



# Measuring Post-Traditional Student Success: Institutions Making Progress, but Challenges Remain

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

In partnership with 

**Measuring Post-Traditional Student Success: Institutions Making Progress, but Challenges Remain**

**OVERVIEW**

Stakeholders across the higher education landscape continue to work toward a consensus on how to measure and enhance progress toward degree completion for non-first-time, non-full-time (post-traditional) students. In 2011, the University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA) partnered with InsideTrack to support these efforts and foster a national dialogue on the issue.

The organizations developed a survey mechanism for benchmarking activities and attitudes regarding post-traditional student performance measures and provided forums for exploration and discussion of relevant issues. This effort culminated in a report issued in the summer of 2012 entitled, *“Measuring Nontraditional Student Success: An Imperative for Colleges and Universities.”*

This report builds on that foundation, addressing a number of shortcomings and issues identified through the initial effort.

The 2011-12 survey and forums addressed:

- how institutions measured retention and degree completion rates for post-traditional students,
- how well institutions understood the root causes of post-traditional student attrition,
- what initiatives institutions had in place to strengthen post-traditional student retention and completion rates,
- how institutions measured the impact of these initiatives,
- the relationship between post-traditional programs and related entities,
- the definitions and data required to establish a national comparative framework of post-traditional student success, and
- the key obstacles to establishing a national comparative framework.

This initial effort revealed a lack of consensus around key definitions, low incidence of adequate measurement mechanisms at the institutional level, and the need for better cross-industry coordination. These findings spurred action on several fronts.

First, UPCEA and InsideTrack initiated efforts to educate the higher education community on the importance of measuring post-traditional student success in a disaggregated fashion, and establishing

metrics better suited to the post-traditional population than those used to track success among traditional first-time, full-time students. The organizations conducted educational sessions at conferences and via webinars, engaged members of the media to produce articles highlighting key issues, provided consulting services to assist institutions in putting relevant systems and procedures in place, and participated in forums that brought together institutions and external stakeholders to develop consensus around key definitions and measurement mechanisms.

One of the most promising developments emerging from this effort involves a working group formed by more than a dozen post-traditional programs accredited by The Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), led by senior administrators from Golden Gate University in San Francisco. This group worked directly with WASC as the accreditor redesigned its accreditation processes and standards to ensure that the new regime would effectively account for post-traditional students and programs, particularly in its increased emphasis on student outcomes as a key accreditation criterion. By engaging directly with their accreditor and speaking with a unified voice, these post-traditional programs strongly influenced the redesign process and created a model for their peers to follow in other regions of the country.

In addition to the engagement efforts described above, UPCEA and InsideTrack also revised the survey instrument for 2013. While maintaining the ability to track progress on key metrics from the previous round, the survey was enhanced to capture additional information on key definitional issues and to allow for more qualitative input.

UPCEA serves approximately 380 member institutions. The association is nearing a century of serving institutions operating in the post-traditional student education field. The association's Center for Research and Consulting (CRC) represented the association in this effort.

InsideTrack works with colleges and universities to improve student and institutional success through one-on-one student coaching, process expertise, analytics, and technology. Since 2001, InsideTrack has partnered with a broad range of universities to drive continuous improvement, including leading post-traditional programs such as Arizona State Online, Columbia University School of Continuing Studies, Drexel University Online and Penn State University World Campus.

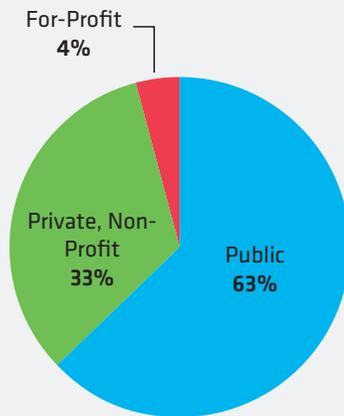
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**METHODOLOGY**

The 2013 survey was conducted in a manner similar to the original 2011-12 survey, in which 75 institutions participated. This year’s survey was conducted in March and April of 2013 and also was completed by 75 institutions. As in the original round, this survey was sent to UPCEA member institutions as well as institutions with large post-traditional student populations working with InsideTrack.

Of the 75 institutions completing the full survey, 63 percent were public, 33 percent were private non-profit, and 4 percent were for-profit (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1:**  
**How would you classify your institution?**



Respondents varied in their relative focus on serving post-traditional students, with the majority serving baccalaureate or advanced degree-seeking, post-traditional students through a continuing, professional or online education division (see Figure 2).

Respondents varied widely in their size and level of selectivity. At the ends of the size spectrum, approximately 28 percent of respondents had fewer than 500 post-traditional students and 15 percent had more than 10,000 students (measured as non-duplicated, degree-seeking headcount). On average, 33 percent of these students were enrolled in fully online degree programs, 11 percent in hybrid programs and 3 percent in competency-based programs, with the remainder in campus-based programs. In terms of selectivity, 11 percent were highly selective (admitting fewer than 50 percent of qualified post-traditional applicants), 35 percent were semi-selective (admitting between 50 and 90 percent of qualified post-traditional applicants), and 54 percent were open or near-open enrollment (admitting more than 90 percent of qualified post-traditional applicants).

The 2013 survey was similar in format to the 2011-12 survey, with multiple choice questions addressing a variety of topics related to how institutions measure the success of post-traditional students. In addition to questions with multiple choice answers, participants were also invited to opine more openly on key topics, including how they define and measure post-traditional student success and what they see as the primary obstacles to enhancing post-traditional student success.

**Figure 2:**  
**Which best describes your institution relative to its programs for post-traditional students?**

Degree Level	Institution Focus	
	Focused on serving traditional students, with post-traditional students served via a continuing, professional or online education division.	Focused on serving post-traditional students
Majority baccalaureate and above	58%	17%
Majority associates, certificates, and non-degree programs	12%	2%
Majority noncredit and workforce development	10%	2%

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The results of the 2013 survey indicate that many post-traditional programs are making progress on the fundamental issues related to student success measurement and enhancement. Relative to the 2011-12 survey:

- more institutions are tracking retention and completion rates for post-traditional students in a disaggregated fashion (69 percent versus 57 percent in the last survey),
- more institutions have developed a strong understanding of key attrition factors for these students (27 percent versus 16 percent last survey),
- fewer institutions report that they are not measuring the impact of their initiatives to improve outcomes (58 percent versus 71 percent last survey), and
- many institutions are actively refining their mix of initiatives based on evidence of effectiveness (more specialized advising, non-academic coaching/mentoring, advisors/counselors; fewer extended orientations and learning communities).

While institutions obviously still have work to do internally, their primary concerns revolve around their ability to benchmark performance against their peers. Generally, respondents cite three key obstacles to making progress on cross-industry benchmarking:

- Lack of consensus on key definitions and metrics
- Insufficient coordination among industry stakeholders
- Inadequate resources at the institutional level

In addition, 61 percent cite cultural resistance to measurement and accountability as an obstacle to establishing effective benchmarks of performance for post-traditional baccalaureate student success.

While not specifically addressed in the survey, conversations with respondents revealed that one of the primary areas of underinvestment at the institutional level is in data collection and analysis technology, expertise and processes. Without the right people, procedures, and systems in place, many institutions are struggling with determining where they stand on post-traditional student success, much less how their performance compares to that of their peers.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

The recommendations in our previous report centered on cross-industry coordination in the development of standard definitions and data measures. We also called on post-traditional student success advocates within individual institutions to join forces to overcome institutional inertia. While there is much work to be done on both fronts, this year's analysis indicates that progress is being made.

Our recommendations this year fall along the same lines.

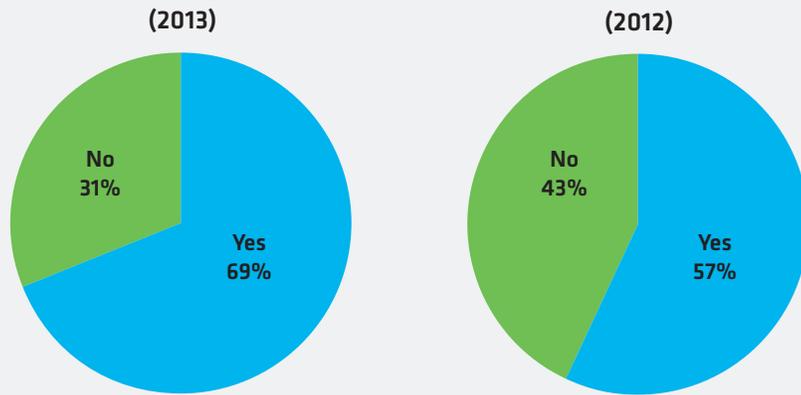
- We encourage post-traditional program leaders to advocate strongly for the systems and expertise they need in order to effectively measure student outcomes and the effectiveness of their support initiatives, leveraging evidence of positive impact from peer institutions that have made these investments.
- We strongly suggest that institutions with large post-traditional student populations form regional working groups and engage directly with their accreditors, speaking with a unified voice and forging consensus on key definitional and measurement issues.
- We also advise institutions with large concentrations of specific subgroups of post-traditional students (e.g., military/veterans, online students, etc.) to join forces in working with relevant stakeholders nationwide.
- We solicit all stakeholders to embrace measurement, transparency and accountability as a natural element of ensuring student and institutional success, and to champion it within their respective spheres of influence.

**DETAILED FINDINGS**

The following figures indicate that post-traditional programs are making progress on a number of fundamental issues related to student success. A greater proportion of respondents report tracking key success metrics for post-traditional students, understanding the root causes of attrition for this population, and measuring the success of their support initiatives.

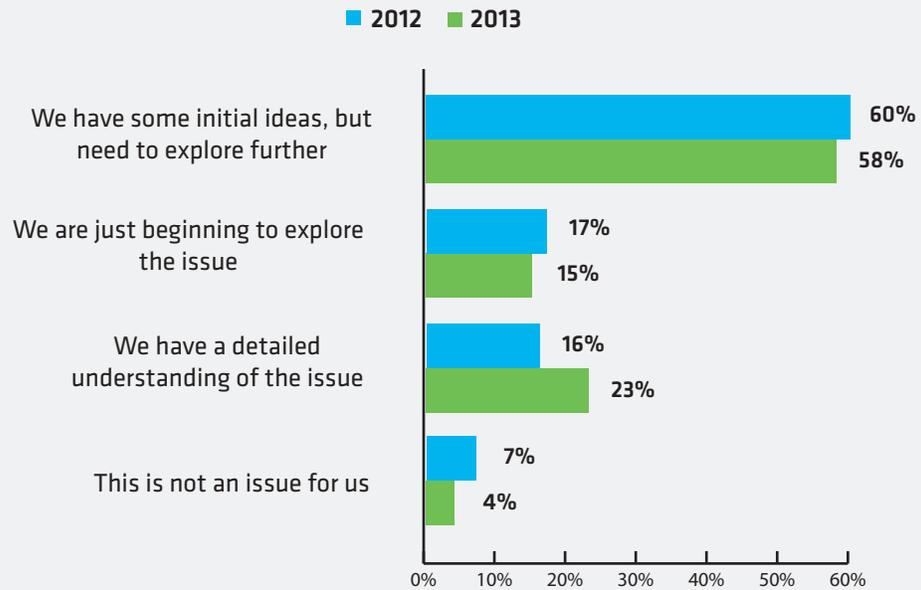
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**Figure 3:** Does your institution track retention and graduation/completion rates specifically for post-traditional baccalaureate students?



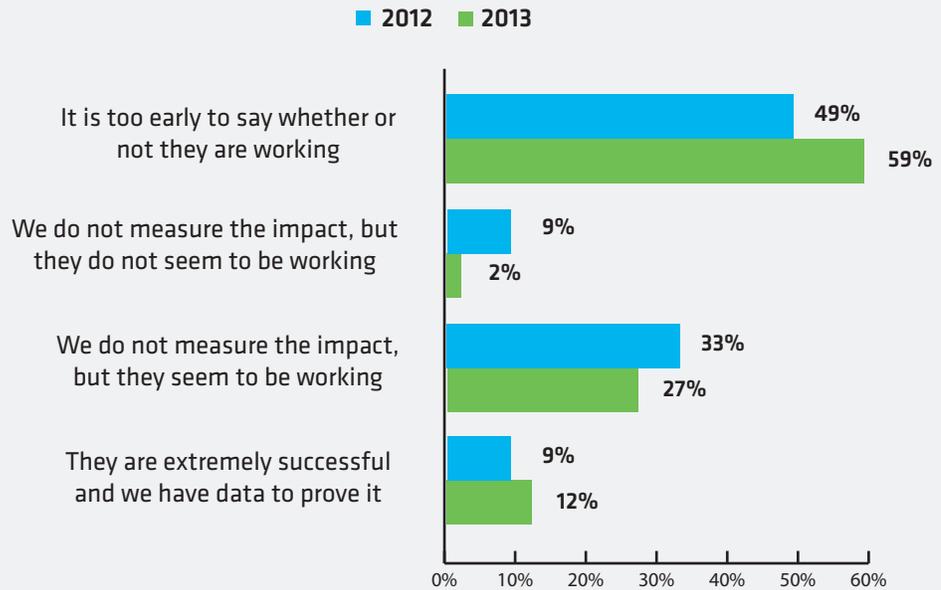
**INTERESTING FACTS:** Despite 69 percent of respondents claiming to track retention and completion rates for post-traditional students, only 22 percent were able to provide their current retention rate, and 20 percent their current completion rate. Retention rates ranged from 33 to 98 percent, with a median of 70 percent. Completion rates ranged from 43 to 89 percent, with a median of 65 percent.

**Figure 4:** How well does your institution understand the root causes of attrition among your post-traditional baccalaureate students?

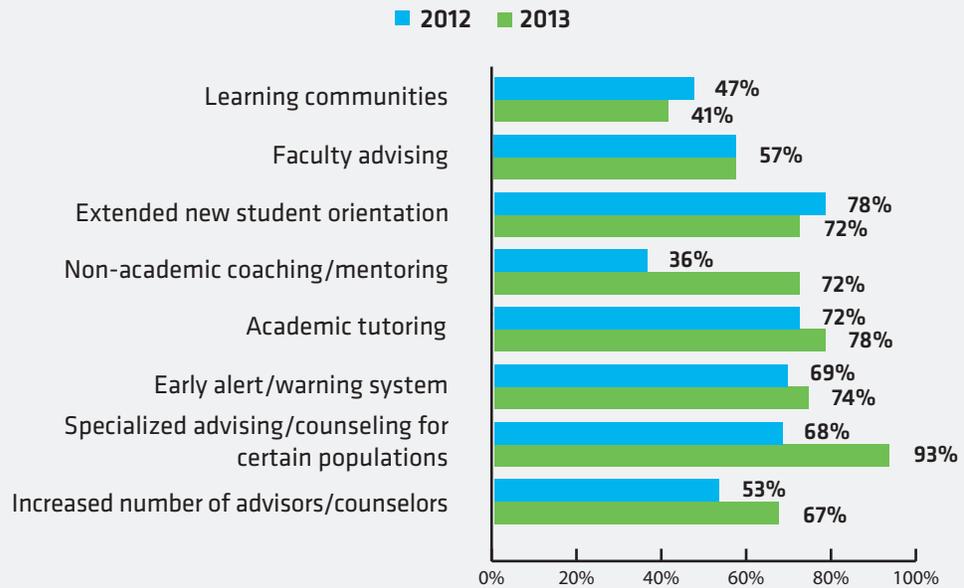


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**Figure 5:** Which best describes your institution's experience with your current initiatives to address post-traditional baccalaureate student attrition?



**Figure 6:** What initiatives do you have in place to address post-traditional baccalaureate student attrition?



**INTERESTING FACTS:** Roughly 45 percent of respondents have set a specific goal to increase retention rates. The goals range from 1 percent to 25 percent, with a median of 10. The median goal for institutions who do not know their current retention rate is 25 percent higher than the median goal for institutions who do know their current retention rate.

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Thanks in part to better information and measurement mechanisms, institutions are also revising their mix of support services for post-traditional students. Respondents report an increase in specialized advising, non-academic coaching/mentoring and numbers of advisors/counselors. Use of faculty advising has remained flat, while extended orientations and use of learning communities has decreased.

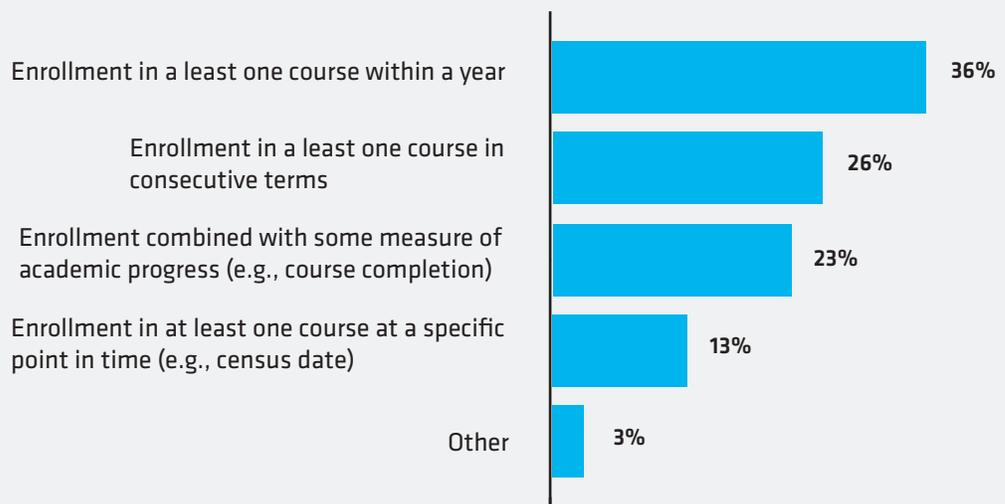
When asked to express in their own words what they saw as the primary obstacles to improving post-traditional student success, respondents provided a wide range of answers. Below are a few responses that highlight the diversity of opinions.

- *“Not enough staff to stay in touch with students, address issues and help motivate students.”*
- *“There is a lack of institutional awareness and focus on the value of adult learners and an unwillingness to accept the differences between traditional and nontraditional students.”*
- *“Nontraditional students are seen simply as a revenue source. It is difficult getting agreement to spend money supporting them.”*

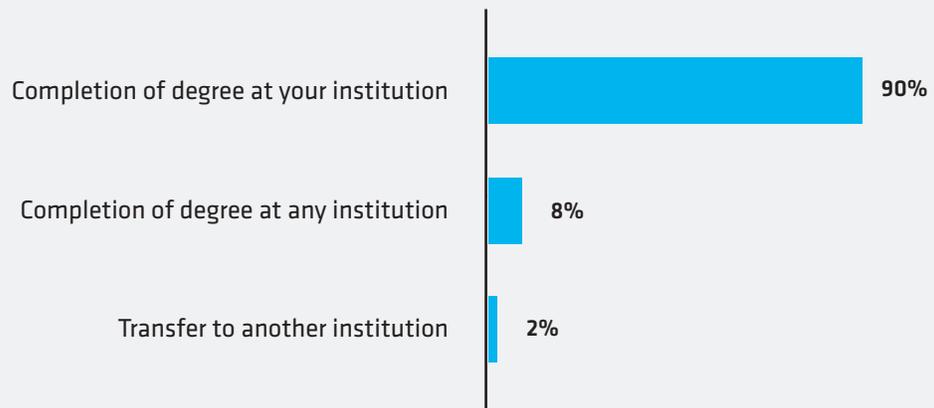
- *“There are many variables with this group of students that tend to be out of the control of the educational institution.”*
- *“We need definitions to be established that reflect the part-time adult student who sometimes stops out for a while.”*
- *“One reason I have started to focus on is the lack of accountability by faculty for student success.”*
- *“We lack knowledge as to why students stop out short of their goals.”*
- *“Bureaucracy in state institutions as it relates to this population is a nightmare.”*
- *“Addressing the issues of why they leave can be impossible when the issues are daycare, aging parents, etc.”*

New to the survey this year were several questions regarding key definitions and policies related to student success measurement. These questions were added to shed light on a key finding from last year’s report—the lack of consensus among post-traditional programs on a number of fundamental definitional issues. The figures below provide a summary of the responses to these questions.

**Figure 7:**  
Which best describes your institution’s definition of “retention” for post-traditional baccalaureate students?



**Figure 8:** Which best describes your institution’s definition of “graduation/completion” for post-traditional baccalaureate students?

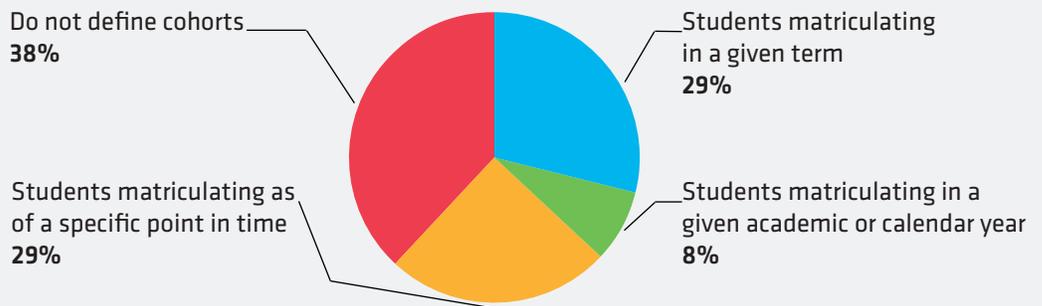


When asked to express in their own words how they define and/or measure post-traditional student success, respondents provided a wide range of answers. Below are a few responses that highlight the diversity of opinions.

- “Post-traditional student success is measured by the number of students who are able to find a program that best suits their goals and are then able to complete the program.”
- “It’s about fostering a climate of educational and life goals and ensuring those learning outcomes and high rates of degree completion are met.”
- “Success’s achievement of their academic and/or professional goals, (e.g., placed in job related to their degree, accepted into a graduate program, etc.).”
- “It’s about a strong match between student goals and programs, consistent enrollment and reasonable graduate timelines.”
- “Success is meeting one’s own learning objectives as measured through an annual survey.”
- “Success is students completing their degrees on their projected timetables.”
- “It’s about graduation and the impact the degree has on employment.”

Institutions were also asked about their use of credit-level designations, cohorts, transfer credits and prior learning assessments with respect to measuring post-traditional student outcomes. A majority of respondents indicated that they do classify incoming students as either upper- or lower-division and take into account prior learning assessments in doing so. Also, a majority group incoming students into cohorts (see Figure 9), but only a minority take transfer credits into account when establishing these cohorts.

**Figure 9:** Which best describes your institution’s definition of a “student cohort” for purposes of tracking retention and graduation/completion rates for post-traditional baccalaureate students?

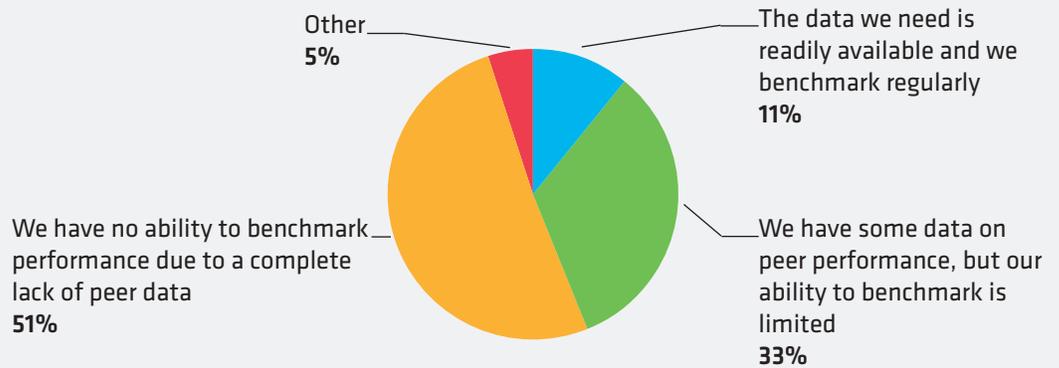


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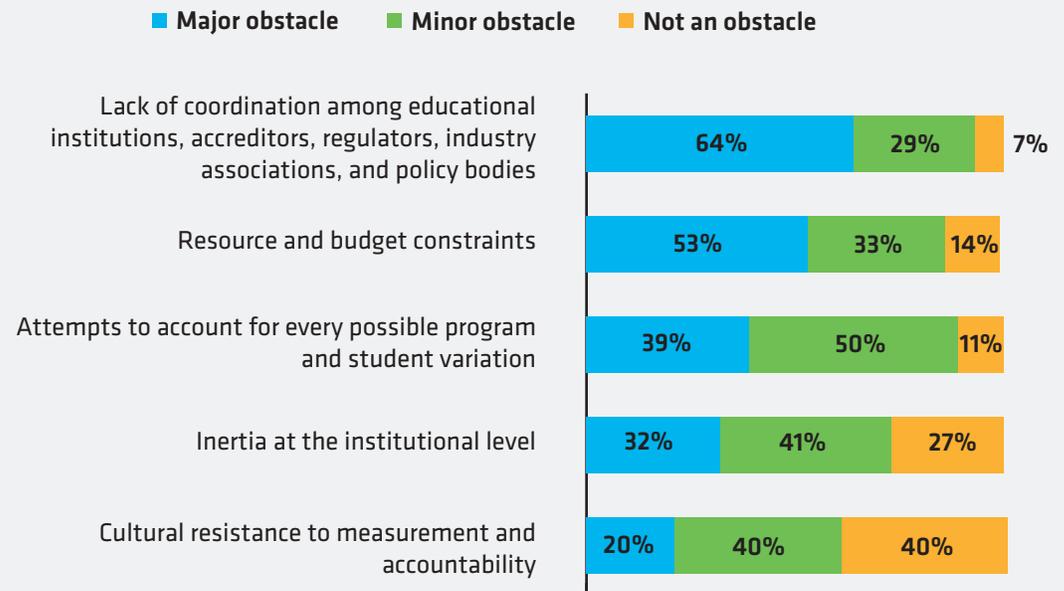
The survey included a number of questions related to institutions' abilities to benchmark their performance against one another. More than half of the respondents indicated that they were unable to perform benchmarking due to a lack of relevant peer data, and another third said that their ability to benchmark was limited (see Figure 10).

When asked about the impediments to establishing effective benchmarks, respondents cited cross-industry coordination and institutional resource constraints as the primary obstacles (see Figure 11). Unnecessary complexity in measurement and institutional resistance were also raised as important issues.

**Figure 10:**  
Which best describes your institution's experience benchmarking performance with like institutions relative to post-traditional baccalaureate student success?



**Figure 11:**  
Which of the following do you consider obstacles to establishing effective benchmarks of performance for post-traditional baccalaureate student success?



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Finally, as in the original survey, institutions were asked about the role that post-traditional student success would play in their accreditation process. The results were nearly identical to the previous round, with the majority believing that their accreditors would evaluate post-traditional retention and completion rates as part of their accreditation review and that they would meet their accreditors' requirements (see Figure 12).

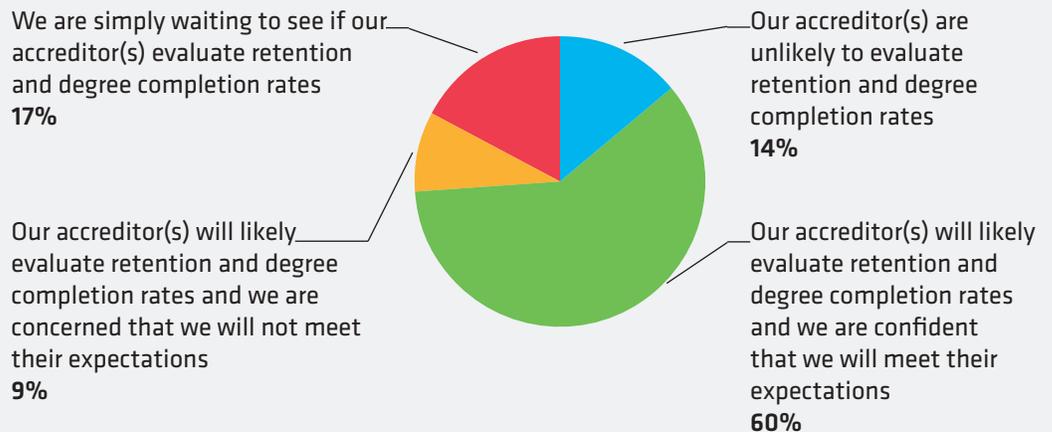
**NEXT STEPS**

UPCEA and InsideTrack will continue to work with colleagues in the higher education community to raise awareness, foster dialogue and share best practices in the area of post-traditional student success. Already, the two organizations have joined forces with fellow industry leaders to conduct similar benchmarking studies for specific post-traditional student populations.

Earlier this year, InsideTrack released the first in a series of joint reports with the NASPA Research and Policy Institute (RPI), a division of the association NASPA–Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, entitled *“Measuring the Success of Student Veterans and Active Duty Military Students.”* Later this year, UPCEA, InsideTrack and NASPA expect to issue a similar joint report focused on the success of online learners. Joint projects with other industry associations are also in development.

In the meantime, institutions serving post-traditional learners are encouraged to join forces, share data and forge a common voice for advocating both within institutions and across the industry for the resources and attention required to tackle these important issues. The working group formed by WASC-accredited post-traditional programs provides a useful model. We encourage stakeholders in other regions to consider a similar approach.

**Figure 12:**  
**Which best describes your institution's view on how post-traditional baccalaureate student retention and degree completion rates are likely to affect your next accreditation review?**



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**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 [www.upcea.edu](http://www.upcea.edu).

**ABOUT INSIDETRACK**

InsideTrack works with colleges and universities to improve student and institutional success. Their one-on-one student coaching, process expertise, analytics and technology have been proven to increase graduation rates by an average of 15 percent and enhance the student experience. Since 2001, InsideTrack has partnered with a broad range of universities to drive continuous improvement, including Penn State University, University of Dayton, and Columbia University. For more information, visit [www.insidetrack.com](http://www.insidetrack.com)