



## Views

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### An Alternative to Graduation Rates

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By **John Bassett**

When college presidents and other higher education leaders talk about federal policy these days, the most common theme is dismay at proposed new regulations from the Department of Education. But a close second is the inadequacy of data from the Education Department's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) for evaluating anything.

This is a problem that has vexed us for years, and it's time for us to do something about it.

Every sector is affected. Colleges with many students transferring out to other colleges complain that even when those men and women graduate from the second institution, they still count as failures for their first college.

Universities with large numbers of entering transfer students know that even when they graduate they will not count as successes anywhere in IPEDS accounting. Juniors entering with degrees from community colleges will not help the statistics of their new university when they receive a B.A. or B.S.

Colleges with large percentages of part-time and commuter students know that they normally take longer than six years to graduate. Everyone reminds each other that a large percentage of Americans graduating from college now have credits from more than one institution, often more than two institutions. Many people taking courses at community colleges do not intend to complete degree programs.

Yet six-year graduation rates from the first point of entry are the only figures we seem to have for evaluating completion success. IPEDS data are not useful for management purposes, but they can be outright dangerous for policy making, particularly if leading to conclusions that whole segments of our country can be written off as not college-worthy. The figures are least reliable for low-income populations who do have to "stop out" some semesters, who are more likely to attend part time, more likely to need time for pre-college courses because of weak high schools, more likely to transfer, and more at risk.

So, rather than leaving this for the U.S. Department of Education to fix, I am challenging colleagues in higher education to design an alternative system that is more valid, reliable, and useful.

My institution, Heritage University, in the Yakima Valley of Washington, is one of the institutions fully committed to creating opportunities for a region's underserved, low-income, largely minority and almost entirely first-generation-college population that, by and large, has not been well-prepared by local high schools. Until my arrival last summer, Heritage's founding and only president, Kathleen Ross, had for 28 years been building an inspirational learning environment with thousands of success stories from that population. Many of those graduates are not only productive citizens but also leaders in the Pacific Northwest, reaching goals no one would have imagined possible for them before they came to Heritage.

Most Heritage students, to be sure, do need pre-college developmental work; almost all have to hold jobs; many have to "stop out" for a semester from time to time. Some 70 percent are women, many of them single parents determined to raise their families up out of poverty. Graduation figures in the IPEDS data for those who entered at the start of the last decade look miserable at first glance, something like 18 percent in six years. A certain portion of that deficiency derives from Heritage having had in its early years an enrollment policy a bit too close to open enrollment for a college with high standards.

The history of Heritage has been, in effect, a search to understand which students can be remediated to do rigorous college work and which, despite a high school diploma and a respectable grade point average, lack the academic skills and work ethic to succeed. As a consequence Heritage, now with much time-tested data at its disposal, is advising a number of applicants in other directions; is developing stronger pre-college modules for those with ability and commitment to succeed; and is investing in robust advising to

complement academic rigor.

One might hope that Rich Vedder, who in [a recent Forbes blog post](#) suggested Heritage might best be shut down for wasting Pell Grant dollars, would reconsider that conclusion and decide that Heritage is actually a very good Pell investment in America's future.

For if he and others study the data more closely, they'll also learn that of those students who actually matriculated as full-fledged freshmen between 2003 and 2005 -- that is, students who had completed any necessary remedial work -- the 8-year graduation rate was 41 percent, not including those who transferred to another college. Of those who successfully became sophomores at Heritage, the graduation rate was 81 percent. Of those who became juniors, as well as those who transferred in as juniors from community colleges, the graduation rate was 81 percent. In each of those last three data sets, Heritage University compares quite favorably with other colleges that have comparable populations. Hundreds of other colleges, moreover, have good stories to tell if they can use metrics that are truer to and more relevant to actual performance than are the IPEDS data.

So Heritage is now developing a metric to assign to every entering student -- based on credits transferred, remediation needed, and planned full-time or part-time schedule -- a predictive graduation date, a benchmark against which success can be measured, with a factor also to account for those known to have transferred to another college.

This is the time, however, to challenge all of us in higher education -- the presidential associations, those who oversee accreditation, and other higher education organizations -- to come together to propose an alternative to IPEDS, or at least a parallel system, that colleges and universities themselves find useful for management and that policy makers can trust.

It must account for transfer patterns, for differential rates of progress among low-income populations, for developmental needs of students, and for the wide array of kinds of institutions in American higher education. It is complex but it is doable. It will give all of us a better system for measuring completion success rates.

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