



**How Four-Year Colleges and Universities  
Organize Themselves to Promote Student  
Persistence: The Emerging National Picture**

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A report from the College Board Study on Student Retention by the Project on Academic Success at Indiana University and the Center for Enrollment Research, Policy and Practice at the University of Southern California

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## Executive Summary

As leading measures of student success and institutional quality, persistence and graduation rates are intensely debated at education conferences, institutional meetings and legislative sessions (Adelman, 1999; American Association of State Colleges and Universities [AASCU], 2002; Gold & Albert, 2006; Perna & Thomas, 2006; Tinto & Pusser, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Most of the relevant research that might be cited in these debates has focused on the extent to which these outcomes are influenced by students' college experiences and characteristics like academic preparation (e.g., Astin, 1993; Braxton, Sullivan & Johnson 1997; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Strauss & Volkwein, 2004; Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 2006–2007). These factors are certainly important to our understanding of persistence and graduation rates — as are such factors as national and regional economic contexts as well as students' and families' access to and navigation of financial aid. At least as important as these factors, however, is the institution's role in student persistence and completion. Yet the efforts of institutions to boost these measures of student success through their policies and practices have, until now, been relatively unexamined and underresearched — and remain poorly understood. Research has not yet adequately addressed this key question: How do institutions organize themselves and what actions do they take to improve student persistence and completion?

To help fill this gap, the College Board Study on Student Retention has been collecting and analyzing an extensive set of data on institutions' student retention policies and practices, ranging from coordinating and assessing retention efforts to providing services and resources to enhance persistence and graduation. Drawing on findings from a nationwide survey of four-year postsecondary institutions, this report offers insights into the nature, extent and effects of institutions' efforts to improve their students' success as reflected in persistence and graduation rates. The idea driving our study is that for institutions to know which of their efforts are succeeding and which need improving, they must have information that is empirically grounded and based on the study of similar efforts at peer institutions. This report presents data for comparison by institutional type as well as actionable findings colleges and universities can employ in their efforts to increase persistence and graduation at their institutions.

One of our survey's most important findings is that institutions are, indeed, making efforts to improve student retention. Most of the institutions that participated in the survey reported they regularly analyzed their retention rates, most also had an administrator charged with the responsibilities of a retention coordinator, and many had a retention committee — clear indications that these institutions were searching for ways to increase persistence. A majority of the participating campuses also had early warning systems and required first-year students to meet with advisers at least once per term. Yet the evidence from this survey raises serious questions, explored in this report, about whether the resources institutions are devoting to these efforts are sufficient to meet the complex challenge of improving student persistence and graduation rates. For example, among the responding institutions, on average only a little over one-third full-time equivalent (FTE) was formally allocated to the retention coordinator role, and these administrators usually had little authority or resources to implement new program initiatives.

Looking at these survey findings — presented by institution type as well as in totals across all institutions — will give campus administrators a sharper, contextualized perspective on how their institution's policies and practices compare with those of similar institutions and will provide both the data as well as the impetus to inform and focus their campus efforts. These findings also provide national comparative data on public institutions that state policymakers need to evaluate institutions' good-faith efforts toward state policy goals. Administered nationwide to a large sample of public and private four-year institutions and tracking a range of retention efforts across different institution types, this survey extends our understanding of whether and how institutional policies and practices improve student persistence rates. Because the study also examines the effects of persistence on student experiences and characteristics, this line of inquiry provides a more complete picture of student persistence for administrators and policymakers striving to enhance student success.

## Overview

Interest in student persistence in postsecondary education is high across the U.S., and research on student persistence has been wide ranging. Scholars such as John Bean, Ernest Pascarella, William Spady, Patrick Terenzini and Vincent Tinto have pioneered efforts to better understand the various pieces of what John Braxton has aptly called the “student departure puzzle” (2000). The resulting growing body of research literature over the last 30 years has examined the impact of factors such as student expectations, economic circumstances and campus climate on student decisions to persist toward graduation (e.g., Astin, 1993; Bean, 1983; Braxton, Sullivan & Johnson, 1997; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Porter, 1990; Rendón, Jalomo & Nora, 2000; St. John, Paulsen & Carter, 2005; Stage & Hossler, 2000; Strauss & Volkwein, 2004; Tierney, 1992; Tinto, 1993).

Facing ever-increasing budgetary challenges, colleges and universities have sought to stabilize revenue streams by improving student retention

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**This new study provides a comprehensive account of what four-year institutions are doing to address their persistence and graduation rates.**

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on campus. More and more states are tying funding for institutions to retention and graduation rates. Furthermore, these same measures are key criteria in the widely followed national rankings of colleges

and universities published by *U.S. News & World Report*. These and other developments demonstrate — for institutions as well as for policymakers — the importance of student persistence and the need for reliable, research-based information about it. Yet despite this greater attention to student persistence, national indicators of degree completion remain disconcertingly low. Less than a third of the U.S. adult population has a bachelor’s degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009), graduation rates for both public and private postsecondary institutions

have declined in recent decades (ACT, 2009), more than a third of students who enroll in a four-year college immediately after high school do not earn a bachelor’s degree within six years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003), and degree completion rates among 25-to-29-year-olds have been stagnant over the last decade (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

Despite numerous studies of college student persistence, the existing research- and practice-oriented literature provides little guidance on the role of institutional policies and practices in student persistence and its improvement (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004; Hossler, 2005). Prominent publications on this topic released in the last few years include *College Student Retention: Formula for Student Success* (Seidman, 2005); ACT’s *What Works in Student Retention? All Survey Colleges* (Habley & McClanahan, 2004); “Research and Practice of Student Retention: What Next?” (Tinto, 2006–2007); and *Student Success in State Colleges and Universities: A Matter of Culture and Leadership* (AASCU, 2005). While shedding necessary light on student retention issues generally, these reports do not address whether institutions are backing their rhetorical commitments to student success with coordinated strategies for enhancing student outcomes. Specifically, they do not measure the intensity of institutions’ efforts to develop and coordinate activities and programs to enhance student persistence or the extent of the institutions’ resource commitments to these efforts. Nor do these reports measure whether institutions have formal mechanisms in place for planning their retention efforts or for collecting and analyzing data to guide systemic improvements to their retention efforts. In brief, existing reports lack the kind of national data on what colleges and universities are doing that institutions could use to guide their retention efforts.

In April 2009, the College Board, in collaboration with the Project on Academic Success at Indiana University and the USC Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice, initiated a study

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These comparative data and actionable findings will provide better tools to guide campus efforts to improve persistence and graduation rates.

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*Organize Themselves to Increase Student Persistence: Four-Year Institutions* (Project on Academic Success, 2009), which outlined the national persistence and graduation picture across various types of four-year institutions — and

on student retention to fill this gap. A groundbreaking pilot survey was followed by the release of a report, *How Colleges*

which, along with the preliminary results, provided the initial indicators for empirically grounded, contextually specified comparisons across peer institutions. Expanding on that pilot study, our new study provides a comprehensive account of what four-year institutions are doing to address their persistence and graduation rates and on whether these policies and practices are conducive to student success and sufficient to the task. Most important, with this new study's comparative data and actionable findings, campus officials and public policymakers will have better tools to guide their efforts to improve student persistence and graduation rates.

## The National Context

In the past 20 years, graduation rates have declined at both public and private four-year institutions (Table 1). In addition, the gap in five-year graduation rates between public and private institutions increased by almost 4 percent from 1989 to 2009 — from 9.8 percent in 1989 to 13.6 percent in 2009. Although declining somewhat from 2006 to 2008, first-to-second-year retention at public institutions increased in most years,

six-year graduation rates across all classifications of institutions underscores the well-documented observation that graduation rates calculated over just a few years are inappropriate measures (Adelman, 2007; AASCU, 2002, 2006; Astin, 2005–2006; Burd, 2004; Gold & Albert, 2006; Russell, 2009). *Research universities with very high research activity* have the highest average retention rates for both full- and part-time students, followed by

**Table 1. Graduation and Persistence Rates at Four-Year Institutions, 1989–2009**

Year	Percentage of Students at Four-Year Colleges Who Earned a Degree Within Five Years of Entry			Percentage of Students at Four-Year Colleges Who Returned for Second Year		
	Public	Private	All	Public	Private	All
1989	48.2	58.0	55.1	70.7	76.4	74.7
1990	47.9	57.8	54.9	71.4	76.2	74.8
1992	46.7	57.6	54.4	71.6	76.2	74.8
1994	45.6	57.2	53.7	71.7	75.2	74.1
1996	44.6	57.1	53.3	71.0	74.1	73.1
1998	42.9	56.2	52.1	71.2	74.7	73.6
2000	41.9	55.5	51.2	72.1	75.1	74.2
2002	41.2	55.5	51.0	71.9	74.9	74.0
2004	42.3	57.9	52.0	73.5	75.1	74.5
2006	42.8	57.8	52.3	74.0	74.7	74.5
2007	43.7	57.8	52.3	73.4	73.9	73.7
2008	43.8	57.4	52.5	70.9	72.9	72.3
2009	44.0	57.6	52.7	72.9	73.0	73.0

Adapted from ACT data: [http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/09retain\\_trends.pdf](http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/09retain_trends.pdf)

including 2009, and is currently at the same level as at private four-year institutions — about 73 percent. These shifting patterns reflect the complexity of graduation outcomes — a central concern of institutional and public policymakers.

Graduation and retention rates differ across institutions by Carnegie Classification as well. For example, at institutions classified as *baccalaureate arts and sciences colleges* and *research universities with very high research activity*, slightly more than half of the students graduate with a bachelor's degree within four years, while the average four-year graduation rate at all types of institutions is about 35 percent (Table 2). The markedly higher

*research universities with high research activity* and *baccalaureate arts and sciences colleges*; the lowest full-time student retention rates are at *baccalaureate/associate degree colleges* (Table 3). Large differences also exist across institution classifications between the retention rates of full-time students and those of part-time students — from a difference of about 15 percentage points at *baccalaureate/associate degree colleges* to a difference of about 27 percentage points at *baccalaureate arts and sciences colleges*.

An examination of baccalaureate graduation rates by the institutions' total student enrollment shows that the highest four-year graduation rates



were at institutions with enrollments between 1,000 and 3,000, and the highest six-year graduation rates were at institutions with enrollments of 20,000 and higher (Table 4). As in Table 2, the figures in Table 4 show six-year graduation rates that are markedly higher than the four-year graduation rates across all classifications of institutions.

**Table 2. Average Baccalaureate Four-Year and Six-Year Graduation Rates by Carnegie Classification, 2008**

<i>Carnegie Classification</i>	<i>N</i>	Degree Within 4 Years	Degree Within 6 Years
		<i>MEAN %</i>	<i>MEAN %</i>
Research Universities (very high research activity)	96	53.78	75.02
Research Universities (high research activity)	103	32.1	56.9
Doctoral/Research Universities	74	33.07	50.79
Master's Colleges and Universities (larger programs)	325	30.38	49.58
Master's Colleges and Universities (medium programs)	176	30.79	47.04
Master's Colleges and Universities (smaller programs)	113	29.97	45
Baccalaureate Colleges—Arts & Sciences	282	51.73	62.65
Baccalaureate Colleges—Diverse Fields	338	27.39	42.94
Baccalaureate/Associate's Colleges	59	18.31	30.39
ALL INSTITUTIONS	1,566	34.95	51.42

Data Source: IPEDS

**Table 3. Average Retention Rates of Full-Time and Part-Time Students by Carnegie Classification, 2007–2008**

<i>Carnegie Classification</i>	<i>N</i>	Full-Time	Part-Time
		<i>MEAN %</i>	<i>MEAN %</i>
Research Universities (very high research activity)	96	89.51	63.04
Research Universities (high research activity)	103	79.35	55.02
Doctoral/Research Universities	74	73.47	47.84
Master's Colleges and Universities (larger programs)	325	73.91	48.32
Master's Colleges and Universities (medium programs)	176	71.53	47.53
Master's Colleges and Universities (smaller programs)	113	70.56	43.49
Baccalaureate Colleges—Arts & Sciences	282	78.8	51.56
Baccalaureate Colleges—Diverse Fields	338	66.3	46.69
Baccalaureate/Associate's Colleges	59	60.19	45.24
ALL INSTITUTIONS	1,566	73.44	49.16

Data Source: IPEDS

**Table 4. Average Baccalaureate Four-Year and Six-Year Graduation Rates by Institution Total Enrollment, 2008**

<i>Total Enrollment*</i>	<i>N</i>	Degree Within 4 Years	Degree Within 6 Years
		<i>MEAN %</i>	<i>MEAN %</i>
Less than 1,000	225	29.75	43.23
1,000–2,999	546	40.48	53.23
3,000–9,999	477	33.17	50.42
10,000–19,9999	183	30.97	52.74
20,000–higher	129	32.55	58.59
ALL INSTITUTIONS	1,560	34.95	51.42

\*FTE is found by adding full-time enrollment and 1/3 of part-time enrollment.

Data Source: IPEDS

# The Survey Results

The framework for presenting the results of our nationwide survey of four-year institutions on their current engagement with common retention policies and practices is a product of our pilot study, our continuing research and our review of the relevant research literature. To provide campus policymakers comparative data they need to evaluate their own institutions' efforts to increase student persistence, we present these findings by institution classification as well as in totals across all institutions. Because it is beyond the scope of any single survey to explore all of the possible programs and policies relevant to student success, building on previous research on "policy levers" in this area (e.g., Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004), we focused this study on six broad policy levers commonly found in institutions' efforts to increase persistence: (1) retention program coordination, (2) research and assessment on retention, (3) orientation programs, (4) early warning practices, (5) faculty-student interaction and (6) advising practices. We discuss survey results relevant to each of these policy levers below. The data sources for the study are briefly outlined at the end of this report.

## Coordination of Retention Efforts

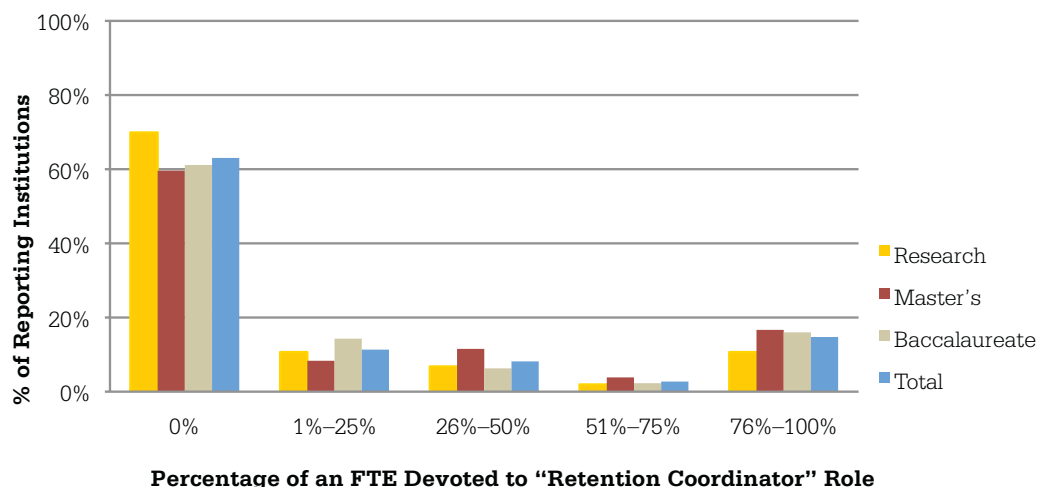
Although a broad spectrum of departments or units may be involved in an institution's retention efforts, only 68 percent of the institutions responding to our survey reported having an administrator charged with the responsibility

of coordinating efforts to improve student persistence rates, and 62 percent reported having an administrator whose responsibility was to act as a central resource for efforts to improve student persistence rates. While a sizeable majority of responding institutions indicated having an administrator in one or both of these capacities, about one-fourth reported having no administrator charged with either of these roles.

On several measures, resources allocated to efforts to increase student persistence were relatively modest. Especially indicative of this finding, the overall mean FTE devoted to the "retention coordinator" administrative role for all responding institutions was only .35 FTE, while only 17 percent reported devoting more than .50 FTE, and almost two-thirds (63 percent) reported devoting zero FTE to that role (Figure 1).

More master's- and baccalaureate-granting institutions (16.7 percent and 16 percent, respectively) reported having a nearly full-time retention coordinator (1.0 FTE) than did research institutions (10.7 percent), yet even these percentages are very low. Public institutions and residential institutions (a mean of .34 FTE for both groups) reported devoting slightly lower FTE amounts to the retention coordinator position, compared with private institutions (a mean of .35 FTE) and institutions classified as nonresidential (a mean of .36 FTE), respectively.

**Figure 1. Percentage of an FTE Devoted to the "Retention Coordinator" Role by Institution Type**



The extent to which institutions are positioned to organize campus retention efforts is revealed further by the level of authority afforded to retention coordinators to implement or fund retention initiatives (Figures 2a and 2b). Among responding institutions, 66.2 percent reported giving their retention coordinator some or a great deal of authority to implement new initiatives. While authority to *implement* a new program was relatively more common for participating institutions, authority to *fund* new programs was rarer. A smaller minority of the responding institutions (only 32.3 percent) reported their retention coordinator had some or a great deal of authority to fund new programs, while almost as many (31.9 percent) indicated their retention coordinator had no funding authority at all.

Thus, only 47.6 percent of all participating institutions had a designated coordinator of retention efforts who also had “some” or “a great deal” of authority to implement new programs, and only 23.2 percent had someone who had “some” or “a great deal” of authority to fund new retention initiatives. These findings demonstrate that the intensity of institutional efforts to enhance student persistence — and, thus, student success — can be described, at best, as modest.

To further assess the intensity of retention efforts, we also asked about formal and informal planning for institutional retention efforts. About a third of the participating institutions (31 percent) reported having implemented a formal, written plan for improving student persistence at the institution level; 37 percent reported having such a plan at the unit level; 22 percent reported having multiple written plans at the unit level; and

69 percent reported having informal agreements across units.

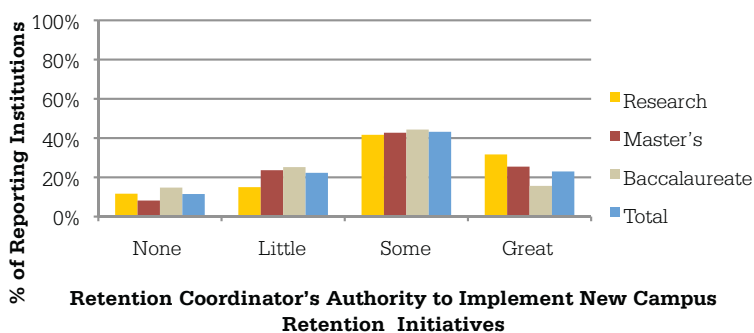
Institutions’ self-ratings of the coordination of their retention efforts (Figure 3) corresponded with our findings reviewed so far: Only a small proportion of the participating institutions reported high levels of coordination for retention efforts on their campuses. These results were similar across all types of institutions, narrowly ranging between 26 percent and 28 percent.

In addition to an administrator designated to coordinate retention efforts, an institution may have a retention committee that is often instrumental in monitoring and coordinating retention efforts. In this study, 62 percent of the responding institutions reported having a campuswide retention committee meeting regularly. This encouraging result suggests that an array of faculty and administrators are coming together on a regular basis to grapple with the issues surrounding student persistence at these institutions.

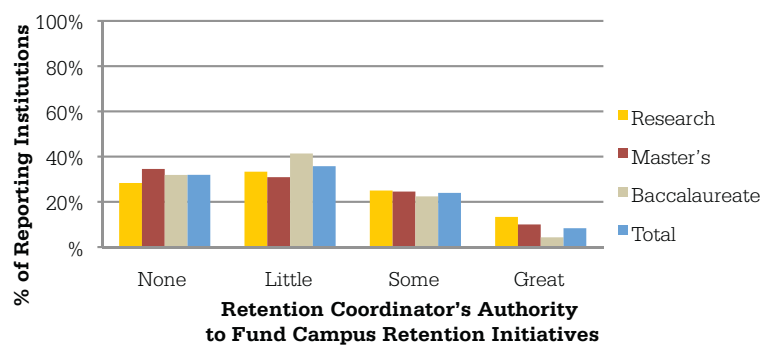
### Research and Assessment on Retention

The extent to which institutions are committed to enhancing student success can, in part, be gauged by the frequency and intensity of their efforts to track persistence and graduation rates. The vast majority of the participating institutions (82 percent) reported they analyzed retention data annually, although fewer institutions disaggregated results by student characteristics: 77 percent reported analyzing student retention rates by class year, 69.4 percent by race/ethnicity and 54.2 percent by student major.

**Figure 2a. Retention Coordinator's Authority to Implement New Campus Initiatives by Institution Type**



**Figure 2b. Retention Coordinator's Authority to Fund Campus Retention Initiatives by Institution Type**



Institutions' analysis of student persistence rates per se does not, however, carry over to equal engagement in the assessment of retention programs. Only 39 percent of participating institutions reported having formal assessment procedures for their retention programs. Of those that did not conduct formal assessments, 89 percent reported having informal assessment procedures for retention programs.

A similar pattern can be observed in the extent to which institutions reported using data to evaluate their retention programs: 40 percent reported using data "to a great extent," while nearly half described data being used to a lesser degree (37 percent reported "somewhat," and 9.1 percent reported "slightly"). Consistent with findings from previous research (Braxton, McKinney & Reynolds, 2006; Hossler, 2005), our survey results suggest that most colleges and universities devote little attention to assessing their retention policies and practices and, likewise, to coordinating and planning for these efforts campuswide.

### Orientation Programs

One common goal of new student orientation programs is to help students form strong and lasting relationships with their institutions, thereby helping them integrate into the campus community more effectively (Braxton et al., 2006; Hossler, 2005; Patton, Morelon, Whitehead & Hossler, 2006). The orientation programs of many participating institutions reflect this perspective. Their programs are extensive in length and engage the majority of new students. For example, 44.8 percent reported having orientation programs that lasted three days or more, and 37 percent reported having an

orientation program that extended to the end of the first semester of classes. The orientation program at 40.3 percent of the participating institutions, however, reportedly lasted two days or less.

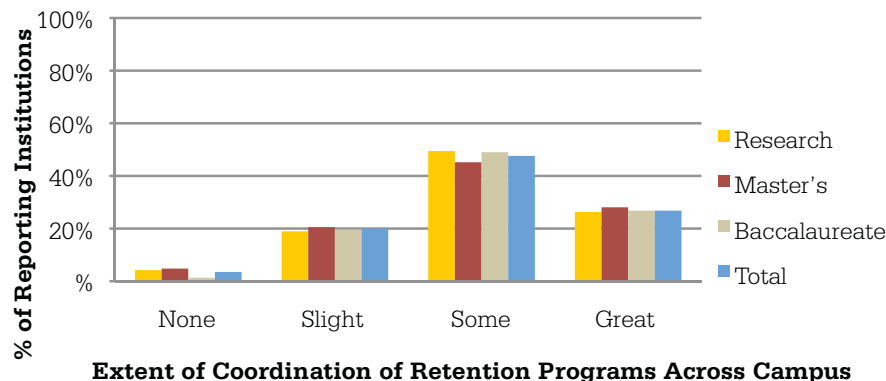
Regarding levels of participation in orientation programs, 64.7 percent of the responding institutions reported that more than three quarters of their first-year students completed the entire orientation program, and 76.4 percent reported that over half of their first-year students participated fully in such a program. At 64.4 percent of the responding institutions, participation was required for first-time, first-year students, while only 34 percent had a similar requirement for transfer students. Because an orientation program at the receiving four-year institution can be an effective strategy for easing transfer students' transition to the new institution (Townsend & Wilson, 2006), institutions would be well advised to consider requiring their first-time transfer students as well as their first-time freshmen to participate in orientation programs.

Overall, the results of this survey indicate that institutions are generally making a solid effort to offer strong orientation programs, particularly for first-time freshmen. The evidence shows that orientation programs are a valued component in institutions' efforts to enhance student persistence.

### Early Warning Practices

Early warning programs designed to identify students at risk of dropping out can be an effective tool in improving persistence and graduation rates (Beck & Davidson, 2001; Reisberg, 1999). Among the institutions participating in our survey, a

**Figure 3. Extent of Coordination of Retention Programs Across Campus by Institution Type**



large majority (88 percent) reported having some kind of early warning program in place for first-year students. Midterm grade reports typically collected via registrar’s offices from faculty institutionwide are often the centerpiece of an early warning system. Midterm grade reports are widely used to identify students with two or more Ds, Fs or Ws — because these students are frequently viewed as being more likely to drop out. About 60 percent of all participating institutions reported collecting midterm grade information for first-year students. A high proportion of the baccalaureate-granting institutions (74 percent) reported collecting midterm grades, followed by the master’s-granting institutions (70 percent) and the research universities (64 percent) (Figure 4). More than half (58 percent) reported also asking faculty to complete “early alert” forms for first-year students. Regarding institutions’ actions after collecting midterm grades or early alert forms, almost all of the participating institutions reported contacting students who received low midterm grades or who were reported on early alert forms to be experiencing academic difficulty.

Although these results are encouraging, a different story emerged from institutions’ self-ratings of the extensiveness of the steps they took — through either incentives or sanctions — to encourage students to use academic support services. Among the institutions that reported contacting students with low midterm grades, those steps were rated “very extensive” by only 19 percent, “moderately extensive” by 49 percent and “somewhat extensive” by 27 percent. Very similar to these numbers were the institutions’ self-ratings of the extensiveness of their efforts to encourage students identified as having academic

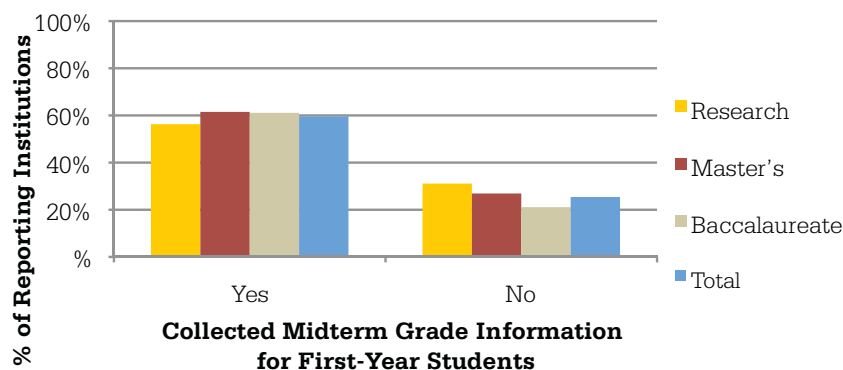
difficulty through early alert forms completed by faculty: 18 percent rated their efforts “very extensive,” 45 percent rated them “moderately extensive,” and 29 percent rated them “somewhat extensive.”

Courses in which large proportions of students receive Ds, Fs and/or Ws are sometimes identified as courses for which students need supplemental instruction or other forms of course-targeted academic support to succeed. Among the institutions responding to our survey, however, a surprisingly small proportion (45 percent) reported the practice of flagging such courses. Only 39 percent of participating institutions reported having course-targeted academic support for students. Of those institutions, only 23 percent rated their offerings “extensive” or “very extensive,” and a substantial majority (77 percent) rated them “not extensive” or “somewhat extensive.” Taken together, these findings suggest that while most institutions are identifying and often contacting students at risk of nonpersistence, follow-up and course-based preventions are usually limited.

### Faculty–Student Interaction

Many scholars who have written on the topic of student success and graduation have found that having small classes for first-year students and using full-time faculty to teach introductory first-year courses have had positive effects on these outcomes (Kokkelenberg, Dillon & Christy, 2008; Weaver & Qi, 2005), giving support to the idea that students’ interactions with faculty during the first year of college can have a positive impact on persistence. Among the institutions responding to

**Figure 4. Percentage of Institutions That Did or Did Not Collect Midterm Grade Information for First-Year Students in 2007–2008 by Institution Type**



our survey, 54 percent reported an average class size between 1 and 30 in courses taken primarily by first-year students — a likely indication that more faculty–student interaction is occurring at these institutions. It should be noted that the proportion of small institutions participating in the study (49 percent) was higher than that of midsize institutions (27 percent) or that of large institutions (22 percent). Our cross-tabulation of institution size by class size demonstrates that the class-size pattern is likely partly attributable to institution size: 84 percent of small institutions and 66 percent of midsize institutions reported having an average class size of 1–30, while only 17 percent of large institutions selected this category of class size.

About 56 percent of participating institutions reported that more than half of their 100-level classes were taught by full-time faculty, although 70 percent reported that incentives for full-time faculty to teach first-year classes were small or nonexistent. Nevertheless, given the high proportion of small and midsize institutions in our sample, the size of first-year classes at many of these institutions likely created frequent opportunities for student–faculty interaction.

### Advising Practices

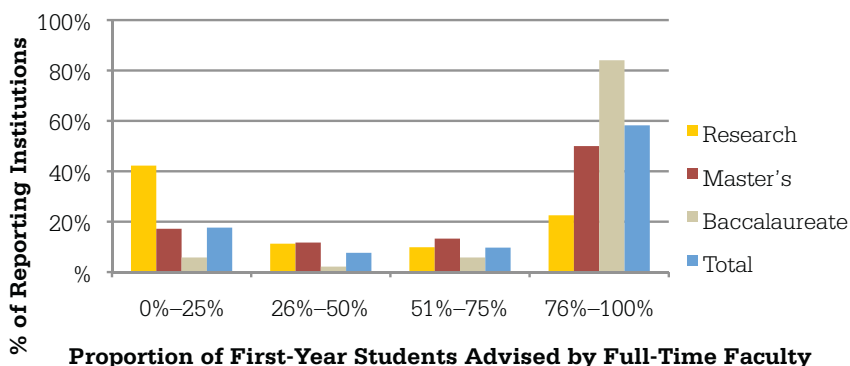
Academic advisers can be a source of professional knowledge helping integrate first-year students into the institution (Tinto, 1999), and our survey results suggest that institutions are embracing the use of advisers as a common retention strategy. Among the responding institutions, 69 percent reported requiring first-year students to meet with an academic adviser at least once per term, with this practice reported by a higher proportion of the

baccalaureate-granting institutions (89.4 percent), followed by the master’s-granting institutions (79.6 percent) and the research universities (76.5 percent).

Advisers for first-year students were reported to be full-time faculty at many of the responding institutions, with 78.2 percent reporting that full-time faculty acted as academic advisers and 52.4 percent reporting that full-time faculty members advised more than three-fourths of their first-year students. Professional advisers, on the other hand, were reported to be advising more than three-fourths of the first-year students at 28.3 percent of the participating institutions.

As expected, due to their smaller size and their consequential propensity for greater faculty–student interaction, the baccalaureate-granting institutions had the highest proportion of first-year students with faculty advisers, with 84.1 percent of these participating institutions reporting more than three-fourths of their students being advised by full-time faculty (Figure 5). In contrast, this level of advising by faculty was reported by 50 percent of the master’s-granting institutions and by only 22.5 percent of the research universities participating in the survey. More than half of the research institutions (54 percent) reported 76 percent to 100 percent of their students being advised by professional advisers. Overall, these results suggest that many institutions have solid advising policies in place and that they are using advising as a policy lever in their efforts to enhance student success.

**Figure 5. Proportion of First-Year Students Advised by Full-Time Faculty in 2007–2008 by Institution Type**



## **Summing Up**

Today's economic pressures and educational challenges call for evidence of student success, yet our collective knowledge about what it will take from institutional policy and practice to answer this call is as yet incomplete and in some cases inconclusive. For this reason, and with competing demands on institutions' resources, we cannot simply assume institutions can or will organize and implement effective efforts to improve student persistence and graduation rates. Recent research on the efficacy of student success programs has found limited investment of resources in institutions' retention and student success efforts and very little evaluation of these efforts on most campuses (Hossler, Gross & Ziskin, 2009). Yet the same research provides clear and compelling evidence that when institutions devote time and resources to these efforts, they have a good chance of being successful.

The new research findings we report here demonstrate that institutions of higher education are responding to the student success imperative by creating student retention plans, by establishing student retention committees and by vesting individuals with responsibility to coordinate student retention efforts. These results also suggest, however, that the intensity of institutions' efforts devoted to enhancing student persistence and graduation rates — as reflected in organizational time and resources — is weak. In this most important task of higher education, these findings show, the current state of institutional practice reveals a pervasive interest — but an inadequate investment.

## Making Sense of the Emerging National Picture

In organizing their efforts to improve student persistence and graduation rates, higher education institutions that now rely on propositional one-size-fits-all advice and general wisdom, instead, need national data that provide research-based understandings of current practice at similar institutions. Senior campus officials in all areas of college and university administration are seeking comparative data to evaluate their efforts alongside those of peer institutions. State policymakers are also searching for comparative data across multiple public institutions to determine which campuses are making good-faith efforts toward state policy goals. The framework of institutional policies and practices used in this study offers a promising starting place for campus officials and state policymakers. We have arrived at this framework by drawing on the extant research literature on student persistence and by probing the following questions through our nationwide survey:

- **Retention Program Coordination:** Is there an individual on campus charged with improving student persistence and graduation rates? Does this individual have the focus, time, resources and organizational clout to address the issue? Is there an on-campus committee or task force charged with carrying out coordinated and comprehensive student retention plans? Has a formal plan been written for the institution, and do the academic and student service units have written plans?
- **Research and Assessment on Retention:** Is comprehensive and rigorous research and assessment carried out to examine student persistence and graduation results and the on-campus programs designed to promote them?
- **Orientation Programs:** Are orientation programs comprehensive in scope and required for transfer students as well as for freshmen?
- **Early Warning Practices:** Are early warning systems in place and is there well-executed follow-through that identifies students having academic difficulties?

- **Faculty–Student Interaction:** Does the institution place first-year students in settings that ensure faculty–student interaction?
- **Advising Practices:** Are first-year students required to meet regularly with an academic adviser? Do full-time faculty or professional advisers serve as academic advisers?

### Current Institutional Practice Surrounding Student Retention

The evidence from our study suggests that four-year colleges and universities, to varying degrees, are aware of the need to improve student success as reflected in retention rates and are beginning to address this need. The majority of the institutions responding to our survey reported having an administrator charged with coordinating retention efforts and with being a central resource for efforts to improve student persistence rates. Our study also reveals strong evidence of efforts to assist with student adjustment and persistence — through orientation programs, freshman advising, student–faculty interaction opportunities and early warning systems.

On the other hand, our results provide considerable evidence that the organizational structures and resources that institutions currently dedicate to improving their persistence and graduation rates are, in fact, quite minimal. While approximately two-thirds of the participating institutions reported having a designated retention coordinator, on average only about a third of an FTE was dedicated to the retention coordination role. Indeed, two-thirds of the institutions reported dedicating no FTE at all to the retention coordinator role, and only 17 percent reported dedicating more than half of an FTE to the role. Moreover, most of the retention coordinators were reported to lack the authority to initiate or fund new programs.

With respect to early warning systems and campus assessments of student retention activities, our findings further suggest a lack of concentrated institutional effort and rigor. Although a great majority of the institutions reported having some kind of early warning



program for first-year students, most of them rated their follow-up measures “not very extensive.” Formal assessment procedures for the retention programs were reportedly in place at a little over a third of the participating institutions.

Modest evidence of administrative coordination, funding and policymaking authority, as well as limited follow-through in early warning systems and assessment of retention activities, lead us to conclude that many institutional efforts to improve student persistence and graduation rates lack the adequate authority, structure, personnel and material resources to succeed. This conclusion alone can provide the impetus for institutions to examine how they have dedicated their resources and to rededicate and reallocate them to match their goals for student success.

### **The Survey Results Condensed**

The comprehensive and national scope of this study has enabled us to draw conclusions about the nature of the efforts under way at four-year colleges and universities nationwide to promote student persistence and graduation rates at their institutions. We have condensed these conclusions under three key general findings:

- **Institutions are making efforts to organize for retention.** Both formally and informally, the nation’s four-year colleges and universities are organizing to promote student persistence and graduation rates. Formal methods include designating a retention coordinator and having formal written retention plans. Informal methods include creating retention committees and drawing up informal agreements across units. The great majority of the institutions in our study have one or both of these models in operation.
- **Institutions are not devoting resources in proportion to the importance and challenge of the task.** In this most crucial institutional task — promoting student success through persistence and graduation — the evidence on current institutional practice reveals a pervasive interest but an inadequate investment of resources. Where the retention coordinator role exists, for example, little to no FTE is devoted directly to that role and few to no resources are available to fund those

initiatives. Follow-up from early warning systems and program assessment is also often weak at most institutions.

- **Inadequate institutional efforts may point to underlying causes.** While analyzing the results of our study, we have kept our eye on one broad, causal question: Are institutions with weakly organized or minimally resourced retention efforts just getting started in these efforts, or is their commitment to retention lacking? If the former is the case — if these institutions are just beginning to organize toward improving retention — this could explain why adequate institutional resources have not yet been dedicated to that goal and why informal structures are still so prominent. To the extent that campus budgets, when closely scrutinized, reveal institutional priorities (Wildavsky, 1992), most institutions evidently have yet to be convinced of the importance of institutional efforts toward improving student retention. Based on findings from our study and from earlier research (Braxton, McKinney & Reynolds, 2006; Hossler et al., 2009), we speculate that at too many institutions, the efforts to enhance student success and persistence are as yet superficial. Indeed, the results from our analysis demonstrate that in institutional responses to this problem, time and again, either budget or follow-through is lacking.

## The Forecast: Mounting Pressures

Looking ahead, we anticipate that pressures from a range of directions will increase on institutions to more definitively account for their institutional performance and to more tangibly demonstrate the success of their students:

- **Federal and state focus on retention and graduation rates will pressure institutions to improve.** New federal investment in education comes with assessment and accountability requirements. State agencies and accrediting bodies, either in response to federal initiatives or through their own mechanisms, focus on measures of performance. These results-oriented strategies will continue to pressure institutions to improve student persistence and graduation rates.
- **Economic troubles will pressure families to calculate the practical value of higher education.** With the damage to their finances from the present and lingering economic crisis, families are carefully weighing the costs of higher education against its outcomes — and they will continue to do so, using a growing range of measurements, for some time to come. Student retention and graduation rates will become even more important metrics of higher education quality as families consider educational options and as institutions promote themselves. As these pressures mount over time, the intensity of the student retention efforts we have indentified is sure to increase.

Drawing on our study's comparative data and analytic framework — using its empirically grounded tools calibrated to institutions' contexts — administrators and policymakers will be better equipped to respond to these pressures. As a result of our research, what colleges and universities can do to most effectively organize themselves to promote student persistence is becoming much clearer.

## Data Sources

The data for this report were taken from the College Board Study on Student Retention institutional survey and from public data available through the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). The survey was administered to 1,484 four-year public and private not-for-profit institutions nationwide in spring 2009. In total, 441 institutions responded to the survey, resulting in a response rate of 30 percent. Questions focused on institutional policies and practices related to increasing student persistence. Additional data on each institution's student body and other important institutional characteristics were obtained from IPEDS, and these data were subsequently merged with survey responses from the institutions to create a complete data set for this exploratory research.

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