



## ➤ Counting Every Graduate

Comprehensive Completion Rates at UNCF-Member HBCUs



## Acknowledgements

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## Highlights

- According to the National Student Clearinghouse, the six-year graduation rate for students enrolling on an exclusively full-time basis at 19 UNCF-member institutions was 56 percent. This is 20 percentage points higher than the six-year graduation rate as measured by data from the Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) for these same 19 UNCF members. The Clearinghouse's more inclusive graduation measure includes students who transferred to and graduated from non-UNCF institutions.
- A comparison of six-year graduation rates using the National Student Clearinghouse's method still shows a gap between UNCF's member institutions and the national average of all colleges. Although the six-year graduation rate of full-time students at UNCF members was 56 percent in 2012, the six-year national graduation rate of full-time students that same year was 76 percent. Research shows that this gap can be accounted for by pre-enrollment differences in student populations.
- Older students who first enrolled at a UNCF-member institution graduated at a rate of 47 percent, compared with a national rate of 42 percent for these students.
- Of mixed-enrollment graduating students (those who enroll both full time and part time at some point during their college years), half of those starting at UNCF-member institutions graduated at a different institution, compared with 36 percent of those starting at non-UNCF institutions.

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## Introduction

Few indicators of a college's effectiveness receive more attention than its graduation rate, a measure closely attended to by everyone ranging from high school seniors to state governments and the U.S. Department of Education (Cook & Hartle, 2011). In one form or another, graduation rates factor into the college ranking systems of *U.S. News & World Report*, *Forbes* and *The Washington Monthly*. Even the White House's college scorecard features graduation rates among its few measures of college value, these data coming courtesy of NCES.

This reliance on graduation rates is not unreasonable. Graduation rates are both easy to understand and highly relevant to a prospective student's college ambitions. Why attend a college from which the student is unlikely to graduate?

However, measures of graduation rates, depending on how they are produced, often tell an incomplete or even misleading story, particularly if they exclude significant portions of student populations. The most widely circulated college graduation rates (those available from the National Center for Education Statistics' Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, or IPEDS, are only for first-time, full-time degree- or certificate-seeking students "minus any allowable exclusions"—namely, students who transfer out of the institution before completing their degree. In fact, the College Completion microsite, produced by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* using IPEDS data, shows that over 3 million of the 4.3 million freshmen who started college in 2004 did not count in any institution's graduation rate because they either transferred, were enrolled part time or simply dropped out (<http://collegecompletion.chronicle.com>).

Why is it flawed to calculate graduation rates this way? Because many students do not fall into this more "traditional" definition of college student. About 22.5 percent of undergraduate students at four-year institutions in the fall of 2012 were enrolled on a part-time basis, according to IPEDS. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (which, unlike IPEDS, uses a unit tracking method that follows the academic progress of individual students) has reported that approximately 33 percent of first-time college students attend multiple institutions before earning a degree or certificate (National Student Clearinghouse, 2012).

If nearly a quarter of students enroll on a part-time basis, and a third of graduating students transfer before earning their degrees, then it is all the more imperative that measures of graduation rates include both part-time and transfer students. This would not be a problem if these less "traditional" students were otherwise like more traditional students, but that is not so.

Older students may also be undercounted by graduation measures that exclude transfer students, who are less likely to graduate from their institutions of first enrollment: In the 2007-08 academic year, among older students (i.e., those over the age of 24 at first enrollment) who graduated within six years, 43.7 percent earned their degree at their first postsecondary institution. This is compared to 56.6 percent of younger students (those who were aged 24 or younger at first enrollment) who graduated within six years from their first postsecondary institution (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). In other words, older students were thirteen percentage points less likely to graduate from their original institutions.

This reliance on graduation rates is not unreasonable. Graduation rates are both easy to understand and highly relevant to a prospective student's college ambitions. Why attend a college from which the student is unlikely to graduate?

It is nontraditional students such as these whose eventual successes may go overlooked by graduation rate calculations that include only students who remain at their institution of first enrollment. Students who transfer to a different institution (and groups of students more likely to make such transfers, such as older students), may go unexamined. If students, parents and policymakers are to identify best-value colleges and universities, a graduation rate measure that takes nontraditional students into account is of critical importance.

A graduation rate measure based on full-time students graduating from their original institutions will also fail to recognize the work that institutions are doing to serve these students, telling an incomplete story with major implications for such colleges and universities. Historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in particular tend to underperform by these metrics. As has often been true of historical practices within America's education system, the over-reliance on six-year, first-time, full-time bachelor's degree completion rates may be especially punitive for the nation's HBCUs, which enroll many nontraditional students who go unnoticed by such measurements (Ashley, Gasman, Mason, Sias, and Wright, 2009). For example, the 36 four-year private not-for-profit HBCUs included in UNCF's membership had an average six-year graduation rate of 32 percent in 2012, according to data from IPEDS.

To better account for students often excluded from measures of college effectiveness, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center conducted a national study on student attainment that identified six-year graduation rates of first-time students<sup>1</sup> starting at U.S. colleges of all levels (both two-year and four-year institutions) and control types (public, private nonprofit, and private for-profit), while tracking even those students who transferred to different institutions. The study, *Completing College: A National View of Student Attainment Rates—fall 2007 cohort* (National Student Clearinghouse, 2013a), also identified students' enrollment intensity as exclusively full-time, exclusively part-time, or mixed enrollment (those who changed their enrollment from full time to part time, or vice versa, from term to term).

Desiring a similar analysis focused on its member institutions, UNCF's Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute contracted the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center to conduct just such an analysis, to better understand how UNCF's member HBCUs serve their nontraditional students. Specifically, this analysis examined 19 four-year private UNCF-member, baccalaureate-level HBCUs that participated in the National Student Clearinghouse national study six years prior to the final year analyzed.<sup>2</sup> The data indicated whether students at these institutions graduated in six years, even if they completed their degree programs at a different institution than the UNCF member where they initially enrolled. This brief report presents a few select findings of these analyses.



<sup>1</sup> Defined as students who "(1) did not show any postsecondary enrollment record in the four years prior to the student's fall 2006 enrollment, and (2) did not receive a degree or certificate from any postsecondary institution prior to fall 2006."  
<sup>2</sup> The Interdenominational Theological Center, despite participating in the Clearinghouse at the time, does not enroll students at the undergraduate level and therefore was excluded from these analyses.

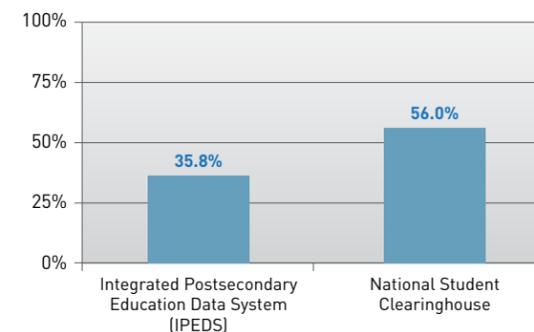
## Findings

### OVERALL GRADUATION RATES

The National Student Clearinghouse tracked individual students who enrolled for the first time in 2006. According to these data, the six-year graduation rates of students who first enrolled, on an exclusively full-time basis, at any of the 19 UNCF members examined here was 56.0 percent. This more inclusive graduation measure includes students who transferred to and graduated from non-UNCF institutions.

Contrast this rate to the IPEDS measure of six-year graduation rate of first-time, full-time degree- or certificate-seeking students. According to this more traditional measure of graduation rates, which does not track students who transfer to other institutions, the 2012 graduation rate for these 19 UNCF-member institutions was only 35.8 percent. (See Figure 1.)

**Figure 1: Six-Year Graduation Rates of Students Enrolling at UNCF-Member Institutions, by Source, 2012**



Source: Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute analysis of data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System and the National Student Clearinghouse.

Note that a comparison of six-year graduation rates using the National Student Clearinghouse's data between UNCF-member institutions and the national average of all colleges still shows an achievement gap between the two groups of institutions. Although the six-year graduation rate of full-time students at UNCF members was 56.0 percent in 2012, the six-year national graduation rate of full-time students that same year was 76.2 percent (National Student Clearinghouse, 2013a). However, the origins of this gap are explicable by student-level factors that exist prior to enrollment. UNCF-member institutions, like other HBCUs, enroll disproportionately high numbers of lower-income, academically under-prepared students, students who are less likely to graduate regardless of where they enroll. When these background factors are controlled for, UNCF-member institutions graduate students at rates comparable to non-UNCF institutions (Richards & Awokoya, 2012; Richards, 2014).

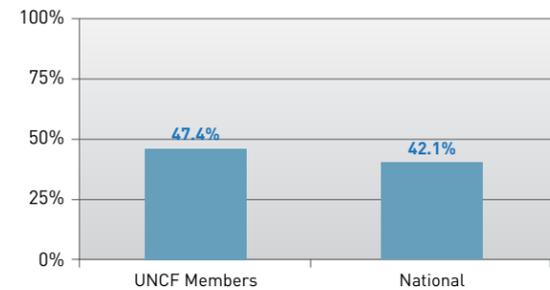
### GRADUATION OF OLDER STUDENTS

However, a more nuanced comparison between the two groups does allow the opportunity to highlight the areas, if any, where UNCF members are outperforming the national average. In the fall of 2013, an estimated 37 percent of students at Title IV, degree-granting institutions were over the age of 24 (National Student Clearinghouse, 2012).

In particular, UNCF's member institutions outperformed the national average in the graduation of students over the age of 24 at the time of first enrollment. Older students who first enrolled at a UNCF-member institution graduated at a rate of 47.4 percent,

compared with a national graduation rate of 42.1 percent for these students (National Student Clearinghouse, 2013a). (See Figure 2.) A 5.3 percentage point difference may not appear very compelling on its face. However, it is worth noting any area where a group of HBCUs, despite being relatively cash-strapped and under-resourced, are outperforming the larger postsecondary universe even without using statistical controls.

**Figure 2: Six-Year Graduation Rates of Students Over the Age of 24 at Time of First Enrollment, by Institution Group, 2012**



Source: Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute analysis of data from the National Student Clearinghouse.

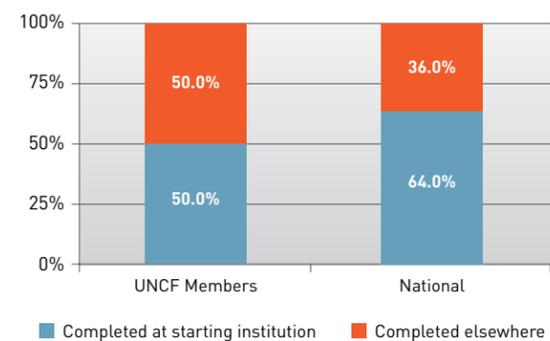
Among mixed-enrollment students who graduate in six years, those starting at UNCF members are half as likely to graduate from a different institution as from the one where they started, compared with a 36 percent likelihood among mixed-enrollment students who start at non-UNCF members.

**MIXED ENROLLMENT**

A more nuanced, inclusive analysis using Clearinghouse data also provides a picture of the educational pathways of students that would not be possible through less comprehensive measures of graduation rates.

For example, the more comprehensive data make it possible to look at the graduation of mixed-enrollment students who, at various points during their college career, have enrolled on both a full-time and part-time basis. In the current analysis, mixed-enrollment students who began college at UNCF-member institutions were less likely to complete their degree at their original institutions than were mixed-enrollment students who began at non-UNCF institutions. Of mixed-enrollment, graduating students, half of those starting at UNCF members graduated at a different institution, compared with 36 percent of those starting at non-UNCF members. (See Figure 3.) Whether this may be due to higher rates of full-time enrollment at private institutions (a group that includes all UNCF members), or to lower availability of institutional aid at these relatively cash-strapped institutions, is a topic for future research.

**Figure 3: Final Institution of Mixed-Enrollment Students Graduating Within Six Years, by Institution Group, 2012**



Source: Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute analysis of data from the National Student Clearinghouse.

**CONCLUSIONS**

This analysis leads us to make several brief observations and recommendations.

First, a method of measuring graduation rates that includes transfer and part-time students shows students at UNCF-member institutions graduating at a rate higher than that shown by a method that tracks only students who remain enrolled at their institution of first enrollment. This same method also shows that UNCF's member institutions outperformed the national average in the graduation of students over the age of 24 at the time of first enrollment. Among mixed-enrollment students who graduate in six years, those starting at UNCF members are half as likely to graduate from a different institution as from the one where they started, compared with a 36 percent likelihood among mixed-enrollment students who start at non-UNCF members. Why is this the case for mixed-enrollment students? The data are not robust enough to provide an answer, but this is a ripe area of investigation for future research.

In light of these findings, an institutional graduation rate measure that includes only full-time students who graduate from their original institution is clearly inadequate to capture the complexities and diversity of the nation's undergraduates, whether at HBCUs or elsewhere. Measures of graduation rates should incorporate student tracking methods that include these less traditional students so as to provide a more comprehensive means of assessing institutional performance. Furthermore, UNCF members and other HBCUs should participate in the National Student Clearinghouse, to better allow for full demonstration of their value proposition.

This same method also shows that UNCF's member institutions outperformed the national average in the graduation of students over the age of 24 at the time of first enrollment.

**POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

Graduation rates often are used as the primary outcome measure for gauging the effectiveness of institutions of higher education—an issue that policymakers at all levels are scrutinizing to help ensure that the country gets the most “bang for the buck” in terms of student access, degree completion, and post-enrollment earnings and employment. Indeed, there is growing consensus that current methods of calculating graduation rates are flawed because they do not sufficiently reflect the “nontraditional” characteristics of 21st-century students.

College student enrollment is more complex than ever, with students transferring and enrolling in multiple institutions before graduating at higher rates than ever (McCormick, 2003).

These issues are important because policymakers need an accurate picture of where the nation stands on producing college-educated citizens. This issue brief clearly indicates that current graduation rate calculations significantly understate U.S. progress on college attainment. Many students who are counted as college dropouts from the colleges where they first enrolled do, in fact, go on to earn postsecondary education degrees at other institutions. The issue brief shows that when student mobility is factored in, college graduation rates at HBCUs like UNCF’s member institutions, in general, increase by roughly 20 percentage points.

Second, these results suggest that accountability proposals considered by legislators and other policymakers must be built on better data. Federal and state funding is critical to the existence of most higher education institutions, especially HBCUs. As resources become more scarce and government investments in colleges and universities continue to diminish, accountability requirements become more complex and stringent—requiring institutions to demonstrate outcomes and/or impact. A more precise graduation rate would enable more sound, reasonable and accurate accountability proposals.

For example, federal initiatives such as the College Scorecard and the recently proposed Postsecondary Institution Rating System (PIRS) are being developed to provide greater transparency to students and families about the cost and performance of colleges and universities. Ultimately, a federal rating system may be used to reward high-performing institutions and penalize low-performing ones. [See President Obama’s “Plan to Make College More Affordable: A Better Bargain for the Middle Class,” August 2013.] However, using flawed graduation rate calculations could have far-reaching negative impacts that could further hinder the ability of HBCUs to attract students and secure resources. As these initiatives are developed and designed for a “high stakes” allocation of federal student financial aid, it is imperative that outcome measures, such as graduation rates, enable meaningful and fair college ratings by using accurate data.

Thus, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) maintained by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) must immediately be improved to capture information about today’s college students, including part-time and transfer students, in federal graduation rate calculations. NCES began work in 2012 to include part-time and transfer students in federal graduation rate calculations; however, these improvements have not yet been implemented.

Finally, the results of this brief provide greater justification for a unit record system that would allow more effective tracking of college students across institutions and provide a more accurate portrayal of enrollment and completion across all of postsecondary education. College student enrollment is more complex than ever, with students transferring and enrolling in multiple institutions before graduating at higher rates than ever (McCormick, 2003). The National Student Clearinghouse documents that one-third of all college students transferred at least once (Hossler et al., 2012), and estimates of how many students enroll in more than one institution simultaneously is even higher. Until there is a unit record system that can more accurately track where students matriculate and graduate from, institutions that enroll highly mobile students—such as HBCUs and other campuses with large numbers of low-income and financially challenged students—will continue to suffer under the current graduation rate calculation.

**Appendix: Participating UNCF-Member Institutions in Analyses**

School Name	State	Participant Since
Benedict College	SC	03/2001
Bennett College	NC	02/1999
Clafin University	SC	10/1999
Clark Atlanta University	GA	07/1994
Dillard University	LA	01/1999
Florida Memorial University	FL	10/1999
Huston-Tillotson University	TX	04/1999
Johnson C. Smith University*	NC	11/2003
LeMoyne-Owen College	TN	12/2001
Morris College	SC	10/1999
Oakwood University	AL	05/1997
Saint Augustine’s University	NC	11/1997
Shaw University	NC	04/2001
Spelman College	GA	11/1993
Talladega College	AL	08/1997
Tuskegee University	AL	07/1997
Virginia Union University	VA	11/1997
Voorhees College*	SC	12/2002
Xavier University of Louisiana*	LA	12/2006

\*Institutions included only as concurrent enrollment. Very partial results due to Clearinghouse memberships beginning after 2002. Source for participation start dates: National Student Clearinghouse. Retrieved from [http://www.studentclearinghouse.org/colleges/studenttracker\\_for\\_outreach/participating\\_schools.php](http://www.studentclearinghouse.org/colleges/studenttracker_for_outreach/participating_schools.php)

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