



Vol:2\*

Issue\*\*

Graduation rates for full-time first-time-in-college students in State University System (SUS) institutions are well above the national average for public four-year colleges, based on early release data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

Of those who entered the SUS as first-time, full-time students in fall 1997, 58% completed their bachelor degree at the same institution by 2002-2003, compared to 53% of students at public institutions nationwide.

Florida ranked tenth among the states in overall graduation rates, with graduation rates for Hispanic and black students ranked eleventh and fifth respectively. Among the ten largest states, Florida was third in overall graduation rates and first in graduation rates for black and Hispanic students.

The national numbers understate the chances that a student who enters the SUS will graduate from the system. The estimated eventual graduation rate for students entering in 1997 is 70%, if those who transfer from one SUS institution to another or who take longer than six years are included.

## State University System Graduation Rates: How Are We Doing?

As a resource for national comparisons, DCU staff has made available an online query tool for the NCES early release graduation data at

[www.institutiondata.com](http://www.institutiondata.com).

### National Graduation Rate Data\*

Four factors contribute to Florida's overall high graduation rates in public four-year institutions:

1) Graduation rates for the largest race/ethnic groups were higher than for the nation as a whole. The rates for white, black, and Hispanic students were 61%, 49%, and 53% respectively, compared to 55%, 38%, and 42% in the nation as a whole.

2) The gaps between racial/ethnic groups were smaller than in the nation as a whole. The gaps between the public institution

graduation rate for white students and the rate for black and Hispanic students were 12 points and 8 points, respectively, compared to 17 points and 13 points in the nation as a whole.

3) Florida's largest institutions compared well with their peers. The University of Florida's graduation rate of 77% ranks it 12<sup>th</sup> out of 101 public *Doctoral-Extensive* institutions nationwide, which had a collective graduation rate of 63%. University of Central Florida's rate of 54% ranks it 11<sup>th</sup> among 62 public *Doctoral-Intensive* institutions, which had a collective graduation rate of 46%. Florida A&M University's rate of 45% ranks it 8<sup>th</sup> among the 38 public Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the country, which had a collective rate of 35%.

4) Florida's students are more likely to attend institutions with high graduation rates. More of Florida's students attend the types of institutions that

*Florida ranks first in graduation rates for black students and first for Hispanic students among the ten largest states.*

typically have high graduation rates. *Doctoral-Extensive* institutions tend to have some of the best graduation rates nationally. While Florida's four *Doctoral-Extensive* institutions collectively had a graduation rate of 64%, which was just slightly above the national average, 65% of students attended these institutions, compared to only 44% nationwide.

## State Graduation Rates Trends

The graduation rates calculated based on data reported to the National Center for Education Statistics provide a national basis for peer comparisons, but do not include as much information as individual states and institutions have available.

They do not include, for example, students who start at one public four-year institution but graduate from another. In Florida, adding those graduates to the national data would raise the system's six-year graduation rate by five percentage points, to 63%.

The national data do not include students who start as part-time students or who take longer than six years to graduate. A small but significant number of students take longer than six years. (The number is larger at some types of institutions—such as urban

commuter universities with many older or working students—than at others.)

In past years, 88% of students who are still enrolled but who have not graduated after six years have eventually graduated. This produces an eventual graduation rate of 70% for 1997 freshmen (the same year as the national data).

Although national comparisons are not yet available, preliminary state data indicate that graduation rates for the 1998 cohort will be about the same. This follows three years of annual increases.

## Questions about Graduation Rates

*What factors reduce graduation rates?*

The six-year graduation rate is reduced both by students who leave—either by transferring or dropping out of education altogether—and by students who take longer than six years.

Many students who leave the State University System finish elsewhere, either at private institutions or out of state (just as many transfer into the system from those institutions).

Some students who leave or who

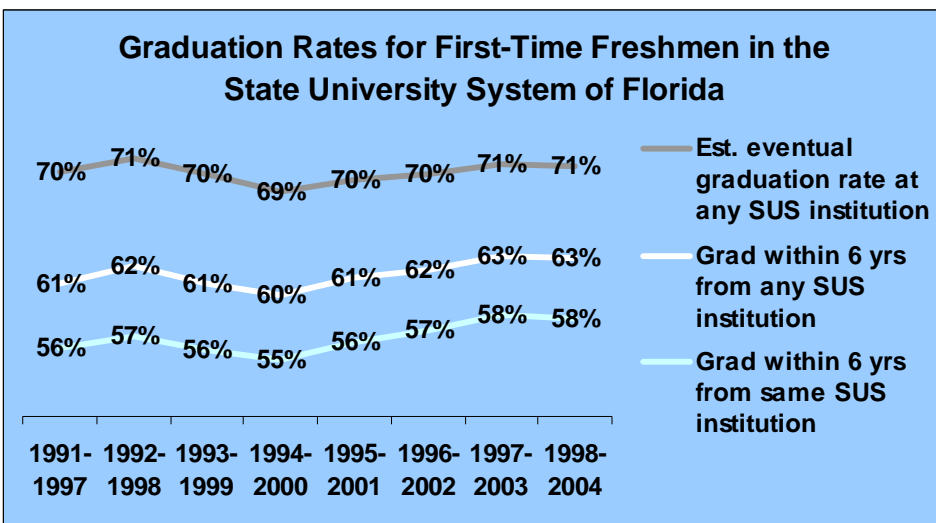
attend part-time may be successfully employed without a degree. In an economic downturn, however, there may be fewer opportunities for students who do not have degrees, leading to higher persistence and graduation rates. The resulting higher levels of current education and training may help drive economic growth in the next cycle.

Still others may have personal reasons—illness, changes in family status, etc.—for leaving.

*What factors improve graduation rates?*

Initiatives to improve retention and graduation, including a new advising and student tracking system at the University of Florida, are due credit for much of the improvement in recent years. Of the 0.9 percentage point improvement in the statewide graduation rate from the 1995 to the 1996 cohort, 0.7 points could be attributed to the University of Florida alone, which had a 6 point increase, primarily as a result of its new advising system. The statewide increase from the 1996 to the 1997 cohort, however, appears to be broader based, with smaller improvements at multiple institutions. From 1997 to 1998, graduation rates increased at most institutions, but since institutions with lower graduation rates have been growing faster, the statewide figure remained about the same.

Other factors to consider include the relatively low tuition rates in Florida, which, combined with increases in private and out-of-state institution tuition rates, may be reducing the number of students who transfer out.



**What happens to students who do not graduate in six years?**

In a study of the 1997 cohort of entering freshmen, we found that 63% had graduated by the end of the 2002-03 academic year. Another 9% were still enrolled, most of whom will eventually graduate, if past experience holds. Another 14% had left the SUS but were found enrolled elsewhere in Florida (8%) or out-of-state (6%). The National Student Clearinghouse database used to identify these students is comprehensive but may have missed some students at non-participating institutions. Seven percent of the 1997 cohort had not graduated and was not found enrolled anywhere, but was found employed in Florida. Finally, there were just 8% for whom no outcome information was found. A disproportionate number of these were foreign or out-of-state students who may have left Florida altogether.

**When do students leave?**

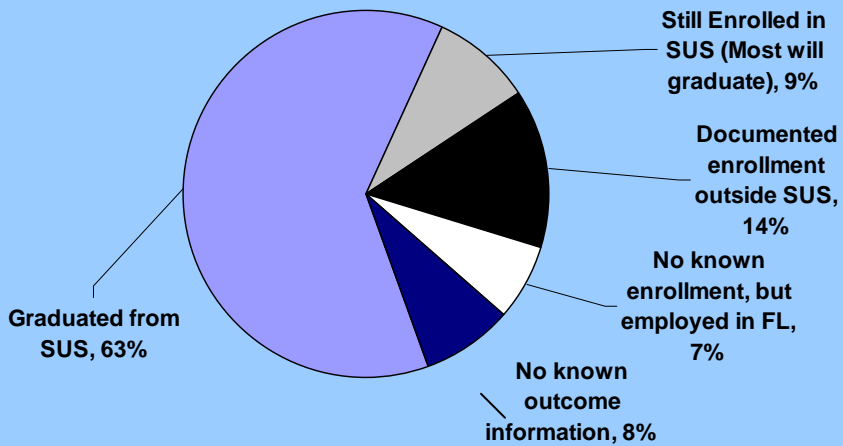
The first two years—especially the first year—are when most students leave. Of the 1996 beginning college students who left, 37% left before their second year and 61% left before their third year.

The beginning students had an average of 43 credits when they left. About 44% were technically freshmen (fewer than 30 credits) and another 29% were sophomores.

**Why do some students take longer than four years?**

Students take longer than four years either because they take

**What Happened to 1997 SUS Freshmen by 2002-2003?**



fewer credits per year than they would need to graduate—usually 30 credits per year for a 120-credit program—or because they take more than the minimum number of credits required to graduate.

**How long does it usually take students to finish?**

The average time 2002-2003 graduates (excluding transfer students) took to complete their degrees was 4.3 years. Of these graduates, 54.2% took 4 years or less, 69.5% took 4.5 years or less, and 86.5% took 5 years or less. Graduation rates, which measure the percentage of students who graduate, should not be confused with time-to-degree,

which measures the length of time to graduation. See Information Brief 2004-#4, (“How Long Do Students Take to Graduate in the State University System?”) for more on this topic.

**What are the limitations of graduation rates?**

Graduation rates are not, by themselves, indicators of institutional quality or efficiency. They are best viewed in a broader context.

Different institutions and state systems serve different populations of students and graduation rates by themselves say nothing about the quality of education or the reasons why students might leave. Some smaller institutions that offer a limited number of bachelor degrees also have many students who transfer after a year or two. Some institutions and state systems intentionally place very few restrictions on admissions, an approach that offers broad opportunity but cannot be expected to lead to the highest graduation rates.

**How are graduation rates calculated?**

The standard national graduation rate calculation is based on students who enter in the fall of each year as first-time-in-college students (students with fewer than 12 college credits accumulated after high school graduation). Students who start in the preceding summer and

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Table 1: Same-Institution Graduation Rates for Public Four-Year Institutions, by State, Fall 1997 Full-Time, First-Time-In-College Students

State	% Graduated in 6 Years	Number in Cohort
Delaware	3,816	67%
Iowa	9,501	65%
Virginia	23,739	64%
New Jersey	13,791	63%
Washington	10,812	63%
New Hampshire	3,807	61%
Maryland	12,500	61%
California	52,249	59%
Michigan	31,316	58%
Florida	22,490	58%
Vermont	2,745	58%
North Carolina	22,738	58%
Pennsylvania	35,442	58%
South Carolina	11,691	57%
Illinois	22,645	57%
Wyoming	1,119	57%
Wisconsin	22,397	56%
Ohio	32,107	53%
New York	29,838	53%
Arizona	11,352	53%
Missouri	15,149	52%
Massachusetts	10,952	52%
Kansas	10,381	52%
Rhode Island	2,970	52%
Colorado	16,115	51%
Mississippi	7,525	50%
Hawaii	1,774	50%
Nebraska	6,691	50%
Maine	2,823	50%
Indiana	26,301	50%
Connecticut	6,329	49%
Oregon	7,193	49%
Minnesota	13,194	49%
Alabama	13,757	48%
North Dakota	3,626	48%
West Virginia	8,203	48%
Texas	44,300	47%
South Dakota	3,899	46%
Kentucky	11,380	45%
Tennessee	14,571	44%
Oklahoma	10,119	44%
Georgia	20,591	44%
Utah	5,348	43%
Montana	4,641	43%
Nevada	2,656	42%
Puerto Rico	11,410	40%
New Mexico	4,996	38%
Arkansas	9,094	36%
Virgin Islands	223	35%
Guam	396	35%
Idaho	3,942	35%
Louisiana	21,023	34%
Alaska	842	21%
<b>US</b>	<b>698,509</b>	<b>53%</b>

Source: IPEDS GRS Survey.

the spring or who enter in the summer and do not continue in the fall (many of these are taking summer courses between high school graduation and enrollment at another institution) are not included. Only students who are full-time in the fall (taking 12 or more credits) are included.

About half of all undergraduates entering the SUS are included in the standard graduation cohort. The other half includes transfer and part-time students for whom no national standard or comparison is available.

The number who have graduated by the summer following the sixth year (e.g., summer 2003 for the 1997 cohort) is divided by the number in the original cohort, less a very small number of allowable exclusions (students who died, for example).

State totals were produced by adding the total adjusted cohorts and number of graduates within six years for all public four-year and above institutions.

Students who transfer in are not included in the cohort, although Florida reports separate graduation rate data for students who transfer from in-state community colleges with AA degrees.

Because of small definitional differences and because of a

procedure the National Center for Education Statistics uses to ensure that data cannot be tied to individual students, there may be very small (less than 1%) differences between numbers reported by institutions or the Florida Division of Colleges and Universities and data reported as part of the national Graduation Rate Survey.

*Where Can I Learn More?*

Data on State University System institutions, including graduation rates, are available through the Fact Book and Quick Facts links at:

<http://www.fldcu.org/>

National Center for Education Statistics "College Opportunities On-Line" has individual institution data, including graduation rates:

<http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/cool/>

The National Information Center for Public Policymaking and Analysis has easy-to-use state-level higher education data:

<http://www.higheredinfo.org>

National Center for Education Statistics Documentation for the Graduation Rate Survey and other Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) surveys:

<http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/>

State Higher Education Executive Officers information on the limitations of graduation rates as accountability measures and current accountability initiatives:

<http://www.sheeo.org/>

continue in the fall are also included. Students who enter in

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