

Section 2

Increasing College Retention and Graduation Rates

Priority 2. Increase the percentage of students who enroll and successfully complete a degree.

The second priority recommended by the 2003 LR 174 Task Force is to increase the percentage of students who enroll, persist, and successfully complete a degree. To achieve this goal, the LR 174 Task Force concluded that Nebraska's postsecondary education system must (1) decrease the percentage of students who fail to persist beyond their first year(s) of enrollment, (2) increase the percentage of students who complete associate degrees within three years and baccalaureate degrees within six years, and (3) expand upon and strengthen existing associate degree to baccalaureate degree transfer programs.

To monitor the extent to which the first and second strategic objectives are being achieved, this section focuses primarily on freshmen retention rates and college graduation rates that are based on data collected through the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), maintained by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in the U.S. Department of Education. In addition, the Coordinating Commission analyzes the transfer rates based on IPEDS data for Nebraska's six community colleges.

Retention rate: The rate at which students persist in their educational program at an institution. For four-year institutions, this is the percentage of first-time bachelors (or equivalent) degree-seeking undergraduates from the previous fall who are again enrolled in the current fall. For all other institutions, this is the percentage of first-time degree/certificate-seeking students from the previous fall who either re-enrolled or successfully completed their program by the current fall. Retention rates are reported for full-time and part-time students.

Graduation rate: The total number of completers within 150% of normal time divided by the adjusted cohort. Graduation rates are only available historically for full-time, first-time freshmen.

Transfer-out rate: Total number of students who are known to have transferred out of the reporting institution within 150% of normal time to completion divided by the adjusted cohort. Transfer-out rates are only available for full-time, first-time freshmen. Note that IPEDS data are not available to determine if transfer students persist in their studies and graduate from the institutions to which they transfer. In this report, the terms transfer-out rate and transfer rate are used interchangeably.

Cohorts for retention rates, graduation rates, and transfer rates are adjusted for allowable exclusions.²⁷

The NCES is the best available source of data for monitoring the retention and graduation rates of institutions on an annual basis and over time, either by institution or by sector. However, the retention and graduation rates that are calculated using data collected through IPEDS are for first-time freshmen who continue their studies at the same institution

²⁷ For the Graduation Rates, Outcome Measures, and Fall Enrollment retention rate reporting, students may be removed from a cohort if they left the institution for one of the following reasons: death or total and permanent disability; service in the armed forces (including those called to active duty); service with a foreign aid service of the federal government, such as the Peace Corps; or service on official church missions. Beginning with 2016 retention data, the freshmen cohort is adjusted by adding inclusions to the adjusted freshmen cohort. See Explanatory Note A9.1 in Appendix 9 for more information about freshmen retention rate calculations.

where they started college. This type of student represents a decreasing percentage of postsecondary students. Consequently, a statewide analysis of retention and graduation rates based on NCES-IPEDS data does not provide any information about the persistence or graduation rates of a significant number of Nebraska college students who transfer to other institutions to continue their studies, including students who start college in the academic transfer programs offered by Nebraska's community colleges and then transfer to four-year schools to earn bachelor's degrees.

Another limitation of the currently available transfer data is that not all institutions are required to report the number of full-time, first-time freshmen who transfer to other schools. As a result, it is impossible to compute a statewide transfer rate that is comparable to Nebraska's statewide graduation rate. However, beginning with the 2010-2011 academic year, all six of Nebraska's community colleges have reported the number of students in their full-time, first-time freshmen cohorts who transferred to other schools. Resulting transfer rates for these schools are reported at the end of Section 2.2 on college graduation and transfer rates based on IPEDS data.

In addition to reporting the latest available retention, graduation, and transfer rates based on NCES-IPEDS data, this section of the *Progress Report* includes information about graduation and persistence rates obtained from research conducted by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. Using Clearinghouse data, six-year student outcomes based on national cohorts of degree-seeking, first-time freshmen were analyzed by state as well as for the United States as a whole. As a result, it provides additional information about the graduation and persistence rates of students who have started college at two-year public institutions, four-year public institutions, and four-year private nonprofit institutions in Nebraska.

The research conducted by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center is not without limitations. However, the research encompasses part-time students as well as full-time students and includes students who transferred to other institutions before completing their programs of study. Including these students overcomes important limitations of the analyses that are based only on NCES-IPEDS data. In overcoming these limitations, the research conducted by the Clearinghouse provides previously unavailable information about graduation and persistence rates. Consequently, this information, presented in Section 2.3, should be of interest to public policy makers and administrators of postsecondary institutions in Nebraska.