



University Professional &
Continuing Education Association

Measuring Nontraditional Student Success: An Imperative for Colleges and Universities

The University Professional and Continuing Education
Association Center for Research and Consulting

In partnership with  insidetrack[®]

Measuring Nontraditional Student Success: An Imperative for Colleges and Universities

OVERVIEW

It is common knowledge that the United States continues to fall behind other countries with respect to the percentage of adults earning a tertiary degree¹. Of the three million students who begin U.S. degree programs each year, 1.6 million or 53 percent never graduate². To regain America's leadership position, President Obama has charged the nation with obtaining the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020, adding eight million graduates to our population³. Many higher education leaders have noted that such an achievement must include raising attainment among working adults⁴.

Despite remarkable consensus on the importance of the initiative, one key obstacle remains. The higher education establishment in the U.S. has yet to reach consensus on how to measure intermediate progress toward adult degree completion. While retention and graduation rates for first-time, full-time "traditional" students are well established and publicly reported by all institutions receiving U.S. Department of Education (ED) Title IV funding, the same cannot be said of outcomes measures for part-time students or other "nontraditional" students, such as those entering degree programs with existing credits.

There are a variety of efforts underway to establish standardized success measures for adult students, including projects through the ED, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC), and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE). To support these efforts and foster a national dialogue on the issue, the University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA) partnered with InsideTrack to:

- develop a survey mechanism for benchmarking activities and attitudes regarding nontraditional student performance measures, and
- provide forums for exploration and discussion of relevant issues.

Specifically, the survey and forum objectives included addressing the following questions:

- How prevalent is the measurement of retention and degree completion rates in higher education programs focused on adult learners?

- How well do institutions understand the root causes of adult student attrition?
- What initiatives to strengthen adult student retention and completion rates are currently underway?
- Are institutions measuring the impact of these initiatives?
- What is the nature of the relationship between adult-serving programs and related entities, such as university central administrations and accreditors?
- What definitions and data measures are required to move forward to establish a national comparative framework of adult student success?
- What are the key obstacles to establishing a national comparative framework?

UPCEA serves approximately 350 member institutions. The association is nearing a century of serving institutions operating in the nontraditional student education field. The association's Center for Research and Consulting (CRC) was charged to represent the association on this effort.

InsideTrack is the nation's premier provider of student coaching services. Its mission is to improve student engagement, persistence, and success. Since 2001, InsideTrack has coached more than 350,000 students across a broad range of universities and improved graduation rates by an average of 15 percent in more than 55 controlled studies.

METHODOLOGY

UPCEA and InsideTrack designed an initial survey and invited 357 UPCEA member institutions to participate. Of the 77 institutions completing the full survey, 52% were public baccalaureate granting institutions, 29% were private non-profit baccalaureate granting institutions, and 19% were for-profit or less-than-baccalaureate institutions. Sixty percent of the responding institutions were small (less than 1,500 degree-seeking adult students); 25% medium (between 1,500 and 3,000); 6% large (between 3,001 and 10,000), and 9% very large (more than 10,000).

The results of the survey were then presented and discussed in two forums: 1) The InsideTrack Client

¹<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/61/2/48631582.pdf>

²http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d09/tables/dt09_198.asp

³<http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/education>

⁴<http://chronicle.com/article/To-Reach-Obamas-2020-Goal/63646/>

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Summit, where several non-profit, adult-focused client universities were gathered, and 2) the UPCEA Annual Conference, during a session attended by approximately forty individuals involved in adult higher education. More than half the time of both forums was set aside for dialogue about the survey findings and related issues.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Through the use of surveys and forums, as well as tapping into both organizations' collective experience, the following highlights are noted as they pertain to measuring nontraditional student success:

- Approximately 43% of responding institutions do not track retention and degree completion rates for nontraditional students.
 - Approximately 43% do not know their current retention rate for nontraditional students.
 - Approximately 77% do not know their current degree completion rate for nontraditional students.
- Only 16% have a good understanding of the root causes of attrition for their nontraditional students.
- Most institutions have a variety of initiatives underway to strengthen adult student retention and completion rates.
 - The most popular initiatives include specialized advising/counseling for certain student populations, extended new student orientation, early alert/warning systems, and academic tutoring.
 - Only 36% provide non-academic mentoring.
- Only 8% state that their initiatives are successful and they have data to prove it; 30% report that they believe their initiatives are working, but do not measure the results.
- Despite poor measurement, 58% believe that their accreditor(s) will likely evaluate retention and degree completion rates and are confident that the university will meet accreditor expectations; while 14% are simply waiting to see if their accreditor(s) will evaluate retention and degree completion rates.
- In terms of the relationship with university central administration, 41% maintain that they

receive strong support, while 43% state that the central administration values the financial contributions adult programs provide, but does not provide much support.

- The definitions and data measures identified by forum participants as being critical to a national comparative framework of adult student success revolved around three areas:
 - Institutional/program descriptions (level of independence, degree offerings, size, etc.)
 - Common terms and measures (start, term, cohort, retention, completion, etc.)
 - Variation in student attributes and actions (incoming credits, stop outs, transfers, etc.)
- The key obstacles to establishing a national comparative framework identified by participants included:
 - Lack of coordination among educational institutions, accreditors, regulators, industry associations and policy bodies
 - Attempts to account for every possible program and student variation
 - Cultural resistance to measurement and accountability
 - Inertia at the institutional level
 - Resource and budget constraints

RECOMMENDATIONS

Educational institutions, accreditors, regulators, industry associations and policy bodies should join forces and foster a unified national dialogue on measures of adult student success. The dialogue should leverage the groundwork laid by existing efforts, including those of WASC, SOC and WICHE.

- Initial efforts should focus on definitions and data measures that apply to the broadest subset of nontraditional programs and students. Follow-up effort can address the nuances of unique program configurations and student populations.
- All parties should embrace measurement, transparency and accountability as a natural element of ensuring student and institutional success in higher education.

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- Fellow advocates for adult student success measurement within institutions should join forces to overcome institutional inertia and advocate for necessary resources and budget.

DETAILED FINDINGS

Figure 1 shows that just over one-half of responding institutions track nontraditional student retention and degree completion rates. Approximately 43% did not know their current retention rate for nontraditional students, and approximately 77% did not know their current degree completion rate for this population (see Figure 2). Among institutions that did know their completion rate, the average was 67%, with a range between 44% and 85%.

During our forums, most audience members said they track retention, but only about half track completion. Several commented that they are not required to track these measures outside of ad hoc requests during accreditation reviews, and find it difficult to secure resources and funding to track

them on an ongoing basis. Despite generally not knowing their completion rates, 83% expect their degree completion rate to increase. The average expected increase is 10%, with a range of 2% to 20%.

In Figure 3, we see that only 16% of responding institutions indicated that they had a detailed understanding of the root causes of attrition among their nontraditional students, while most reported having some initial ideas or being at the beginning of the exploration process. In terms of the tools that they are using to better understand attrition, 71% rely on feedback from advisors, counselors and faculty, while 67% said they also use surveys. Less than half perform a one-on-one interview with the exiting student. About half also leverage student information system data.

Figure 1

Does your institution track retention and degree completion rates for non-traditional students? (%)

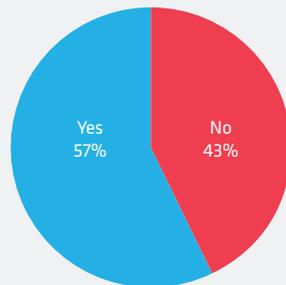


Figure 2

What is your current degree-completion rate for nontraditional students? (%)

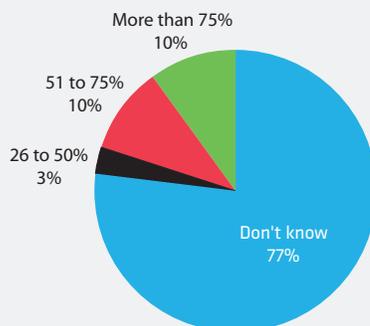
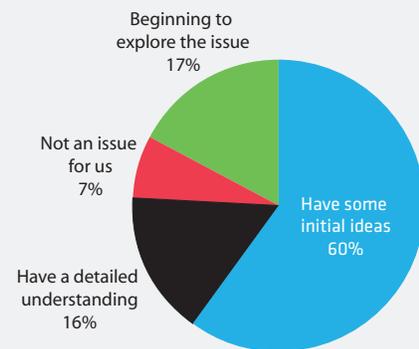


Figure 3

How well does your institution understand the root causes of attrition among your nontraditional students? (%)



“It’s difficult to compare retention and completion rates when institutions are serving difficult student populations – some cater to underserved demographic groups, some have students with significant transfer credits”

“We track retention, but do not normally track completion. We don’t track it because we don’t often know how to. Some of our students jump between programs and it makes it difficult for us to measure”

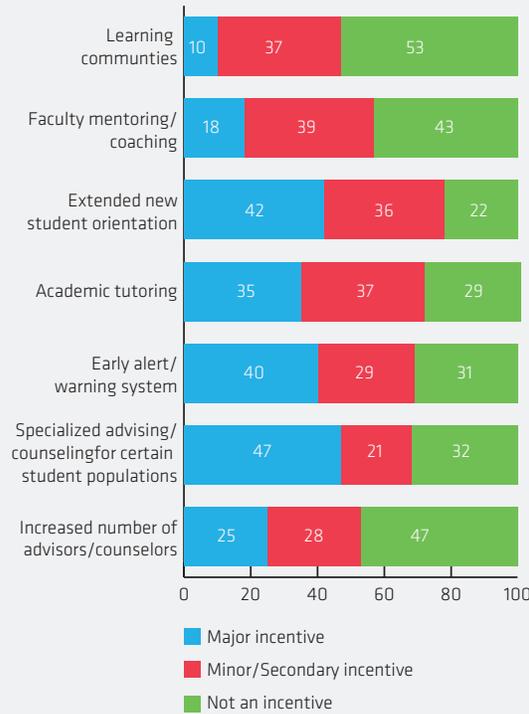
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Despite the lack of clear understanding of attrition factors, most institutions have initiatives underway to strengthen adult student retention and completion rates (see Figure 4). The most popular initiatives include:

- specialized advising/counseling for certain student populations,
- extended new student orientation,
- early alert/warning systems, and
- academic tutoring.

Figure 4

Which initiatives do you have in place to address nontraditional student attrition? (%)



In a separate question, only 36% reported providing non-academic mentoring.

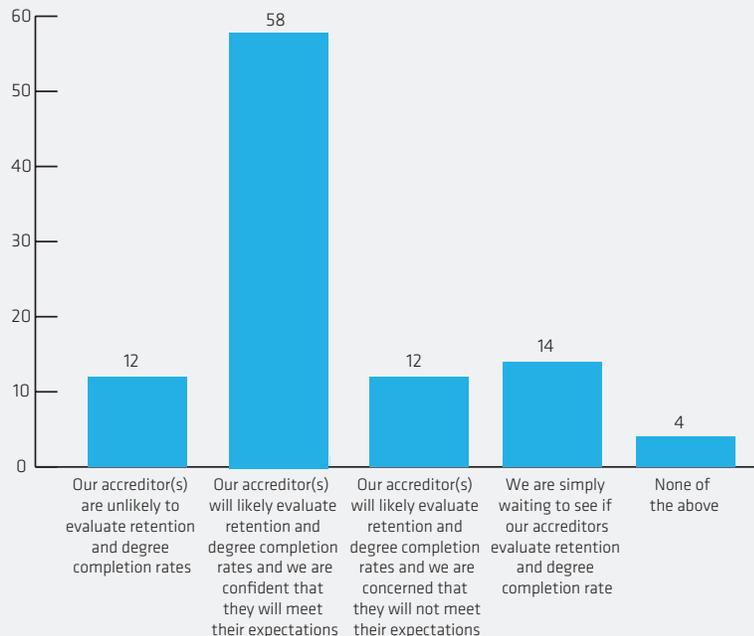
When asked about the effectiveness of these initiatives, only 8% reported that their initiatives are successful and they have data to prove it, while an additional 30% maintained that they think their initiatives are working, but do not measure the results.

In terms of expected changes in accreditation requirements, 58% believe that their accreditor(s) will likely evaluate retention and degree completion rates in their next accreditation review but, despite poor measurement standards, they are confident that they will meet accreditor expectations (see Figure 5). Another 14% are simply waiting to see if their accreditor(s) will evaluate retention and degree completion rates.

Participants in the forums showed some surprise at this finding, but also agreed that accreditors look at many factors that lead to retention and completion.

Figure 5

Which best describes your institution's view on how retention and degree completion rates are likely to affect your next accreditation review? (%)



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“We can see what’s happening in Washington. If we don’t define these measures, someone else will define them for us.”

Relationships between adult-serving programs and their respective central administrations essentially fall into two camps—41% responding that they receive strong support, and 43% stating that the central administration values the financial contributions adult programs provide, but does not provide much support.

The definitions and data measures forum participants identified as being most critical to a national comparative framework of adult student success revolved around three areas:

- Institutional/program descriptions (level of independence, degree offerings, size, etc.)
- Common terms and measures (start, term, cohort, retention, completion, etc.)
- Variation in student attributes and actions (incoming credits, stop outs, transfers, etc.)

The key obstacles to establishing a national comparative framework identified by participants included:

- Lack of coordination among educational institutions, accreditors, regulators, industry associations and policy bodies

- Attempts to account for every possible program and student variation
- Cultural resistance to measurement and accountability
- Inertia at the institutional level
- Resource and budget constraints

NEXT STEPS

The adult higher education community is committed to developing standardized success measures for nontraditional students. There are a variety of efforts underway, including projects through the ED, WASC, SOC and WICHE. The challenge is to unify these efforts, focus initially on a broadly applicable set of standards, and work cooperatively to build support and secure the resources required to make measurement and transparency the norm across adult-focused programs nationwide.

Initial conversations among several parties, including InsideTrack, the ED, WASC and UPCEA show some promise of being able to bring the parties together. In the meantime, nontraditional program administrators can focus on building support within their institutions for putting in place the mechanisms to assess and impact adult student success.

Jim Fong, Director of UPCEA's Center for Research and Consulting; Dave Jarrat, Vice President, Marketing at InsideTrack, and Kai Drekeimer, Founder and President of InsideTrack contributed to this whitepaper.

ABOUT UPCEA

Located in Washington, D.C., UPCEA serves more than 380 institutions of higher education with a focus on professional, continuing, and online learning. The Association provides its members with educational publications, programs, conferences, and services for the advancement of lifelong learning. UPCEA promotes awareness of the needs of adult learners and recognizes best practices in the field. For more information, visit <http://www.upcea.edu>.

ABOUT INSIDETRACK

InsideTrack is the nation's premier provider of student coaching services. Our mission is to improve student engagement, persistence, and success. Since 2001, we have coached more than 350,000 students across a broad range of universities, including Penn State University, University of Dayton, Florida State University, and Columbia University. InsideTrack Coaching has been proven to improve graduation rates by an average of 15 percent in more than 55 controlled studies. To learn more about InsideTrack, please visit: www.insidetrack.com.