

# More Data On Non-Traditional Students is Needed, But We're On The Right Track

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Changing the way we track completion rates is critical to gaining a better understanding of how non-traditional students are progressing, and a new system is getting us on the right track.

Institutional graduation and retention rates recall the old epigram comparing statistics to skimpy swimsuits: “What they reveal is suggestive, but what they conceal is vital.”

The institutional measures reported by the US Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) exclude many non-traditional undergraduate and transfer students who face longer odds of completion compared with traditional first-time beginning students. These data would have to change substantially in order to allow policymakers to track non-traditional and transfer students, but steps to include these groups are already underway.

Non-traditional students, as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics, are undergraduates who are independent for financial aid purposes, enroll part-time, delayed enrollment in postsecondary education, have dependents, work full-time while enrolled, are single parents, or have no high school diploma. These students make up about three-quarters of undergraduates, a proportion that has been stable for at least two decades.

Ideally, federal statistics would track *all* undergraduates who enter an institution and disaggregate outcomes by conventional indicators of non-traditional status and transfer student status. These statistics would be further broken down by gender, race and ethnicity, and characteristics associated with risk of dropout such as growing up in poverty, having parents who did not graduate from college, and enrollment in remedial courses. Transfer students might be further differentiated by the number of credits they transferred or what proportion of their intended degree program they completed at their prior institutions.

Yet many undergraduates are left out of existing measures, and others are not tracked specifically. Undergraduates who initially enroll part-time, for example, are not counted in institutional graduation rates. Transfer students, which for this purpose include all undergraduates with prior postsecondary enrollment of any type (except the prior summer term and before high school graduation), are also excluded from federal retention and graduation rates. Some institutions report counts of students who transfer without first earning a credential, but they do not officially track the students further and the destination institutions do not report their persistence and graduation.

Not tracking these students prevents policymakers and researchers from comparing outcomes across institutions and groups. At some institutions, more

than half of undergraduates are left out of graduation and retention rates, and those who are counted are not separated by non-traditional characteristics.

However, change is underway on this front. This year NCES will report new institution-level outcomes data for part-time, first-time undergraduates and non-first-time undergraduates who started in the fall term. The new data will tally the number of students at each institution who completed an award within six years, and their years of starting. Among students who did not complete, institutions will report the number still enrolled, the number enrolled at another institution, and the number with unknown enrollment status. This more detailed accounting represents a big step forward for tracking part-time and transfer students. Still, many undergraduates will not be included, particularly those who start in terms other than the fall (over one-fifth of beginning postsecondary students). And results will not be disaggregated for non-traditional or at-risk characteristics other than part-time status.

Other data sources can add other important indicators of students' educational experiences, especially for students who do not intend to complete a credential or who have uncertain goals. For example, the NCES-sponsored Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS) measures over a six-year period such aspects as tuition and price of attendance, unmet financial need, borrowing, course completion and employment. These results can be calculated for non-traditional and transfer students at the national level but not at the institutional level. State longitudinal data systems offer similar metrics at the state and institutional levels with varying degrees of completeness, detail, and frequency. And initiatives like *The Completion Arch* compile these and other student data from various sources to provide context and facilitate comparisons. (Full disclosure: RTI International is the primary contractor for BPS and sponsors *The Completion Arch*.)

To be sure, proposals to collect additional and more granular statistics must be considered in the context of privacy concerns and cost. Outcome data for very small groups of students may necessitate suppression or other disclosure avoidance methods to prevent identification of individuals. And with over 7,000 institutions potentially affected nationwide, every ten hours spent reporting these data adds up to 35 person-years of effort. Such effort requires resources that are not spent on instruction or student support and whose cost is ultimately

borne by students and their families (in tuition and fees) and taxpayers (in financial aid and state subsidies).

These practical issues, though significant, are not so large as to outweigh the potential benefits of more detailed information on the progress and success of non-traditional and transfer students.

Swimwear fashions may vary according to time, place, and individual tastes, but statistics are usually most valuable when they leave nothing to the imagination.

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