

ISSUE BRIEF

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Tracking Students to 200 Percent of Normal Time: Effect on Institutional Graduation Rates

INTRODUCTION

A majority of college graduates take longer to earn a degree than what is commonly thought to be the “normal” amount of time it should take—4 years for a bachelor’s degree and 2 years for an associate’s degree. For example, among college graduates who earned a bachelor’s degree in 1999–2000, about two-fifths (39 percent) had completed the degree in 4 years (Bradburn et al. 2003). A majority (72 percent) of this cohort, however, had completed a bachelor’s degree within 6 years, while 14 percent took 6–10 years and the remaining 14 percent took more than 10 years. Similarly, among a survey of students who started college in 1995–96 with the goal of completing an associate’s degree, less than one-fifth (17 percent) completed the degree in 2 years, 43 percent took 2–3 years, and another 40 percent took 3–6 years (Berkner, He, and Cataldi 2002).

The normal time to degree assumes full-time, continuous enrollment. Yet a snapshot of all undergraduates in the year 2007–08 indicates that just over half (53 percent) had attended full time for a full academic year (9 months) and less than one-third (29 percent) of community college students did so.¹

The 1990 Student Right-to-Know Act requires institutions to annually disclose graduation rates. To assist institutions in meeting this responsibility, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) has collected institutional graduation rate data since 1997. Institutions eligible for federal student aid (Title IV funding) are required to calculate and report completion or graduation rates for a cohort of students entering that institution and to disclose these rates to all students and prospective students. The cohort is defined as first-time, full-time, degree- or certificate-seeking students, and the completion rate is calculated as the total number of completers within “150 percent of normal time” divided by the number of students in the cohort. Using this definition, an eligible cohort member in a 4-year institution who finished a bachelor’s degree at that same institution in 6 or fewer years and an eligible cohort member in a 2-year institution who completed an associate’s degree at that same institution in 3 or fewer years would be counted as completers.

Beginning in 2008, to comply with the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, IPEDS added a new survey com-

ponent, called Graduation Rate 200, which collects graduation rates at 200 percent of normal time. This time frame corresponds to completing a bachelor’s degree in 8 years and an associate’s degree in 4 years.²

The purpose of this Issue Brief is to report whether this additional time results in higher institutional graduation rates. We also examine whether the longer time frame particularly changes reported rates for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) or institutions with high Hispanic enrollment (HHE),³ because previous research has reported lower than average graduation rates for these institutions in the 4-year public and private not-for-profit private sectors. (Li 2007). Using the most recent graduation rate data available at the time of this publication, the Issue Brief addresses three questions:

Are graduation rates reported at 200 percent of normal time higher than those reported at 150 percent of normal time? How does this difference compare with the increase in rates between 150 percent and 100 percent of normal time? Does the longer time frame yield bigger gains in graduation rates for HBCUs and HHEs compared with all other institutions within a given sector?

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The Issue Brief reports average institutional graduation rates from the IPEDS Graduation Rate Survey for each of nine sectors: public, private not-for-profit, and for-profit institutions at three levels (4-year, 2-year, and less-than-2-year). The nine sectors vary in both the number of institutions and the size of enrollments (figure 1).⁴ To aggregate from institution to sector, an enrollment weighted average was calculated.⁵

Because graduation rate cohorts include only first-time, full-time degree- or certificate-seeking students, institutions with large part-time enrollments (such as community colleges) have relatively fewer eligible students than those with large full-time enrollments. For example, in 2008, some 32 percent of first-time community college students were included in the graduation rate cohort, compared with 60 percent of first-time enrollees in public 4-year institutions, and 70 percent in private not-for-profit institutions.⁶

KEY FINDINGS

- In general, graduation rates reported at 200 percent of normal time were higher than those at 150 percent of normal time, but the increase was small compared with the increase between 100 percent and 150 percent of normal time.
- HBCUs and HHEs in the public 4-year sector yielded a higher percentage point gain than all other institutions in the same sector between graduation rates reported at 150 percent and 200 percent of normal time. In all other sectors, the average gain for either HHEs or HBCUs was less than 2 percentage points higher than that for all other institutions within the sector.

DETAILED FINDINGS

1) Are graduation rates reported at 200 percent of normal time substantially higher than those reported at 150 percent of normal time, and 2) how does this difference compare with the difference between rates at 150 percent and 100 percent of normal time?

In all nine sectors the average graduation rate at 200 percent of normal time was higher than the average rate at 150 percent of normal time (figure 1). However in most cases, this increase was small compared with the difference between graduation rates at 100 percent and 150 percent. For example, the average graduation rates for public 4-year colleges increased by about 4 percentage points between the 6-year and 8-year graduation rates, but by about 26 percentage points between the 4-year and 6-year graduation rates. Similarly, while the 8-year graduation rate increased by 2 percentage points over the 6-year rate, the average 6-year graduation rate reported at 4-year not-for-profit institutions was 14 percentage points higher than the average 4-year graduation rate.

The middle three graphs in figure 1 show graduation rates for 2-year institutions, where 100 percent of normal time corresponds to 2 years, 150 percent of normal time to 3 years, and 200 percent of normal time to 4 years. Community colleges (public 2-year institutions) comprise the largest share of the 2-year sector, both in number of institutions (54 percent) and students (76 percent).⁷ Whereas the average graduation rate in community colleges at 4 years was 6 percentage points higher (28 percent) than the rate at 3 years, the average graduation rate at 3 years was nearly double the rate of that at 2 years (22 vs. 12 percent). Similar patterns were evident for the other 2-year sectors.

Unlike 4-year and 2-year colleges, the time frame for completing a credential at less-than-2-year institutions may vary

from a few months to more than 1 year, so the rates reported at this level are not associated with a specific time, but are simply noted as completions at 100 percent, 150 percent, and 200 percent of normal time in the bottom three graphs. As in the 4-year and 2-year sectors, the relative gain in graduation rates between 150 percent and 200 percent of normal time was small compared with the gain between 100 percent and 150 percent of normal time.

3) Does the longer time frame yield bigger gains in graduation rates for HBCUs or HHEs compared with all other institutions within a specific sector?

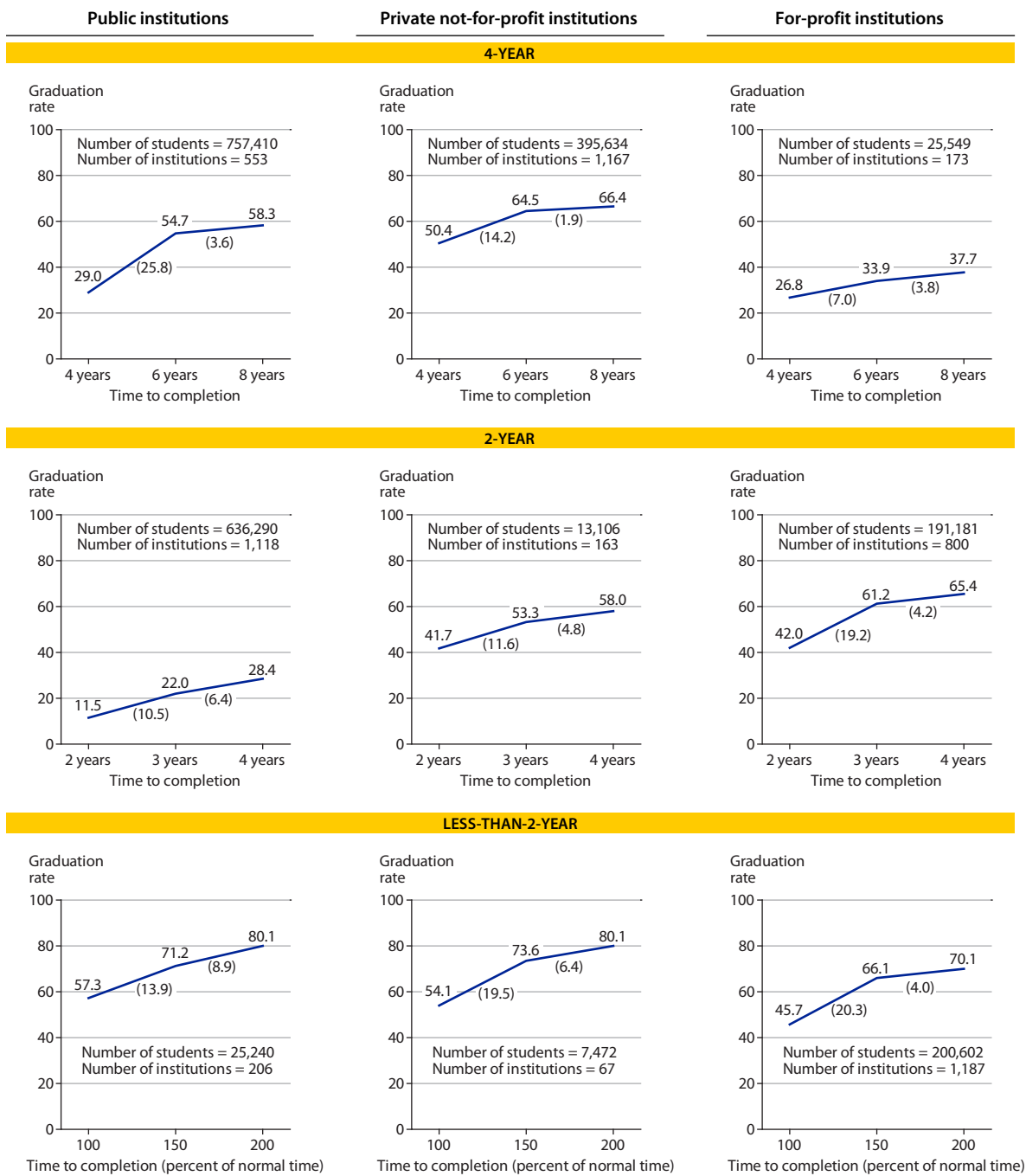
This was found to be the case only in the public 4-year sector (table 1). The average graduation rates for HBCUs increased about 5 percentage points and for HHEs by about 8 percentage points between 150 percent and 200 percent of normal time, compared with an increase of about 3 percentage points among all other public 4-year colleges. The comparable percentage point gains for HBCUs and for HHEs in all other sectors differed by less than 2 percentage points from the percentage point gain for all other institutions within each sector.

REFERENCES

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FIGURE 1.

GRADUATION RATES FOR NINE INSTITUTION SECTORS: Average graduation rates at 100 percent, 150 percent, and 200 percent of normal time and percentage point difference between rates (in parentheses): 2008



NOTE: Average graduation rates are weighted by cohort enrollment size (number of students).

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2008 Graduation rates 200 component (cohort years 2000–01 and 2004–05).

TABLE 1.

GRADUATION RATES and percentage point difference between rates, by size of sector and type of institution: 2008

Institution	Average graduation rate			Difference between		Number of institutions	Number of eligible students
	100 percent of normal time	150 percent of normal time	200 percent of normal time	100 percent of normal time and 150 percent of normal time	150 percent of normal time and 200 percent of normal time		
4-year institutions							
	4 years	6 years	8 years				
Public total	29.0	54.7	58.3	25.8	3.6	553	757,410
No HBCUs ¹ or HHEs ²	30.3	56.3	59.7	26.0	3.3	484	700,744
HBCUs ¹	14.9	35.4	40.7	20.5	5.3	39	26,604
HHEs ²	10.4	35.3	42.8	24.9	7.6	30	30,062
Private not-for-profit, total	50.4	64.5	66.4	14.2	1.9	1,167	395,634
No HBCUs ¹ or HHEs ²	51.9	65.8	67.6	13.9	1.8	1,096	372,341
HBCUs ¹	21.4	41.0	44.3	19.6	3.3	45	16,110
HHEs ²	35.7	52.4	54.9	16.7	2.5	26	7,183
For-profit, total	26.8	33.9	37.7	7.0	3.8	173	25,549
No HHEs ²	24.3	31.5	35.8	7.2	4.3	154	21,461
HHEs ²	40.2	46.1	47.7	6.0	1.6	19	4,088
2-year institutions							
	2 years	3 years	4 years				
Public total	11.5	22.0	28.4	10.5	6.4	1,118	636,290
No HBCUs ¹ or HHEs ²	12.1	22.6	29.0	10.5	6.4	997	544,787
HBCUs ¹	8.7	14.0	21.6	5.3	7.7	10	6,874
HHEs ²	8.3	18.8	25.2	10.5	6.4	112	85,615
Private not-for-profit, total	41.7	53.3	58.0	11.6	4.8	163	13,106
For-profit, total	42.0	61.2	65.4	19.2	4.2	800	191,181
No HHEs ²	41.5	61.4	65.7	19.9	4.3	693	141,071
HHEs ²	43.4	60.5	64.6	17.1	4.1	107	50,110
Less-than-2-year institutions							
Public total	57.3	71.2	80.1	13.9	8.9	206	25,240
No HHEs ²	58.0	72.9	81.7	14.9	8.9	196	21,972
HHEs ²	52.5	59.8	69.4	7.3	9.6	10	3,268
Private not-for-profit, total	54.1	73.6	80.1	19.5	6.4	67	7,472
No HHEs ²	42.5	73.8	80.4	31.2	6.6	41	4,065
HHEs ²	67.9	73.5	79.7	5.6	6.2	26	3,407
For-profit, total	45.7	66.1	70.1	20.3	4.0	1,187	200,602
No HHEs ²	44.5	67.2	71.3	22.7	4.1	920	130,711
HHEs ²	48.2	64.0	67.7	15.8	3.7	267	69,891

¹ Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

² High Hispanic enrollment (Hispanic students make up at least 25 percent of undergraduate cohort).

NOTE: Average graduation rates are weighted by cohort enrollment size (number of eligible students). HBCUs and HHEs are only reported for sectors with at least 10 institutions. The number of institutions and eligible students were determined in 2008, when institutions reported graduation rates at 200 percent of normal time.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2008 Graduation rates 200 component (cohort years 2000–01 and 2004–05).

ENDNOTES

¹ 2007–08 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:08), generated by QuickStats on March 2, 2010. NPSAS estimates are based on student samples, whereas IPEDS graduation rates are based on a census of institutions.

² In 2008–09, for 4-year institutions, the cohorts were students who first started in the 2000–01 academic year, and for 2-year and less-than-2-year institutions, cohorts were students who first started in the 2004–05 academic year. Institutions operating on standard academic terms (semester, trimester, quarter) reported on a fall cohort; all other institutions reported on a full 12-month cohort (September 1 through August 31).

³ HHEs are institutions with undergraduate enrollments of at least 25 percent Hispanic students.

⁴ Disaggregating institutions by sector may not take into account differences in graduation rates due to other institutional characteristics such as selectivity (of 4-year institutions) and the size of the low-income population.

⁵ IPEDS graduation rates are based on a census of institutions; therefore, tests of statistical significance are not required. All analyses in this Issue Brief are descriptive in nature with no a-priori assumptions regarding differences in graduation rates.

⁶ Based on the IPEDS 2008 Fall Enrollment and Graduation Rate Survey components. Data not shown. It should also be noted that students who start at an institution and transfer to another institution before earning a credential are considered noncompleters at the first institution even if they earn an award from the institution to which they transferred.

⁷ Calculated from total number of students and institutions reported in figure 1.