



Photo: Jeckle Island, GA by Douglas L. Flor

Consistent Success in American Baccalaureate Education (2009-2013)

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There are a total of three documents regarding this study. This is the Executive Summary (with Closing Remarks). The second is a condensed version (47 pages) of the study which includes all the information in the Executive Summary but also includes the Methods, Results, and Conclusions – with no Appendices. The third is the full version (136 pages) and includes everything in the condensed version but also includes Appendices.

Executive Summary

This is a study comprised of approximately 1900 primarily baccalaureate colleges and universities in the United States investigating two main issues. The first is the “Front Door” problem in American education (i.e., retention). The second is the “Back Door” problem (i.e., graduation rates).

A number of colleges and universities do rather well with retention rates well above the five-year grand mean of 71%, the number of institutions and graduation rates well above the five-year grand mean 6-year Graduation Rate of 49%. On average, however, colleges and universities lose 30% of their First-time First-year degree-seeking undergraduates by the end of their first year and another 20% by the sixth year. That many institutions do even worse than this is a clear indication of the Front and Back Door problems exist in American baccalaureate institutions.

This study used five years of data (2009 to 2013) pulled from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). In addition, data from the Department of Education’s Student Loan site regarding Institutional Cohort Default rates for 2012 were merged with the IPEDS data so that an examination of the effects retention and graduation rate categories have on Institutional Default rates.

Grand means and standard deviations for Retention and Graduation Rates (4-year, 6-year, and 8-year) were calculated and criterions were established. Each college was then categorized for Retention and then for each of the three Graduation Rate indices. Categorization was into one of five groups (i.e., Well Above Average, Above Average, Average, Below Average, and Well Below Average). After categorization for each of the five years was completed, an additional assessment for consistency across the five years was also conducted.

Institutional size was revised into nine groups based on total enrollment. This revision created a normal distribution to assess effects of the Institutional Size on Retention and Graduation Rates.

The findings of this study indicated that high level of consistency across these KPIs was far more prevalent than inconsistency; with 77% of the institutions exhibiting consistent Retention Rates and 90% of the institutions exhibiting consistent 6-year Graduation Rates. If a college or university was in the “Well Above Average” or “Above Average” category in 2009, they were much more than likely to be in these ranges for three or more of the five years.

Using the consistent criterion classifications (i.e., colleges and universities which were consistently “Above Average” and “Well Above Average” with respect to Retention and 6-year Graduation rates), 30% demonstrated in the 2013 data this pattern of consistent results. This

speaks to the success of those institutions to select students and provide well for these students to be successful.

- For these baccalaureate institutions, there is neither a Front Door nor a Back Door problem.

A similar consistency was noted for the other end of the spectrum. Twenty-two percent of the institutions were in the “Below Average” or “Well Below Average” categories with Retention Rates less than 62%. This speaks to the failure of those institutions to take Retention of Full-time First-time undergraduate students seriously. They are too busy trying to fill a seat.

That 228 of these 389 institutions also exhibited “Below Average” or “Well Below Average” categories for 6-year Graduation Rates indicates that they also do not take seriously the providing of supports necessary for the majority of the students in these institutions graduate, as fewer than 40% of their students graduate within six years of starting their education at these institutions.

- For these baccalaureate institutions, there is both a Front Door and a Back Door problem.

With respect to the largest percentage of baccalaureate institutions in America, those that were Average with respect to Retention (i.e., evidencing a percentage of retention between ~60 to 80%), they consistently evidenced a 6-year Graduation Rate between 38 and 60%; consistently losing an additional 20% of the Full-time, First-time undergraduate students. This group of institutions were also highly consistent in maintaining this level of performance.

- For at least half of these baccalaureate institutions, there may be a Front Door problem. For many, though, there is definitely a Back Door problem, with less than a 49% Graduation Rate.

Less than 3% of the institutions evidenced a consistent improvement in retention to the next category level and only 2% demonstrated a consistent improvement in 6-year Graduation Rate. To evidence consistent improvement, an institution had to be at one level for two or three years and then maintain the improved level for the remaining years. While this was a conservative test for improvement, it did demonstrate that a small number of colleges and universities were able to evidence consistent improvement of the Front and Back Door issues at their institutions. The real test would be if these colleges knowingly, and with forethought, instituted policies and procedures for this improvement in retention and graduation rates.

Statistical comparisons of the consistent categories levels demonstrated that for Retention and Graduation Rates, institutions that were in the “Consistently Below Average” and “Consistently Well Below Average” levels accepted significantly higher percentages of students with higher financial challenges than those institutions in the “Consistently Above Average” and “Consistently Well Above Average” levels.

Similarly, statistical comparisons of the consistent categories levels demonstrated that for Retention and Graduation Rates, institutions that were in the “Consistently Below Average” and “Consistently Well Below Average” levels had significantly higher Institutional Student Loan Cohort Default Rates than those institutions in the “Consistently Above Average” and “Consistently Well Above Average” levels.

For Graduation Rates, an additional significant difference was noted in that “Consistently Below Average” and “Consistently Well Below Average” levels had significantly lower Tuition and Fees than those institutions in the “Consistently Above Average” and “Consistently Well Above Average” levels.

Analyses on Institutional Sector, clearly indicated that with respect to consistent retention and graduation rate levels, Private, For-Profit institutions were much more likely to appear in the “Consistently Well Below Average” and “Consistently Below Average” categories and much less likely in the “Consistently Well Above Average” category.

Private, Not-for-Profit institutions were much more likely to appear in the “Consistently Above Average” and “Consistently Well Above Average” categories and much less likely in the “Consistently Well Below Average” category. And yet, more institutions in this sector were noted in the “Consistently Well Below Average” than those institutions in the public sector.

Public institutions, while they were much less likely to appear in the “Consistently Well Below Average,” “Consistently Below Average,” and “Consistently Well Above Average” category levels of both Retention and Graduation Rates, they were much more likely to appear in the “Consistently Average” and “Consistently Above Average” categories.

Analyses on Institutional Size clearly indicated that - *bigger is better* - for both Retention and Graduation Rates. Also, those colleges with total enrollments under 1000 exhibit profiles for Consistent Retention and Graduation Rates that were poorest of all nine groups and that the profiles became worse as the size of the institution became smaller. Thus, the idea of getting more “personalized attention” that assists with a successful experience at small colleges is just not true.

While these results may not be new, the methodology for examining the consistency of institutions across 5 years of data is innovative. This study speaks for the need of using a multi-year benchmarks to ascertain true and meaningful continuous improvement. It also demonstrates, when one is reminded that less than 3% of the bacallaureate institutions evidenced consistent improvement, that cohort effects noted between years is predominately “noise” and not a demonstration of any lasting improvement.

Lastly, that there was so little change in percentages across all five category levels in the 8-year Graduation Rates indicates there is no real need to go through the process of tracking these data, as the effort to track it seems to outweigh the benefit derived.

Closing Remarks

With 20% of all baccalaureate institutions in America evidencing both Front and Back Door problems and another 15 to 20% evidencing at least a Back Door problem and that the Institutional Student Loan Default Rate for these institutions is up to 7 times higher than the best institutions, how can we as a nation consider this effective education?

Accreditation agencies emphasize the need for “continuous improvement.” And yet, the results of this study demonstrate a high level of consistency exists and very little consistent improvement being made; even in the most gross measures of student success such as Retention and Graduation rates.

It should be noted, as was done in the introduction, that these multi-year criterion measures of student success need to be used in conjunction with assessing academic quality with respect to Student Learning Outcomes. It is not a case of choosing one set of measures over another. Rather, it is using both sets of measure to ensure that the monies, regardless of whether it is the individual family members or the government are well spent.

Let me tell a story that will help to illustrate that leadership matters when facing process failures like those outlined in this study.

In 2006, Ron Rittenmeyer the CEO of Electronic Data Systems, an international IT company of about 150,000 employees worldwide, challenged employees reduce Severity One outages by 50% within the next 12 months. Severity One outages are the most severe IT outages that a company can incur – HR, payroll, or email system outages. If these happen, serious consequences follow.

When everyone in the company heard the Big Hairy Audacious Goal (BHAG), many immediately began to complain and present all kinds of reasons for why it was impossible and would be incapable of being met. Operational personnel complained that the sales personnel were selling ideas and goals that were impossible to meet.

People initially didn't take it seriously, but the objective was made crystal clear – make it happen.

As the author of this report was the program manager of that project for the eight American hubs, our team examined every aspect of the process, the data collection associated with tracking the successes and failures, as well as the hardware constraints which prevent high availability failovers from being implemented. At the end of the 12 month period, EDS had done what no other IT company had ever done before. We reduced Severity One outages by 50% and everyone took a sigh of relief.

Ron Rittenmeyer congratulated the great work by the worldwide team and then challenged everyone with another BHAG – reduce the number of Severity One outages in the next 12 months by another 50%. Again, everyone pulled together and we did what no other IT company had done.



At the end of a second year of concentrated effort on the issue, we had not only effectively reduced the number of Severity One outages by another 50%, but we were forced to become innovative about how we did the work we were charged with performing in behalf of our customers. Thus, EDS as a company, effectively reduced failures of the worst kind by a total of 75% across 24 months. And it was all because the CEO had the guts to ask for something thought to be impossible.

What resulted was true innovation. Innovations that made it possible to get the job done. The spirit of EDS employees were challenged much like Americans were when Kennedy said the U.S. would put a man on the moon.

We have had a few folks calling for BHAGs regarding the two major factors facing the education of Full-time, First-Time, degree seeking undergraduate students – i.e., the Front and Back Door issues of Retention and Graduation rates. But they are few and far between because it is not a popular topic.

These findings point out the good, the bad, and the ugly regarding education in American baccalaureate institutions. While the individual (i.e., student) and our society likes to promote the adage, “buyer beware” (caveat emptor), I think we ought not to lay so heavy a burden on them for this problem. They are only trying to realize the dream Jefferson spoke of when he said that the America, as a country does better with an educated populace.

The burden of consistent failures at the institutional level for baccalaureate education in America is one shared by many sectors.

Some of the burden rests with those institutions that consistently do poorly with respect to their Front Door, taking in students to fill a seat and not providing the proper support systems by which the students accepted into their institutions are afforded a better than 40% chance of completion.

For institutions that continue to accept higher percentages of students who are not “college ready” and then complain about them or use them as an excuse for not improving is tantamount to “complaining that the fox got in the chicken coop when you yourself left the door open.”

Some of the burden is also with accreditation agencies and the peer review process. The idea of having an institution compare itself only with itself, in the name of “continuous improvement” should be replaced. Here are three suggestions. First, these agencies ought to be required by the Department of Education to have permanent insitutional effectiveness staff that provide for the institutions under their purview with national and regional multi-year criterions like those employed in this study.

Second, accreditation agencies ought to applaud as role models, those insititutions demonstrating consistency in retention and graduation, as well as those institutions with high quality student learning outcome measures. And third, accreditation agencies should require administrations of these role model colleges and universities to become mentors of those who are not doing so well.

The Department of Education, with Arne Duncan, and President Obama have recently been speaking to the need of what has been highlighted in this study. These leaders, as Ron Rittenmeyer did at EDS have initiated the goal to – *“make it happen.”* My concern is that once the political machines push back on these efforts, that it will become as dead as the President’s scorecard.

Where is the bipartisan cry for better baccalaureate education in America? Where is the bipartisan call for holding those institutions that cannot effectively educate at least 50% of those undergraduates in their institutions well?

This is an American issue needing leadership from all areas. Let’s *“make this happen”* - together.