Student persistence in higher education is becoming a more visible issue today. A proposed new federal rating system's broad goal is to determine “how many students at an institution graduate, at a reasonable cost, without a lot of debt, and get a job that enables them to support themselves and their families.”[1] It seems likely that future federal funding will be tied to these performance metrics.

To advance degree completion rates, a number of state governments have implemented performance funding models. In Illinois, this model rewards progress in increasing degree completion and serving underrepresented populations (Pell eligible, adults and Hispanic and Black students). The Illinois system also rewards increases in completion in STEM and health shortage areas. Other states are further along in implementing similar systems.

Accrediting bodies are entering this field as well. According to the North Central Association’s Higher Learning Commission, completion is now an accreditation criterion. Institutions must demonstrate “a commitment to educational improvement through ongoing attention to retention, persistence, and completion rates in its degree and certificate programs.” [2] This requires higher education institutions to set goals, gather information, act on the information and use best practices to enhance persistence.

A recent report from the National Student Clearinghouse shows the total degree completion rates — including those who transfer and complete at a different institution than the one they initially enrolled in — are as follows:

- Four-year public: 60.6 percent
- Four-year private for-profit: 42.8 percent
- Two-year public: 36.3 percent

There is room for improvement. Within these sectors, there is wild variation in completion rates. Among Illinois four-year institutions, we have a non-profit institution with a completion rate of 94 percent and another with 16 percent. Among the publics, we see:

- Four-year nonprofit: 71.5 percent
- Four-year private nonprofit: 42.8 percent
- Two-year public: 36.3 percent

In order to increase the overall national higher education completion rate, institutions must pay close attention to the factors and strategies that increase adult retention.

By Walter Pearson
Dean of the School of Continuing and Professional Studies, Loyola University

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 24, 2013

Persistence Beneficial for Students and Institutions

By Walter Pearson
Dean of the School of Continuing and Professional Studies, Loyola University

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rates as high as 83 percent and as low as 20 percent. The for-profit sector generally performs at a lower level but also has a wide variation, with a high of 70 percent and a low of 11 percent.

So, why is this an issue for those of us who serve adult students?

There is even more room for improvement in the persistence of adult students. In one National Center for Education Statistics study, 65 percent of adult students abandoned their goal of a bachelor’s degree after five years of study. Of that 65 percent, 42 percent dropped out completely and 23 percent shifted their goal downward to a certificate or associate’s degree. Only 35 percent of the adult students who had begun their degree actually graduated or were still enrolled after five years. [4]

Adult students have a unique set of challenges as well as strengths they bring to college upon returning to, or starting, their college career. To help adults persist, institutions must show a commitment to academic excellence, learner-centered teaching, flexibility, good course schedules, robust prior learning assessment (PLA) systems, good advising and coaching, strategic financial aid and effective orientation processes.

For more on these strategies to enhance persistence click here.

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**References**


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**AUTHOR PROFILE**

**Current Position and Past Experience**

Since 2013, Walter Pearson has been the Dean for the School of Continuing and Professional Studies at Loyola University. Prior to this, Pearson served as the Dean of the School for Professional and Continuing Education at Lewis University. This followed his two years as the Dean of the New College at St. Edward’s University. This came on the heels of his time as the Associate Academic Dean of Simpson College, where he spent 14 years. During his time at Simpson College, Pearson concurrently served as an Adjunct Faculty member for the National Labor College. Pearson’s first position as a higher education administrator was as the Director of the University of Missouri—Kansas City, where he developed the Institute for Labor Studies.

Pearson has also worked with the Service Employees International Union and the United Farm Workers. In the consultancy field, Pearson has conducted program reviews at numerous major colleges, universities and workplaces.

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