAT scores (or ACT equivalent) are near the national median of 1025. Most of the campuses are located in small towns or mid-size cities, with between 3,000 and 9,000 undergraduates. In these and a variety of other respects, they're very similar.

Yet their overall graduation rates vary *dramatically* – from 31.0 percent on the low end to 65.9 percent at the top. This kind of large variation in graduation rates occurs across the higher education spectrum. In any category you choose – small private colleges, big-city commuter campuses, open-access regional institutions – some institutions consistently outperform their peers when it comes to graduation rates.

Tables 2 -7 offer examples of some of these high performers. While all of the institutions listed on these tables have graduation rates that compare very favorably to similar institutions, some, like Plattsburgh State, have rates that aren't as high as anyone wishes they would be. But we can still learn much from what's made them so successful relative to their peers, even as they work to be better yet.

Unlike the example for Plattsburgh State shown on Table 1, Tables 2 - 7 aren't meant to show a single institution

compared to its closest peers. Rather, *each* institution shown on Tables 2 -7 has a distinct peer group. The individual graduation rate for each institution is shown on the third column of each table. The median graduation rate among the most similar peer institutions is shown in the fourth column. The difference between the graduation rate of the listed institution (Column 3) and the median rate among its peers (Column 4) is shown in the fifth column.

For example, **Table 2** shows some of the elite private colleges and universities that typically round out the top of various "America's Best" college rankings. **Harvard** has the highest graduation rate in the country, at 97.8 percent.[11] This is good even when we limit the comparison to other Ivy League schools and highly selective research institutions. The median graduation among Harvard's peers is 93.1 percent, for a difference of 4.7 percentage points. When we use **College Results Online** to generate a comparison list like the one shown for Plattsburgh State above, Harvard sits on top. [12]

Several other elite institutions – **Notre Dame**, **Amherst**, **Williams** – also outperform their peers on the six-year graduation rate metric. These institutions suggest that even at the "best" schools that enroll the most academically prepared students, there are always ways to be better. In interviews the Education Trust conducted with university officials at Notre Dame, for example, they told us that they had noticed that an unusual number of students were either dropping or failing freshman chemistry. "The problem was that they were not just dropping four credit hours," said Vice President and Associate Provost Dennis Jacobs, who oversees the university's undergraduate studies. "Chemistry is a gateway course for a number of majors, so dropping it meant that they were abandoning what they had planned for their future – a potential career in science, medicine, or engineering."[13]

Jacobs, a chemistry professor, created a new, redesigned general chemistry course to address the problem, offering the class to students whose math entrance exam scores were in the lowest quartile of new students. The alternative course covered the same material as the traditional course, but incorporated mandatory study-group sections where students worked together in teams to create solutions to challenging problems.

Those students were 50 percent more likely to complete two full years of chemistry than other students who also had math scores in the lowest quartile and had been in the traditional general chemistry sequence. They were also 50 percent more likely to pursue majors in science or in the health professions. As a result, the chemistry department has proposed adopting the new model for all the freshman chemistry classes. The same kind of entry-level course redesign has now been undertaken by Notre Dame's College of Engineering.

Notre Dame shows one example – there are many more – of how universities who analyze and focus on student outcome data can use that information to drive changes that both improve the quality of academic instruction and increase the odds of students progressing through higher education successfully.

Table 3 shows a group of large national research institutions that have selective admissions standards and tend to draw a combination of the most academically competitive in-state students plus others from across the country. Each of these universities has a six-year graduation rate significantly greater than its peers.

These universities don't have the near-perfect graduation rates of Harvard and Amherst. But each outperforms the typical rate among its peers by roughly 10 percentage points or more. One example is **Penn State**, one of the five biggest universities in the United States. Ask people about Penn State, and they tend to think of Joe Paterno and very large linebackers in very plain uniforms.

Table 2 - Examples of Elite Private Institutions

Name	State	6 -Year Grad Rate	Median 6-Year Grad Rate - Similar Institutions	Difference
Amherst College	MA	96.8%	88.6%	8.2
University of Notre Dame	IN	94.6%	87.1%	7.5
Williams College	MA	95.8%	88.5%	7.3
Harvard University	MA	97.8%	93.1%	4.7

Many don't know that Penn State also graduates more than 80 percent of its students, a number it has hit more or less like clockwork in every year that GRS statistics have been reported. That number is 10 percentage points higher than the median graduation rate for similar colleges and universities. Had Penn State performed no better than the median graduation rate, there would be almost 2,500 fewer Penn State graduates over the last five years.

Another standout is **Syracuse University**, which like Penn State is well known for its sports programs, recently winning national championships in men's basketball and lacrosse. But their success doesn't stop there – Syracuse has also increased its overall six-year graduation rate for six consecutive years, improving in every year that GRS data has been collected.

Syracuse administrators attribute their success to leadership-driven institutional improvement along a number of fronts, from reducing class size in all introductory-level classes in all disciplines to paying attention to how students spend their time outside of class. Faced in the early 1990s with falling enrollment, a multi-million dollar budget deficit, and faculty sentiment that the university overemphasized research at the expense of teaching, then-chancellor Kenneth Shaw challenged all parts of the university to become more focused on students.

Internal analysis of retention patterns found a significant number of students who left in the fourth year, only a few credits shy of graduation. Some either thought they had graduated or had been unable to get their transcripts to reflect transfer credits or to clear up incomplete grades. The university helped students cut through red tape problems, raising graduation rates.

By focusing extra resources on freshmen, Syracuse works to minimize the dropout rate in the critical first year, while "learning communities" based on academic interests provide students with a more collaborative academic and social experience. Syracuse also takes students seriously when it comes to faculty tenure, combining student evaluations and, in some departments, observations and peer assessments of teaching when conducting the customary third-year review of tenure-track faculty. According to Provost Deborah Freund, those whose teaching is found wanting are told, "Here's what you need to work on, where you have to improve, and how to get help."

Freund said that when tenure recommendations were denied on the basis of the quality of teaching, it sent a powerful message that teaching was taken seriously. "The Syracuse model has been that you have to be great at both [research and teaching]. People who come here believe that the two aren't mutually exclusive."

Table 4 highlights a number of smaller, selective private colleges that also have significantly higher graduation rates than their peers. It includes the **College of Saint Benedict** and **Saint John's University,** two single-gender institutions that are located six miles from one another, in central Minnesota, sharing academic programs and a Catholic tradition. These and other institutions such as **Wheaton College** in Illinois have the small size and academically prepared student body that are often cited as determinant factors when it comes to graduation rates. But even when you compare them to other colleges with the same advantages, they do better at graduating students.

We can also find public universities that aren't as academically selective as Penn

Table 3 - Examples of Selective National Research Institutions

Name	State	6 -Year Grad Rate	Median 6 -Year Grad Rate - Similar Institutions	Difference
Miami of Ohio	OH	80.3%	66.0%	14.4
University of California - Davis	CA	81.1%	67.6%	13.5
University of New Hampshire	NH	72.6%	59.5%	13.1
Syracuse University	NY	81.0%	70.3%	10.7
Penn State	PA	82.5%	72.2%	10.3
University of Illinois - Urbana-Champaign	IL	81.0%	71.5%	9.6
Indiana University - Bloomington	IN	71.8%	62.5%	9.3
SUNY Binghamton	NY	80.1%	71.0%	9.1
Virginia Tech	VA	74.2%	65.7%	8.5

State or some of the other campuses on **Table 3**, but still outperform their peers when it comes to graduation rates. **Table 5** shows a group of large public doctoral institutions that accept the majority of students who apply, in each case 75 percent of applicants or more. Academic preparation among incoming students is still reasonably strong. But it also varies considerably.

Institutions like **Bowling Green**, for example, have a median SAT score or ACT equivalent of a little more than 1000. However, this is just the median – a quarter of new students at Bowling Green scored only an 18 or below on the ACT English and Math assessments.[14] Research by ACT has found that an 18 is the bare minimum level necessary for freshmen to have a reasonable probability of success in college-level English, and well *below* the level associated with success in college-level biology and algebra.[15] Compared to other institutions with similar academic diversity in their student population, Bowling Green's 64.7 percent graduation rate is unusually high.

Most of the institutions we've looked at thus far in Tables 2 – 5 are well-known and above-average in various ways. All of them graduate the majority of their students within six years, and most do much better than that. But there are many examples of other, less-prominent colleges and universities that *also* perform very well relative to their peers, even though they're not wealthy, selective, or nationally renowned. As we see on **Table 6**, when we examine the graduation rate performance of these institutions in the context of their closest peer institutions, they look just as good as many more well-known universities – if not better.

The national conversation on higher education often is intensely focused on elite private institutions and flagship public universities that emphasize doctoral research. It can be easy to forget that those institutions educate only a small minority of all college students. Most undergraduates who attend four-year institutions either start in the two-year sector and transfer, or begin at regional colleges or mid-level public universities close to home. These institutions are usually fairly anonymous on the national scene, flying below the radar outside their home state. But they educate a great number of students, particularly low-income and first-generation students. Graduation rate success there is just as important – probably *more* important – as anywhere else.

The **University of Northern Iowa** consistently has one of the highest graduation rates in the nation among public, Masters-granting institutions. UNI administrators attribute this success to multiple improvements and reforms. For example, a student complaint about being unable to register for a class required in his major led Provost Aaron Podolefsky to spearhead a comprehensive analysis of course sequences, enrollment patterns, and student outcomes. UNI discovered that a significant number of students were taking longer than four years to graduate because of similar course

Table 4 - Examples of Selective Private Colleges

Name	State	6-Year Grad Rate	Median 6-Year Grad Rate - Similar Institutions	Difference
Saint John's University	MN	82.9%	71.7%	11.2
Luther College	IA	78.7%	69.6%	9.1
Wheaton College	IL	86.3%	77.2%	9.1
College of Saint Benedict	MN	78.6%	70.5%	8.1
University of the South	TN	83.2%	75.5%	7.7
Susquehanna University	PA	78.2%	71.6%	6.6
Bucknell University	PA	88.6%	83.1%	5.5

Table 5 - Examples of Moderately Selective Public Doctoral / Research Univ.

Name	State	6-Year Grad Rate	Median 6-Year Grad Rate - Similar Institutions	Difference
Ohio University	OH	70.2%	59.8%	10.4
Louisiana Tech	LA	52.5%	44.3%	8.2
Mississippi State University	MS	57.5%	47.9%	9.6
Bowling Green State University	OH	64.7%	55.3%	9.4
Washington State University	WA	60.0%	51.8%	8.2

Table 6 - Public Masters-Granting Institutions

Name	State	6-Year Grad Rate	Median 6-Year Grad Rate - Similar Institutions	Difference
Troy State University	AL	54.3%	35.7%	18.6
Rutgers University - Camden	NJ	58.3%	42.4%	15.9
Millersville U. of Pennsylvania	PA	65.9%	53.3%	12.6
Murray State University	KY	56.5%	44.6%	11.9
University of Northern Iowa	IA	65.1%	53.3%	11.8
Longwood University	VA	61.3%	51.4%	9.9
Clarion U. of Pennsylvania	PA	54.4%	44.7%	9.7
SUNY College at Plattsburgh	NY	58.9%	49.8%	9.1
Montclair State University	NJ	55.8%	47.8%	8.0

availability problems.

In many cases, simply offering one more section of a class per semester substantially reduced the backlog that had been built up. "We were creating the obstacles," says Podolefsky. "We had to change."

Other high-performing masters-granting institutions include **Longwood University,** a fairly small institution that has been educating students in central Virginia since 1839. Its 61 percent graduation rate is 10 percentage points better than the median among its peer group. In another example, **Troy State University** in Alabama boosted its graduation rate by 14 percentage points in six years, to the point that its six-year rate is now almost 19 percentage points higher than the typical rate for similar institutions.

A number of high-performing institutions also can be found among the ranks of the nation's Historically Black Colleges and Universities. HBCUs are, in this sense, no different than any other sector of higher education – some perform exceptionally well; some don't; and most are somewhere in between. The institutions on **Table 7** have very high graduation rates relative to similar institutions, and not just when compared to other HBCUs. They include **Spelman College**, whose 77 percent graduation rate is the highest among other, similar liberal arts colleges, most of which educate predominantly White students. **Alcorn State** is less academically selective than Spelman and admits a high percentage of lower-income and first–generation students. Retaining such students is a significant challenge for most universities, and at one point Alcorn State was losing as many as 50 percent of its freshman class in the first year alone. Said Dr. Malvin Williams, provost and vice president for academic affairs: "We decided that was unacceptable."

A study team was sent to colleges and universities all over the country to find what programs seemed to help institutions retain and promote their students. From that research emerged the College for Excellence, a concentrated two-year program that freshmen and sophomores must successfully complete before being admitted to a major program. "We pulled all of the services that dealt with freshmen or sophomores – advising, counseling, developmental and the core curriculum – under one umbrella, the College for Excellence," Williams said. Class sizes for freshmen and sophomores were reduced so that most now have fewer than 25 students, and every full-time faculty member is expected to teach at least one freshman-level class. Faculty academic advisers are carefully selected by their departments based on their

Table 7 - Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Name	State	6-Year Grad Rate	Median 6-Year Grad Rate - Similar Institutions	Difference
Fisk University	TN	77.7%	40.3%	37.4
Claflin University	SC	71.2%	40.3%	30.9
Elizabeth City State University	NC	50.5%	29.6%	20.9
South Carolina State University	SC	48.6%	31.0%	17.6
Spelman College	GA	77.0%	60.9%	16.1
Alcorn State University	MS	47.9%	33.3%	14.6
North Carolina Central University	NC	48.7%	36.4%	12.3
Xavier U of Louisiana	LA	58.8%	49.5%	9.3

ability to work with freshmen and then are trained by the College for Excellence. The university has also worked to increase the quality of developmental instruction for students who enroll needing additional skills to be ready for college-level work. Alcorn State's first year retention rate has now increased to almost 75 percent.

Elizabeth City State University Chancellor Mickey Burnim "has made it clear that we all have a role to play in our students' success – from the registrar to the groundskeepers," says Dr. Carolyn Mahoney, provost at this historically Black, public university in northeastern North Carolina. "In some cases, it comes down to a housekeeper noticing that a student in their building hasn't been going to class, and she tells an RA, who checks in and finds out what is going on. Those things don't seem like they make much of a difference, but the accumulated impact is significant."

Class attendance is mandatory at ECSU (a policy dating to 1928), while students' academic progress is monitored closely. Each student's faculty adviser works with the Registrar's Office to track mid-term grades, and advisers are expected to meet with any student who is having difficulty. In some cases poor mid-term grades have been tracked not to problems with the students but to the instruction itself, with steps taken to help professors be more successful in the classroom.

Other successful HBCUs include **Fisk University, Xavier University of Louisiana, North Carolina Central,** and **South Carolina State**. In a simple sense, the graduation rates at some of these institutions aren't that high, in some cases below 50 percent. But it's important to keep in mind that these HBCUs share many challenges with other institutions that serve large numbers of lower-income and first-generation college students, students who don't always come to higher education with the full range of financial and academic resources necessary to guarantee success. Compared to similar institutions, these HBCUs are doing well.

Minority-serving institutions educate a significant portion of the nation's students of color. HBCUs, for example, enrolled about 35 percent of all African Americans who began as first-time full-time freshmen at four-year institutions in 1997. Most students of color, however, enroll at higher education institutions without a specific minority-serving mission. At the vast majority of those colleges and universities, graduation rates broken down by race and ethnicity have never been widely publicized. The new data found at **College Results Online** shows that at many institutions, minority graduation rates should be great cause for concern.

Graduation Rates for Minority Students

It's worth noting that the historical graduation-rate trends for minority students show some gains compared to where they once were.[16] But large gaps between minority students and White students remain. The group of students who entered higher education in 1997 is only the second cohort for which disaggregated, institution-level graduation rates have been made available.[17] In addition to the overall graduation rate for a given college or university, the public can now access graduation rates for specific groups of students within institutions, broken down by gender, race, and ethnicity. As we saw back on **Graph 1**, there are major graduation-rate gaps between different groups.

To some extent these gaps are a function of *where* students are enrolled – African-American, Latino, and Native American students are over-represented at less selective colleges and universities, which in turn tend to have lower graduation rates. For this reason, the aggregate graduation-rate gap is partially caused by a lack of opportunity for minority students to enroll at the colleges and universities where students are most likely to succeed.

In the fall of 1997, more than 108,000 African-American students enrolled as first- time, full-time, degree-seeking freshmen at public or private nonprofit four-year institutions.[18] Ninety-three percent – approximately 101,000 students – enrolled at one of 602 institutions, each of which had an entering class of at least 25 African Americans.

As **Table 8** shows, only a small number of those African-American students – fewer than 3,000 – enrolled at institutions where the odds of graduating for African Americans were 80 percent or better. By contrast, the *majority* of Black students – almost 53,000 – enrolled at institutions where the African-

American graduation rate was less than 40 percent. More than 28,000 started at colleges and universities with less than a three in 10 chance of graduating from that institution within six years.

This means that African-American students are more than four times as likely to enter college at an institution where at least 70 percent of Black students *fail* to graduate as they are to begin at an institution where at least 70 percent of Black students *succeed.*

Nearly 14,000 African-American students enrolled at institutions where the odds of completing a degree were less than *one in five.* Of those students, only 2,064 earned a bachelor's degree from their original institution within six years, a graduation rate of 15.1 percent.

These catastrophic failure rates are partly a matter of unequal access to upper-tier colleges and universities, where minorities are under-represented. Research has shown that students are more likely to graduate from more selective institutions, even after controlling for the characteristics of the students themselves.[19] That said, low minority graduation rates are also significantly caused by persistent graduation gaps *within* institutions. **Table 9** shows that most higher education institutions have a serious graduation-rate gap between White students and students of color.[20]

If we rank all the four-year colleges and universities in America from top to bottom in terms of the difference between their graduation rate for White students and the rate for Black students, the median gap is 11.6 percentage points. Many institutions do much worse – one out of four (those at the 75th percentile or above) has a gap of 20 percentage points or more. Institutional gaps for Native American students are even larger, while Latino students are also significantly less likely than White students at a typical institution to earn their degree.

Table 8 – Institutional Graduation Rates for African-American Students (at least 25 first-time full-time beginners)

6-Year African American Graduation Rate	Number of Institutions	Number of Beginning African-American Students
80%>	37	2,831
70% - 79%	25	3,537
60% - 69%	49	7,229
50% - 59%	67	11,702
40% - 49%	124	23,032
30% - 39%	131	24,576
20% - 29%	95	14,758
10% - 19%	59	12,189
0% - 9%	15	1,514
Total	602	101,368

Most colleges and universities have tracked this information internally for a long time, but haven't made it public. It often reveals a systematic failure to serve certain groups of students. The federal graduation-rate survey that gathers the data we analyze in the report doesn't ask for separate information on outcomes for low-income students, but if it did we would most likely find similar disparities.[21]

In combination, Tables 8 and 9 suggest that to improve college success rates for minority students, we have to be mindful of both absolute and relative levels of performance. For a given college or university, we should compare minority graduation rates both to rates for minority students at other, similar institutions, and for non-minority students at the same institution. Consider, for example, the four institutions in **Table 10**.

Each of these institutions has a six-year graduation rate for African-American students of more than 60 percent – a much higher rate than the national average. Minority students who enroll in these institutions stand a better-than-even chance of getting a degree, which isn't the case at most colleges and universities. However, the graduation rate for White students at each of these institutions is *much* higher, on average 80 percent or more. As Table 9 shows, these gaps, some more than 20 percentage points, are unusually large.

Some might see these differences as the inevitable result of trying to recruit more minority students into higher education, through affirmative action or

Table 9 - Institutional Graduation Rate Gaps Between White and Minority Students (percentage points)

	African American	Latino	Native American	Asian
75th Percentile	-20.0	-15.6	-24.4	-9.5
Median	-11.6	-8.6	-14.6	-1.7
25th Percentile	-3.9	-2.1	-7.6	4.4

other programs. But this ignores institutions that have small gaps – or no gaps at all – between different racial and ethnic groups. Some even graduate African-American and Latino students at *higher* rates than White students. While graduation-rate gaps are unfortunately typical, they are by no means inevitable. Just as some institutions stand out from the crowd in terms of *overall* graduation rates, some institutions outperform their peers in making the promise of college success a reality for all students, not just for some.

Table 11 lists institutions whose minority graduation-rate gaps have been small or non-existent in each of the two years for which disaggregated graduation rate data have been reported. These are not institutions with miniscule minority populations, nor are they all elite campuses that can cherry-pick the minority students they deem most likely to succeed. **Florida State University**, for example, is a large public research institution with tens of thousands of undergraduates, 11.7 percent of whom are African American. Unlike most such universities, only a few percentage points separate the success rate for White students and students of color.

A number of low-income and first-generation students at Florida State get extra attention even before they actually enroll in the fall, at a seven-week summer program that helps them make the transition to college. The first week is an intensive orientation, during which they learn study skills, campus safety and the like. That's followed by six weeks of regular, credit-bearing academic courses, such as American History or first-year English, generally taken in small groups. Nearly 300 students enrolled in 2004, the majority of whom were African American, and almost all of whom came from low-income families.

"The advisers and mentors who connected with you during the (summer) program are going to be monitoring and watching your progress," says Lawrence Abele, Florida State's provost. "And they are going to nag you a bit to make sure that you are staying on track and that you take advantage of the people who are here to help you."

In addition to extremely selective institutions like **Harvard, Brown, Princeton**, and **Washington University in St. Louis**, other universities that don't have large graduation-rate gaps for Black students include the **Longwood University,** the **University of Connecticut, UNC-Greensboro,** and **East Carolina University.**

Table 11 also shows a number of institutions whose success rates for Latino students don't fall short of White students. For example, **St. Mary's University,** a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) in San Antonio whose student body is 71 percent Latino, has a graduation rate higher than the median for its peer institutions, and virtually identical rates for Latino and White students.

Anthony J. Kaufmann, dean of the School of Science, Engineering and Technology (SET), attributed the success at St. Mary's to a concentrated focus on quality teaching. "We are known for our teaching, both on campus and off of it," said Kaufmann. SET is the university's largest program, one of the reasons that St. Mary's ranks in the top 10 nationally for the number of Mexican-

Table 10 - Examples of Universities with Above-Average African-American Graduation Rates but Large Black-White Gaps

Name	FTE Undegrads	Pct. African American	Pct. White	2002/2003 6-Year Grad Rate African American	2002/2003 6-Year Grad Rate White	2003 Gap
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN	28,472	7.5%	67.1%	61.5%	83.2%	-21.7
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN-ANN ARBOR	23,714	8.0%	63.8%	66.5%	88.2%	-21.7
PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY	33,975	4.2%	84.4%	64.2%	83.4%	-19.2
FORDHAM UNIVERSITY	6,928	5.4%	60.6%	61.3%	79.5%	-18.25
CARNEGIE MELLON UNIVERSITY	5,312	4.9%	42.9%	63.9%	81.7%	-17.75
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA-BERKELEY	22,363	3.9%	29.8%	69.8%	86.5%	-16.75

Table 11 - Schools with Small or Non-Existent Graduation Gaps Between African-American and White Students

Name	Carnegie Classification	FTE Undergrads	Pct. African American	Pct. White	2003 6-Year Grad Rate African American	2003 6-Year Grad Rate White	2003 Gap	2002 Gap	2-Year Average Gap
WINTHROP UNIVERSITY	Masters I	4,651	22.7	73.6	61.2	53.7	-7.5	-6.3	6.9
UNC - GREENSBORO	Doctoral/Research Intensive	9,721	20.3	72.9	54.4	49	5.4	4.2	4.8
ELON UNIVERSITY	Masters I	4,200	7.1	89.2	72.1	72	0.1	9.2	4.7
WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST LOUIS	Doctoral/Research Extensive	6,296	5.8	63.3	95.8	89.7	6.1	0.1	3
EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY	Doctoral/Research Intensive	15,396	11.7	84	51	54.6	-3.6	6.9	1.7
VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY	Doctoral/Research Extensive	14,836	27.2	60.4	42.5	40.3	2.2	0.8	1.5
FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY	Doctoral/Research Extensive	19,580	11.7	18.7	41.4	40.4	1.0	-3.3	-1.2
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI	Doctoral/Research Extensive	11,405	26.9	69.3	45.8	46.9	-1.1	-1.4	-1.3
FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY	Doctoral/Research Extensive	26,651	11.7	75.9	61.3	63.9	-2.6	-1.0	-1.8
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY	Doctoral/Research Extensive	4,635	6.3	70.7	97.2	97.2	0.0	-4.3	-2.2
UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT	Doctoral/Research Extensive	14,083	5.7	76.5	68	70.5	-2.5	-1.9	-2.2
HARVARD UNIVERSITY	Doctoral/Research Extensive	7,987	8	38.3	95.4	97.8	-2.4	-4.0	-3.2
WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY	Doctoral/Research Intensive	3,966	8.1	88.3	83.3	87.4	-4.1	-3.1	-3.6
BROWN UNIVERSITY	Doctoral/Research Extensive	5,817	6.9	63.3	92.6	96.7	-4.1	-3.7	-3.9
LONGWOOD UNIVERSITY	Masters I	3,552	8.9	87.5	58.5	62.2	-3.7	-4.7	-4.2

Table 11a - Schools with Small or Non-Existent Graduation Gaps Between Latino and White Students

Name	Carnegie Classification	FTE Undergrads	Pct. Latino	Pct. White	2003 6-Year Grad Rate Latino	2003 6-Year Grad Rate White	2003 Gap	2002 Gap	2-Year Average Gap
FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY	Doctoral/Research Extensive	19,580	60.5	18.7	49.6	40.4	9.2	7.7	8.5
CAL STATE - STANISLAUS	Masters I	4,686	27.6	46.7	46.9	46.1	0.8	9.1	5.0
UC - RIVERSIDE	Doctoral/Research Extensive	13,300	17.6	21.7	63.7	62.6	1.1	3.1	2.1
UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO	Doctoral/Research Intensive	4,535	10.8	35	66.2	67.1	-0.9	3.8	1.5
SAINT MARY'S COLLEGE OF CALIFORNIA	Masters I	2,806	15.6	65.1	76.3	72.7	3.6	-0.8	1.4
UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA-RENO	Doctoral/Research Extensive	9,939	6.1	76.2	45.1	48.6	-3.5	4.9	0.7
ST MARY'S UNIVERSITY	Masters I	2,562	70.6	20.7	63.1	62.9	0.2	-0.3	-0.1
LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY	Masters I	5,120	20.2	51.2	74	73.9	0.1	-2.3	-1.1
HARVARD UNIVERSITY	Doctoral/Research Extensive	7,987	8.6	38.3	97.9	97.8	0.1	-2.5	-1.2
CAL STATE -SAN BERNARDINO	Masters I	10,056	32.4	35.4	43.1	45.4	-2.3	-1.2	-1.8
BROWN UNIVERSITY	Doctoral/Research Extensive	5,817	7.2	63.3	92.9	96.7	-3.8	0.2	-1.8
CAL STATE -BAKERSFIELD	Masters I	4,860	39	36.2	41.8	45.6	-3.8	-0.1	-2.0
SAINT EDWARD'S UNIVERSITY	Masters 2	2,727	37.6	54.9	52.6	52.8	-0.2	-5.0	-2.6
UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME	Doctoral/Research Extensive	8,236	6.4	85.1	90.9	95.4	-4.5	-1.2	-2.9
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA-IRVINE	Doctoral/Research Extensive	18,669	10.2	21.3	74	76.9	-2.9	-3.1	-3.0
COLLEGE OF MOUNT SAINT VINCENT	Masters 2	1,076	29.8	43.1	55.2	56.7	-1.5	-4.6	-3.1
STANFORD UNIVERSITY	Doctoral/Research Extensive	6,818	10.4	50.4	93	95.1	-2.1	-4.1	-3.1
UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO	Doctoral/Research Extensive	14,578	33.1	54.7	40.3	44.3	-4.0	-2.4	-3.2
UC - SANTA CRUZ	Doctoral/Research Extensive	12,405	11.4	59.8	64.3	66.5	-2.2	-4.3	-3.3
DUKE UNIVERSITY	Doctoral/Research Extensive	6,167	4	64.3	89.2	93.8	-4.6	-2.6	-3.6
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA	Doctoral/Research Extensive	10,625	4.7	58.9	89.9	92.8	-2.9	-5.0	-4.0
MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY	Doctoral/Research Extensive	7,308	4.4	84	73.9	78	-4.1	-4.9	-4.5

The list of institutions with small or no graduation rate gaps between Black and White Students is limited to institutions that meet the following criteria:
- At least 50 African American students and 50 white students in each of the 2002 and 2003 GRS beginning cohorts
- At least 3% of the 2002 and 2003 beginning cohorts comprised of both African American students and White students
- A graduation rate gap of no more than 5 percentage points in both 2002 and 2003
- A graduation rate for African American and White students of at least 40% in 2003
- An overall 6-year graduation rate that is either greater than the median rate for the 25 most similar institutions, or not more than 5 percentage points less.
The list of institutions with small or no graduation rate gaps between Latino and White students uses the same criteria as above

American students accepted into medical schools.

SET has established learning objectives for each of its courses, as well as standards of learning for each major the school offers. Both outline what students are expected to learn and know, giving students a clear academic roadmap. As a result, Kaufmann says, SET has been able to be very focused about what their students learn prior to graduation. "Graduation is the key," says Kaufmann. "It's not just about retention; the goal has to be graduating students who are well-prepared for graduate school or the work world." The school checks on how successful it has been by sending a follow-up survey three years after graduation to employers and graduates themselves.

This careful focus on teaching and learning, along with the sense that both new students and new faculty need support, contributes to an intense feeling of community that is reflected in the comments of students. "This is a place where they really care about you," said Michelle Gonzales, the president of St. Mary's student body and a senior scheduled to graduate in May 2005. "You get this feeling of community – that everyone, your professors, the staff, everybody – wants you to succeed and will help in every way they can."

By achieving equal success rates for White students and students of color, the colleges and universities on Table 11 offer proof that graduation-rate gaps are not inevitable. There is, of course, a flip side to these institutions – those schools that have *very* large differences in their success rates for White and minority students. Some of them have otherwise sterling results – indeed, some of them are listed earlier in this paper as outperforming their peers in terms of overall graduation rates. Their challenge now is to extend that success to all groups of students.

And unfortunately, far too many institutions are *both* low-performing overall *and* have large gaps for minority students. Taking all necessary steps to create dramatic improvement at these colleges and universities should be the highest priority for university officials and state policymakers alike.

Institutions That Have Improved Their Graduation Rates Over Time

Just as the data show some institutions outperforming their peers, and some institutions with no graduation-rate gaps, we also find a number of institutions that have improved graduation rates steadily and significantly over time.

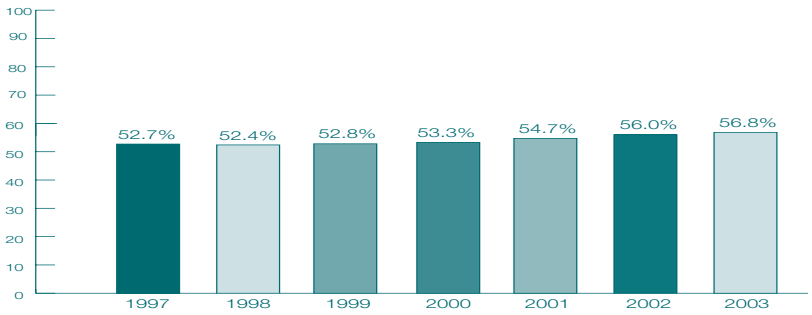
Overall six-year graduation rates are available going back to 1997, when institutions reported the graduation rate for first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students who began as freshmen in fall 1991. **Graph 2** shows the aggregate graduation rate for all institutions that submitted data in each year GRS data has been reported.[22] For the first three years, institutional graduation rates stayed fairly constant.

In 2000, they increased, and continued to do so every year thereafter. By 2003, the aggregate institutional graduation rate nationwide had improved by 4.1 percentage points over seven years. These results should be interpreted cautiously, in light of other analyses that have found mixed results when examining trends in overall graduation rates at four-year institutions over time.[23] That said, it's a positive sign that these most recent indicators show some progress – although 56.8 percent is not exactly a number that gives higher education a reason to declare victory.

A closer look beneath the overall numbers shows even more reason to believe that significant, institution-level improvement is very possible. Ranking all four-year institutions from top to bottom in terms of the percentage-point change in their graduation rate from 1997

Graph 2

6-Year Institutional Graduation Rate, Entering Class of 1997



to 2003, we find on **Table 12** that the median change is +3.2 percentage points, close to the 4.1 percentage point aggregate increase shown on Graph 2. But that's just the median – some institutions did much better.

While the bulk of all institutions made modest gains, there is a small but significant subset that made fairly dramatic improvement. A quarter of all institutions (the 75th percentile) improved their graduation rates by 7.6 percentage points or more, while fully 10 percent of all institutions saw gains of 12.3 percentage points or better.

Table 12 - Percentage point change in Institutional 6-year Graduation Rates 1997-2003

Percentile	Change
95th	15.5%
90th	12.3%
75th	7.6%
Median	3.2%
25th	-0.6%
10th	-4.8%
5th	-8.7%

By contrast, not nearly as many institutions experienced similar *declines* in graduation rates. Out of approximately 1,200 institutions that submitted six-year graduation rates for both 1997 and 2003, more than three times as many saw a double-digit increase in their overall graduation rate (188) as saw a double-digit decrease (51). Eighteen of the institutions that gained more than 10 percentage points had enrollments of more than 10,000 undergraduates, compared to *none* of those with double-digit declines.

This all makes sense once we focus on the fact that there are many things institutions can choose to do to make immediate, significant graduation-rate gains. We know for a fact that between 1997 and 2003, some institutions tried to do better. By contrast, it's safe to assume that no institutions tried to do worse. The distribution of institution-level changes reflects this. Graduation-rate gains are very possible, *when institutions decide to pursue them.*

The existence of these newly successful institutions is of particular value for colleges and universities who want to join the ranks of great improvers. **Table 13** shows a list of some institutions that have made significant graduation-rate gains.

Improving for one or two years might be a matter of statistical happenstance. But some of these institutions have improved their graduation rates in every year that grad rates have been reported, six consecutive years. As we noted previously, institutions like **Syracuse** and **Alcorn State** very deliberately implemented a series of reforms designed to improve student retention and graduation rates. The data on Table 13 suggest that these reforms paid off.

It's also worth noting that

Table 13 - Examples of Institutions with Significant Improvements in Six-Year Graduation Rates, 1997 - 2003

Name	State	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	Change 1997-2003
Alcorn State	MS	33.4%	40.5%	45.7%	44.7%	42.6%	46.6%	47.9%	14.5
Troy State	AL	40.1%	43.1%	46.1%	47.0%	52.3%	56.8%	54.3%	14.2
Central Missouri State	MO	35.4%	37.8%	38.2%	41.2%	42.6%	45.5%	49.4%	14.0
University of Wisconsin - La Crosse	MN	46.1%	50.2%	48.8%	52.1%	52.5%	58.4%	59.5%	13.4
University of Illinois - Chicago	IL	32.3%	36.1%	35.8%	37.3%	42.0%	44.0%	45.5%	13.2
Spring Hill College	AL	50.2%	58.3%	59.0%	60.5%	62.5%	63.2%	63.4%	13.2
University of Kentucky	KY	48.4%	50.8%	53.1%	55.4%	57.2%	57.7%	61.1%	12.7
CUNY City College	NY	21.1%	25.4%	22.3%	24.8%	27.5%	31.6%	33.4%	12.3
Syracuse University	NY	68.8%	71.2%	71.9%	74.0%	75.3%	77.0%	81.0%	12.2
University of Wyoming	WY	44.8%	47.7%	49.5%	52.1%	53.7%	54.3%	56.7%	11.9
New Jersey Institute Of Technology	NJ	37.0%	39.7%	41.6%	44.7%	45.1%	46.7%	48.6%	11.6
CUNY Queens College	NY	37.3%	40.1%	37.8%	38.8%	41.6%	49.4%	48.8%	11.5
Weber State	UT	30.5%	26.7%	37.2%	33.4%	41.4%	45.0%	41.0%	10.5
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute	NY	70.2%	70.4%	73.2%	75.4%	77.1%	78.2%	80.5%	10.3
University of Miami	FL	57.5%	59.4%	61.1%	62.5%	63.3%	65.4%	67.4%	9.9
Carnegie Mellon	PA	71.8%	75.2%	77.7%	76.5%	78.6%	82.3%	81.4%	9.6
Tennessee State	TN	36.7%	36.8%	38.3%	40.4%	45.1%	47.1%	45.2%	8.5

What About Two-Year Institutions?

Both this report and the **College Results Online** Web-based data tool focus exclusively on four-year institutions of higher education. This is in no way meant to reflect a lack of interest in or concern for the two-year higher-education sector. Many low-income and minority students, who are most under-represented in higher education, and most at-risk of not graduating once they enroll, begin their college career at two-year colleges. Thus, a concerted effort to focus on and invest in the two-year sector of higher education will be a critical part of closing the yawning gap in earnings and educational attainment among low-income and minority students.

Identifying high performing two-year institutions means looking both at degree completion and the percent of students achieving other goals, such as certificates and workforce training. The Education Trust plans to focus on increasing student success at two-year institutions in the near future.

steady, significant improvement is possible at a range of different kinds of universities. For example, **Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute** and the **New Jersey Institute of Technology** both specialize in science, engineering, and technology, a class of institution that tends to have lower graduation rates than others because of higher levels of attrition in challenging coursework, and fewer options for students who wish to change majors to other disciplines. They've improved nonetheless. Syracuse and the **University of Miami** already had above-average graduation rates back in 1997, so some might have said that they were already doing well enough, or that it would be hard for them to do much better. Yet they've gotten better every single year.

By contrast, institutions such as the **University of Kentucky**, **Central Missouri State**, and the **University of Wyoming** were in a different place from Syracuse and Miami in 1997: They had a less selective academic profile of incoming students, and graduation rates below 50 percent. For these institutions, the excuse might have been that continuous improvement was unrealistic, given their mission and mix of students. Instead, they started to improve immediately and haven't stopped. These results should be instructive to other institutions that find themselves in a similar position today. Improvement is more than possible; it should be expected.

Some people are quick to note that increasing graduation rates might also be an artifact of increasing institutional selectivity, a side benefit of enrolling more academically prepared students. Indeed, one of the biggest concerns some have voiced about calling for improvement in graduation rates is that institutions might respond by *only* becoming more selective, freezing out the very students who are most in need of a quality postsecondary education. In preparing Table 13, we worked to include only institutions where trends in selectivity rankings and student test scores do not suggest such a pattern.[24]

Conclusion

Analyzing institutional graduation rates using College Results Online, two things become crystal clear.

The things most people think matter to an institution's graduation rates—things like the academic preparation of its student body, the availability of financial aid, the dollars available for instruction and student advising—do, in fact, matter. On the whole, institutions that have lots of well-prepared students, ample institutional budgets and few students with unmet financial aid do in fact have higher graduation rates than those that don't.

That said, the data also make it clear that institutions are not nearly as bound by their mission, student body, resources, and circumstances as they may believe. Even when we control for all these factors, some colleges and universities consistently do far better than other, very similar institutions. Some do better with overall graduation rates; some have smaller or no gaps separating different groups of students; and some are improving at much faster rates than others.

To staunch the appallingly large annual loss of college students we will have to make progress on both fronts. Outside of the walls of higher education, high schools must do a better job of

making sure their graduates are well prepared for postsecondary study. State and federal policymakers, too, must live up to their responsibility to ensure that economic circumstances don't limit the postsecondary study options of students from low-income families.

But clearly, there is also a very big role for colleges and universities themselves.

That role begins, we think, with a clear acknowledgement that what institutions do matters a lot and with a quest to identify, then put into place, the practices that seem to really make a difference in the institutions that perform better than their peers.

In a companion paper to this document, *Choosing To Improve: Voices of High-Performing Colleges and Universities,* we relate the stories of some of these high performers in more detail. While no two accounts were exactly alike, some common themes emerged.

Successful institutions have invested considerable time, energy, and resources in analyzing their internal data to better understand patterns of student progression, uncovering chokepoints and hurdles to completion. They've worked hard to engage and connect with their students, particularly in the first year. They've put strong emphasis on academics, adopting innovative approaches to teaching and learning and aligning the incentives and rewards that motivate faculty with the academic needs of students. Perhaps most important of all, they are never content and are always working to get even better. These institutional leaders effectively build an organizational culture that puts success for all students front and center.

Many sectors of our economy have achieved exponential improvements in quality and productivity in recent decades. Innovations and strategies that allow competitors to temporarily leap ahead of the pack are soon adopted as standard practice.

What at first seems groundbreaking soon becomes routine.

If higher education puts its mind to it – to examining practice, analyzing data, and the like – we have no doubt of its capacity to meet, even surpass, the rate of change in other sectors. In fact, some colleges and universities are already on such a trajectory.

Our collective goal must be to make these kinds of results, and the focus and practices that give rise to them, commonplace.

A million new students will arrive at our four-year institutions next year, and the year after, and every year after that. If we begin now with an all-out focus on improvement – indeed, if every institution simply aimed to match the performance of the leader in its College Results Online comparison group – thousands more of those students would have a fighting chance to achieve their dreams.

Students Who Transfer Between Institutions

Every year, the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) gathers graduation-rate data from every four-year college and university in America, through its annual Graduation Rate Survey (GRS). Each institution determines the number of students who enroll as first-time, full-time, degree-seeking freshmen, and then calculates the percent of those students who graduate from that institution within four, five, and six years.

These numbers are reported to NCES in disaggregated form, broken down by students' gender and race/ethnicity (These numbers are not required to be broken down by socioeconomic class or financial aid status). The most recent available GRS data shows us the percent of students who enrolled in the Fall of 1997 and graduated by the end of August 2003, six years later.

GRS statistics show *institutional* graduation rates – the percent of students who start as first-time, full-time, degree-seeking freshmen at a given institution and get a degree *from that institution*. These calculations leave out two kinds of students – inbound transfer students and outbound transfer students.

Excluding inbound transfer students – those who start at another institution, and transfer in – has no specific impact on institutional graduation rates, because inbound transfer students aren't part of the numerator or denominator of the equation. For institutions that take in many transfers, either from other four-year institutions or from two-year community colleges, this means that the GRS statistics only track a subset of all students. That said, it's important to remember that the students who are included in the GRS cohort – the most "traditional" beginners, the first-time, full-time, degree-seeking freshmen – are generally the *most* likely to ultimately succeed. Chances are if you're having trouble graduating students who start fresh at your institution, you're not doing any better with those who started somewhere else.

Institution	2003 6-Year Grad Rate	Transfer Rate
California State – Dominguez Hills	31.1%	46.3%
California State – Northridge	32.2%	46.1%
University of Texas – Pan American	26.4%	45.7%
University of Texas at San Antonio	27.6%	45.4%
San Diego State University	44.0%	44.7%
Sonoma State University	47.8%	44.3%
Cal State – Sacramento	39.2%	41.6%
San Jose State University	39.4%	41.5%
SUNY – Oneonta	47.2%	41.3%
SUNY – Cortland	49.8%	40.3%
Northeastern Illinois University	17.9%	40.2%
University of Central Oklahoma	27.5%	39.9%
University of Houston - Downtown	12.2%	39.8%
University of Northern Colorado	47.1%	39.3%
San Francisco State University	38.5%	38.9%
California State – Long Beach	42.3%	38.7%
California Polytechnic State University	44.6%	38.0%
Georgia Southern University	37.4%	37.9%
California State – Los Angeles	33.9%	37.2%
Humboldt State University	44.4%	36.9%
University of Texas – El Paso	25.8%	36.8%
University of Central Arkansas	39.5%	36.6%
University of North Texas	38.8%	35.9%
Tarleton State University	43.2%	35.6%
California State – San Bernadino	42.5%	35.3%
Northeastern State University	32.8%	35.2%
University of Houston – University Park	40.2%	35.0%

Institutional graduation rates also don't give institutions credit for students who transfer away to another institution and subsequently get a degree. But this changes things less than one might think. The U.S. Department of Education's Beginning Post-Secondary Survey (BPS) tracked a representative cohort of first-time students who began at various four-year institutions in 1995, and found that 23 percent transferred at some point within six years of starting college.[25] But of those transfer students, only about a third actually earned a bachelor's degree within that six-year timeframe. This means that at the typical institution, giving full credit for students who transfer and graduate elsewhere adds only about eight percentage points to their graduation rate. (For a fuller discussion of various issues related to student mobility, see *A Matter of Degrees,* The Education Trust, pp. 8-9.)[26]

Many discussions of transfers and mobility in higher education seem to take as a given that student mobility is rising rapidly. But some studies suggest otherwise. For example, a recent report from NCES comparing entering students who began college at four-year institution in 1989 to those who entered in 1995 found no significant change in transfer rates among those who began at public institutions, and a statistically significant decline in transfer rates for those who began at private institutions.[27] It's true that when we extend the timeframe back to 1970s, overall

mobility is up somewhat.[28] But it remains the case that the typical student beginning their academic career at a given four-year institution will either succeed there or fail there – nowhere else.

Some institutions have outbound transfer rates that are significantly greater than 23 percent. What an unusually high transfer rate tells us about such an institution is unclear. Some four-year institutions may see preparing students to transfer as part of their mission, while others might simply be not serving students well, driving them to look elsewhere for better opportunities. It's fair to say that if an institution has an unusually high outbound transfer rate, and their former students are ultimately successful after they leave, then institutional graduation rates at the first institution may look worse than they otherwise would.

For such institutions, institutional graduation rates should be considered with particular caution. As part of the GRS survey, institutions can report to the federal government the number of students who transfer to another college. However, unlike other GRS data elements, reporting transfer data isn't mandatory. Only institutions that have transfer as part of their mission are required to report data. For the 2003 cohort, only 469 institutions reported transfer data, less than a third of the total. It's possible that some small institutions had no transfers at all, but many just don't keep track of this data or choose not to report it. For this reason, available transfer data is available for display in the **College Results Online** Web tool, but it is not among the factors used to determine institutional peer groups.

The overall outbound transfer rate among these institutions was 19.7 percent, a low percentage when we consider the 23 percent estimate from the BPS survey, and the fact that many of these institutions self-selected as having a transfer mission.[29] Transfer rates for White and African-American students are similar – 18.6 percent and 20.8 percent, respectively – while rates for Latino students are higher, at 27 percent.

Some institutions clearly have unusual transfer activity. The table above lists every institution with an enrollment of more than 5,000 full-time equivalent undergraduates that reported an outbound transfer rate of 35 percent or higher in 2003. Institutional graduation rates at institutions like these should be considered carefully in light of their large outbound transfer rates. However, we should also keep in mind that BPS data indicate that most transfer students ultimately don't graduate within six years of when they first start college. For example, consider a university that has a 35 percent graduation rate and an unusually high 40 percent transfer rate. Even if we make the very generous assumption that half their transfer students succeed somewhere else, that still only produces a 55 percent overall completion rate. And for the vast majority of four-year institutions, transfer rates are far lower than this.

Given the significance that transfer rates play in calculating institutional graduation rates, more institutions should be encouraged to report such data in the future. Higher education leaders should also support the development of next-generation, "unit record" databases that can track individual students as they move from one institution to another. These data systems can help us put issues regarding the methodological limitations of institutional graduation rates to rest, and focus all of our energies where they belong – improving outcomes for students.

A number of states are already using data systems that track students from one institution to another, allowing them to calculate the percent of students who start at one institution and graduate from either that institution or any other institution within the state. Some states have provided these measures to the Education Trust, which has made them available via the College Results Online Web tool.

Endnotes

1 Regardless of race/ethnicity, surveys indicate that more than 9 out of 10 students in grades 6 – 12, and their parents, expect those students to go on to post-secondary education – Horn, Chen, Chapman, *Getting Ready to Pay for College: What Students and Their Parents Know About the Cost of College Tuition and What They Are Doing to Find Out*, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, September 2003.

2 U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, various years.

3 Berkner, He, Cataldi, *Descriptive Summary of 1995-1996 Beginning Postsecondary Students : Six Years Later,* U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2002.

4 These rates do not include students who transfer and graduate from another institution. The overall rate would likely be closer to 63 percent if transfers were included. (Berkner, He, Cataldi, 2002.)

5 *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 2003,* Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2003. For more detail on this data, see Kevin Carey, *A Matter of Degrees,* the Education Trust, 2004. **http://www2.edtrust.org/NR/rdonlyres/11B4283F-104E-4511-B0CA-1D3023231157/0/highered.pdf**

6 Alexander Astin, "To Use Graduation Rates to Measure Excellence, You Have To Do Your Homework," *The Chronicle Review,* October 22, 2004, estimates that "roughly two-thirds of the inter-institutional variation in baccalaureate degree completion rates is attributable to differences in entering student characteristics." This estimate is generally consistent with other studies, and with Education Trust calculations, using student characteristics as independent variables, based on the data analyzed in this report.

7 Graph 1, like a number of other tables and graphs throughout this paper, is meant to characterize the overall universe of American four-year colleges and universities. But it's important to note that neither this graph nor the **College Results Online** database includes *every* four-year Title-IV eligible higher education institution in the United States. Both the graph and the Web tool are limited to institutions that meet all of the following criteria:

1) They fall in the public or private not-for-profit sector. This excludes for-profit four-year institutions like the University of Phoenix.

2) They reported GRS data for the 2003 cohort.

3) They had sufficient additional contextual data to generate a similarity comparison.

These restrictions limit the universe of four-year institutions being analyzed to 1,395 institutions. Accordingly, the results of statistical analyses and descriptions of this universe of institutions may vary from the results of corresponding descriptions of all four-year institutions. However, because the institutions covered in that universe enrolled 94 percent of all students in the total four-year GRS cohort, such variance is likely to be small.

[8] As noted previously (see footnote 4) these rates do not include transfer students.

[9] http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/education/cps2003/tab01-04.pdf

[10] *Final report,* University System of Georgia Task Force on Graduation Rates, July 2004.

[11] Excluding a handful of art academies and specialty schools.

[12] Throughout this paper, when an institution graduation rate is compared to those of its "peer institutions" or "most similar institutions", this refers to the 25 most similar institutions identified by **College Results Online**. A detailed explanation of how those peers are identified can be found at the Website, as well as in the Technical Appendix to this document. There are, however, some cases where the number of peer institutions is less than 25. This occurs when an institution's various characteristics make it so atypical that there are fewer than 25 institutions that are sufficiently similar to be appropriate for comparison. For the large majority of four-year institutions, this doesn't present an issue. But Harvard, for example, is quite atypical in its wealth, selectivity, and elite student body. There are only 10 other institutions that the peer-group algorithm identifies as possible "peers."

[13] Unless otherwise noted, this and all subsequent quotations from higher education administrators and descriptions of university activities in this paper are based on personal interviews conducted by the Education Trust with selected university officials in 2004.

[14] Bowling Green reported that the bottom quartile of ACT English scores was 18 or below, as was the bottom quartile of ACT Math scores. This doesn't mean that a quarter of all students scored 18 or below on *both* the English and Math assessments.

[15] *Crisis at the Core: Preparing All Students for College Work,* ACT, 2004.

[16] The 8.5-year B.A. attainment rate for African-American12th graders in the high school graduating class of 1992 who earned more than 10 post-secondary credits and any credits from a four-year college was 55.3 percent, compared to a 48.4 percent 12-year graduation rate for the class of 1972. Latino students saw smaller gains, from 43.9 percent to 48.9 percent. Clifford Adelman, *Principal Indicators of Student Academic Histories in Postsecondary Education, 1972-2000,* U.S. Department of Education, 2004, Table 2.2.

[17] Institution-level graduation rates disaggregated by race/ethnicity and gender have been collected for each entering class starting with 1991. However, the National Center for Education Statistics has only released the disaggregated rates for the entering classes of 1996 and 1997.

[18] As noted in footnote 7 above, this total is limited to public and private non-profit four-year institutions that had sufficient additional contextual data to generate a similarity comparison.

[19] Tom Mortenson, *Postsecondary Education Opportunity*, Number 91, January 2000.

[20] Graduation-rate gaps are only calculated for institutions that have 10 or more students in both student subgroups. This is the standard used for reporting graduation rates in the **College Results Online** Web tool. This means that the number of institutions analyzed on Table 9 is different for each racial / ethnic group. For example, there are 887 institutions that have at least 10 black students and 10 white students in the 2003 GRS cohort, but only 185 institutions with a sufficient number of Native American and White students.

[21] The average institutional six-year graduation rate for students in the bottom economic quartile is approximately 47 percent, compared to 68 percent for students in the top quartile (Berkner, He, Cataldi, 2002). It should be noted that the GRS survey does track graduation rates for participants in various categories of intercollegiate athletics. So, we can ascertain the percentage of Non-Resident Alien Female Cross-Country runners who get their degrees within four,five, or six years at a given institution, but not the percentage of Pell grant recipients who do the same.

[22] Because reporting of GRS data was not mandatory for institutions until 2002, the universe of institutions used to calculate the aggregate graduation rate in each year is not exactly the same. For example, the aggregate 1997 graduation rate is comprised of 1,214 institutions, while the aggregate 2003 graduation rate is comprised of 1,395 institutions (For further discussion of how the Education Trust constructed the universe of institutions for analysis, see Footnote 7). Restricting the analysis to only those institutions who submitted data in all years yields very similar results.

[23] For example, one analysis found that the 8.5-year graduation rate for members of the high school graduating class of 1992 who earned at least 10 post-secondary credits and any credits from a four-year institution was 67 percent, four percentage points higher than then the 63 percent rate for the class of 1972. (Special calculation for the Education Trust by Clifford Adelman, senior research analyst, U.S. Department of Education). A recent report from NCES (Laura Horn and Rachael Berger, *College Persistence on the Rise? Changes in 5-Year Degree Completion and Post-Secondary Persistence Rates Between 1994 and 2000,* U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2004) using data from the Beginning Post-Secondary Survey (BPS) found no increase in the 5-year graduation rate for students who began post-secondary education at four-year institutions, when comparing students who entered in 1989-90 to those who entered in 1995-96. The report found that this was the case both for institutional graduation rates and graduation rates that include transfer students. The difference between this finding and the trends in aggregate GRS six-year graduation rate statistics may to some extent be a matter of comparing different cohorts – most of the growth in GRS rates occurred for the 2002 and 2003 cohorts, which correspond to the two entering freshmen classes *after* 1995-96.

[24] Using historical measures of admission selectivity, as well as available data on the median SAT or ACT scores of incoming freshmen, we attempted to only include institutions on Table 13 where admissions selectivity and student academics have not substantially increased during the time period analyzed. Changes in methodologies used to calculate selectivity rankings, missing data, and the re-norming of standardized test scales make this process somewhat inexact.

[25] Berkner, He, Cataldi, 2002.

[26] http://www2.edtrust.org/NR/rdonlyres/11B4283F-104E-4511-B0CA-1D3023231157/0/highered.pdf

[27] Laura Horn and Rachael Berger, College Persistence on the Rise? Changes in 5-Year Degree Completion and Post-Secondary Persistence Rates Between 1994 and 2000, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2004 .

[28] Adelman, 2004

[29] The overall transfer rate is calculated as the sum of all transfer students divided by the sum of the students in the original GRS cohort (minus approved exclusions) for those institutions that reported transfers.

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About The Education Trust

The Education Trust, Inc. was created to promote high academic achievement for all students, at all levels—kindergarten through college. While we know that all schools and colleges could better serve their students, our work focuses on the schools and colleges most often left behind in plans to improve education: those serving African American, Latino, Native American and low-income students.

The Education Trust works side-by-side with policy makers, parents, education professionals, community and business leaders—in cities and towns across the country—who are trying to transform their schools and colleges into institutions that genuinely serve all students. We also bring lessons learned in local communities back to Washington to help inform national policy debates.

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