

RETENTION AND GRADUATION: WHERE ARE THE HOW TO'S AND DO STUDENTS EVEN CARE ABOUT GRADUATING ON TIME?

A POSTER PRESENTATION

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Retention and graduation rates, as defined by the Student Right to Know Act, are two of the many large issues faced by higher education today. Through a STLR funded research project we have been able to delve in these issues. First time, full-time, degree seeking students are defined in a cohort model and tracked from their first semester to the following year to compute a retention rate, and that same cohort is followed for six years to determine a graduation rate. Though the law was passed in the early 1990's the first cohort was not created until 1996. While retention and graduation rates were publicly recorded from that point forward it seems only within the past ten years that they have become one of the most widely discussed issues in higher education. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), "about 59 percent of students who began seeking a bachelor's degree at a 4-year institution in fall 2007 completed that degree within 6 years." The retention rate has moved from 71.1 percent in 2007 to 73.8 percent in 2014 (the cohorts are formed six years before the measurement). Therefore, over the past several decades there has been a push and an expectation set that in order to graduate from a university/college on time, students must finish their undergraduate degree within a four-six-year period. However, it remains unknown if the students themselves consider graduating within four years to be realistic or of any importance.

The purpose of this study has two components. The first is to identify and analyze federally funded retention programs for undergraduate degree seeking students. Although the research has not reached its final stages, we have found that although the Federal Government has a specific definition for retention, the interpretation of retention and its associated programs differ greatly for each university. We found that the availability of reported qualitative and quantitative outcomes on retention programs from the Federal Government were significantly lacking. From there, we concentrated on UCO's peer universities and found that each university and even its different student support services/departments differed greatly on how retention programs were defined. Congruent with what we found with the Federal Government, reported qualitative outcomes were significantly lacking as well. We identified 36 terms that have been used interchangeably with retention and their associated programs. The second component of this study is to identify what value do students place on graduating on time. An online survey via Qualtrics was used to ask undergraduate students from UCO what value, if any, do they place on graduating on time (within a four to six-year duration).

Survey results indicated 62% of students reported that graduating on time (within 4-6 years) is very important and 76% of students reported that it was very likely that they would graduate on time. Also, 89% reported they do keep track of their progress towards graduation; responses included using an advisor or plan of study to ensure they would graduate on time. When students were asked "where do the following items rank in importance in your life?" 58% of students ranked family as most important out of family, education, social groups, job/providing for self or family, social groups, health, and "other." Education was ranked most important by 17% of students; suggesting conflicting responses between the

importance of graduating on time and actual ranking of importance in their lives. Lack of financial aid/funding was the most likely event to keep students from graduating on time.

SELECT REFERENCES

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