



BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY
Office of Institutional Research

Six-Year Graduation Rates: Issues and Alternatives

“Before policy makers formally make graduation rates a high-stakes measure of institutional accountability, they need to better understand existing graduation rate measures.”

(Cook & Pullaro, 2010)

Background and Origin

Six-year graduation rates were originally conceived as a way to track and report student-athlete graduation rates and to compare them to non-athletes. As part of the *Student-Right-to-Know Act* of 1990, the requirement was intended to safeguard the educational interests of student-athletes (Cook & Pullaro, 2010). Data on six-year graduation rates were first collected by the Department of Education in 1996, and all institutions receiving federal financial aid are required to report the rate annually through the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

The standard six-year graduation rate answers the question, “How many first-time, full-time, bachelor’s degree-seeking students who entered an institution in a given fall semester complete a bachelor’s degree at that same institution within six years of their initial enrollment?”

The collection of six-year graduation rates via IPEDS can provide some benefits. Notably, institutions can compare their rates with those of similar institutions, examine their own progress over time, and analyze graduation rates of subpopulations by gender and race/ethnicity. However, six-year graduation rates have proven to be tenuous at best as a measure of institutional performance. Issues with the six-graduation rate metric are presented below, followed by a brief discussion of alternatives.

Issues with the Six-Year Graduation Rate

Issue 1: Six-year graduation rates do not account for distinctive missions of different institutions or for the demographics of the students they serve.

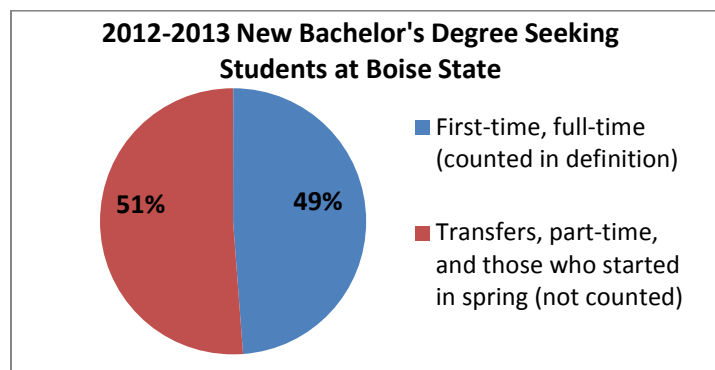
Institutional missions provide important context that cannot be ignored in interpreting graduation rate data. Highly selective, elite institutions enroll students with better academic preparation and typically boast very high graduation rates compared to more inclusive institutions. The standard six-year graduation rate calculation does not control for input variables (such as ACT/SAT score, socioeconomic status, need to work, family obligations, high school GPA or rank, etc.); thus, the six-year graduation rate does not represent the value-added performance of the institution.

Issue 2: Six-year graduation rates do not account for all the students who are served by an institution; they exclude part-time students, transfer students, and anyone who starts anytime other than fall semester.

“Current discussions of the graduation-rate metric generally begin with the concession that it is, at best, a flawed measure of institutional quality. Perhaps there was a time in higher education when the six-year, first-time, full-time longitudinal measure captured most students in colleges and universities, but it clearly no longer does.” (Cohen & Ibrahim, 2008)

What may have been the norm 20 years ago is clearly not the case today. According to estimates, nearly half of students who enroll in higher education in a given year are not included in the IPEDS graduation rate calculations because they do not meet the criteria of being first-time, full-time students. So who are these students? They are characterized as students who are part-time, who began elsewhere and then enrolled as transfer students, or those who began at a time other than fall term.

At Boise State, 49% of new bachelor’s degree-seeking students enrolled in fall and spring of 2012-13 are not reflected in the first-time, full-time fall cohort and, thus, would not be counted in the cohort used to calculate graduation rates.



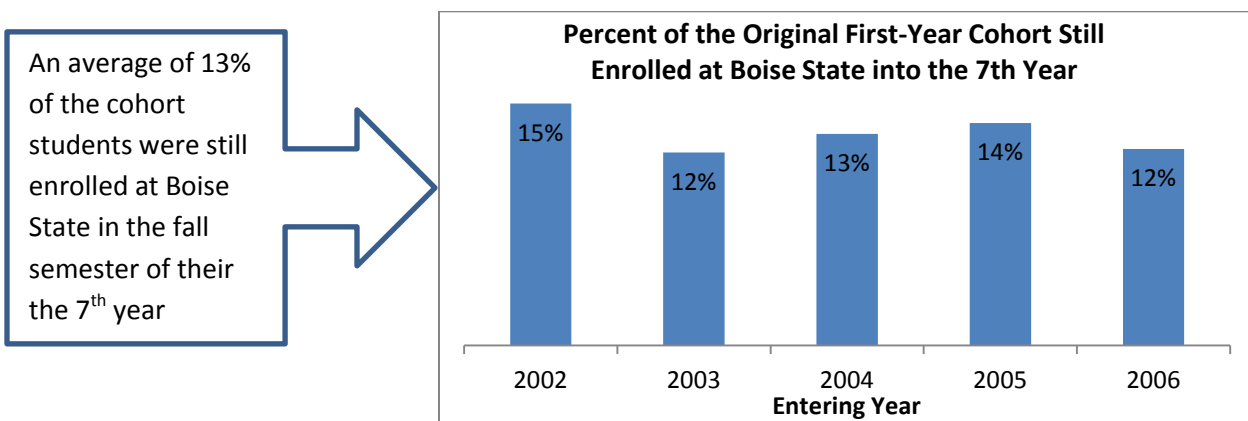
Issue 3: Six-year graduation rates do not recognize the changing nature of higher education enrollment.

The prevailing assumptions of the six-year graduation rates are that students enroll full-time and that a majority of them who graduate will do so within a six-year window and from the institution at which they initially enrolled. As evidenced above, over half of new bachelor’s degree-seeking students at Boise State are **not** first-time, full-time degree seekers who begin in the fall. In addition, the changing nature of higher education enrollment (serving more non-traditional students, such as veterans and working adults) means that there are multiple pathways to college completion that are not necessarily linear, including patterns of “swirling.”

So-called “swirling patterns” may involve moving between full- and part-time status, taking stop-out periods, or even transferring in and out of the same institution. In addition, some students enroll in more than one institution at a time. In a study conducted at Boise State, it was found that 5% of enrolled students in fall 2009 also were enrolled at the same time at another college or university.

Issue 4: Six-year graduation rates do not account for progress and attainment beyond the six-years or beyond the institution.

Six-year graduation rates treat graduation as a dichotomous event, either the student graduated or they did not. However, it is faulty to conclude that the latter group has entirely withdrawn or failed. Students who have not graduated may still be on track, through continued enrollment at their institution or another, or they may have gone on to graduate from other institutions.



Notably, the 2008 *Higher Education Opportunity Act* mandated that IPEDS begin to collect eight-year graduation rates in addition to six-year rates. This change in practice acknowledged in a small way the various pathways to college completion that are undertaken by students. At Boise State, an additional 6-7% of the cohort graduates in years seven and eight and another 2-3% graduate in years nine and ten.

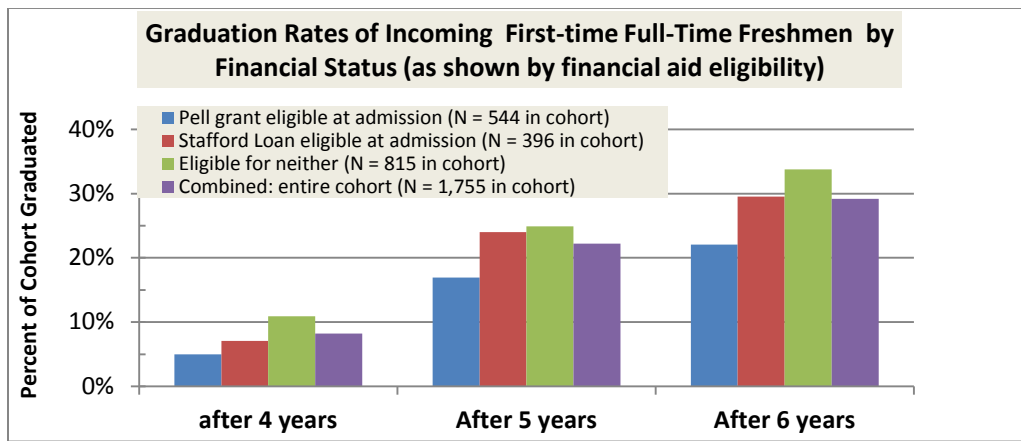
Alternatives to the Six-year Graduation Rate

An effective measure of student progress and attainment should take into account various limitations of the six-year graduation rate. Three alternatives that have received the largest support will be presented.

1. Account for the variability of institutions and the students they serve by disaggregating attainment rates by various subgroups. The Complete College America (CCA) initiative (2011), in which Idaho is a participant, attempts to account for all students (regardless of part-time vs. full-time status or new freshmen vs. transfer entry) and disaggregates a variety of metrics by relevant demographic data (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity, income level, and remedial course participation). Such information-rich measures would enable better comparison with appropriate peers and would

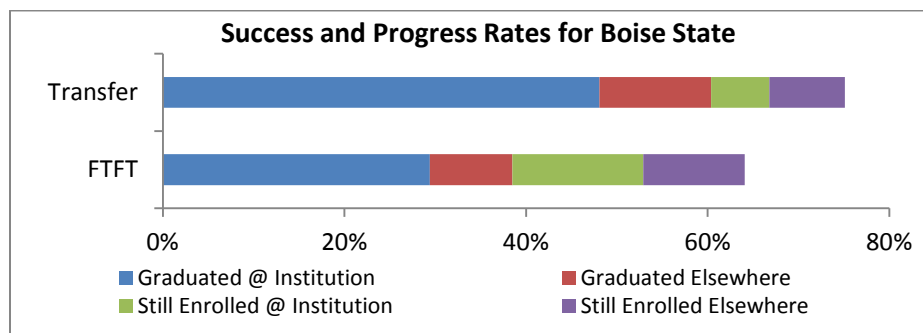
enable Boise State to monitor success of initiatives targeting specific groups. Currently, not every state is participating in the CCA initiative. Even for those who do, data collection is still new and data elements are not yet publicly available for institutions in participating states.

Results of a study at Boise State revealed a strong relationship between financial aid status and graduation rates. As shown below, the graduation rate of Pell grant eligible students who were in the 2005 cohort was nearly 12 percentage points lower than students who were not financial aid eligible. This illustrates the importance of accounting for students' backgrounds by segmenting data for various subpopulations, which helps illuminate issues that can impede student progress so that institutions can address them through programs and services.



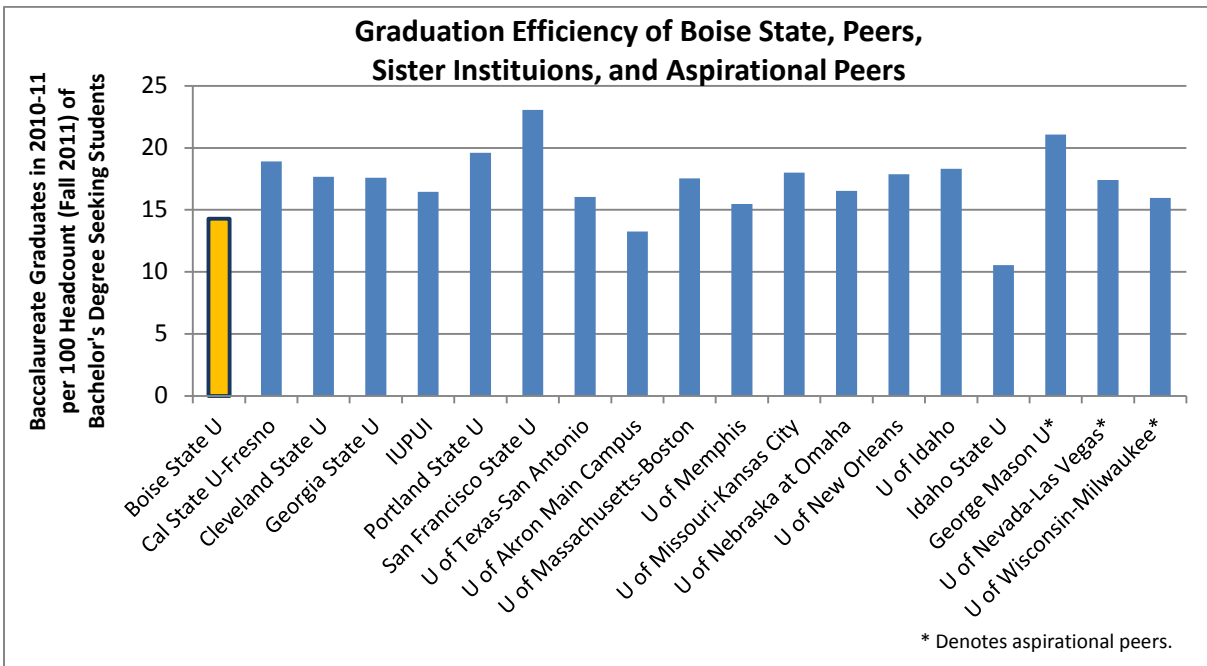
2. Provide a more comprehensive view of progress and attainment through the “Success and Progress Rates” metric. Through the Voluntary System of Accountability (2008), institutions track two cohorts (first-time, full-time students and full-time transfers) and measure graduation and continued enrollment both at the institution of interest or at other institutions using the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). A majority of students and their enrollment patterns can be tracked because 93% of institutions participate in the NSC (Cook & Pullaro, 2010).

The success and progress rate for Boise State’s first-year, full-time students who began in 2006 is 64.1%, and it is 75% for those who were full-time transfers in 2006. See the Appendix for a comparison of Boise State to several peer groups (sister institutions, peers, and aspirational peers).



The success and progress rate is still based on a six-year time frame, so it is not an ideal representation of our student body, given that approximately 10% of the entering Boise State cohort will complete degrees between years seven and ten. Nevertheless, the rates do account for a greater number of entering students (because transfers are included) and for students who are still “on track” at Boise State or another institution.

3. Calculate “Graduation Efficiency,” which is the ratio of degrees per enrolled student, to measure how well increased college “enrollments [have] translated into commensurate growth in degrees conferred” (Cook & Pullaro, 2010, p. 22). A potential enhancement is to prorate the calculations for students who enter transfer students differently from the calculations for students who enter as freshmen (Cohen & Ibrahim, 2008). An illustration of graduation efficiency using publicly available data is below.



Summary

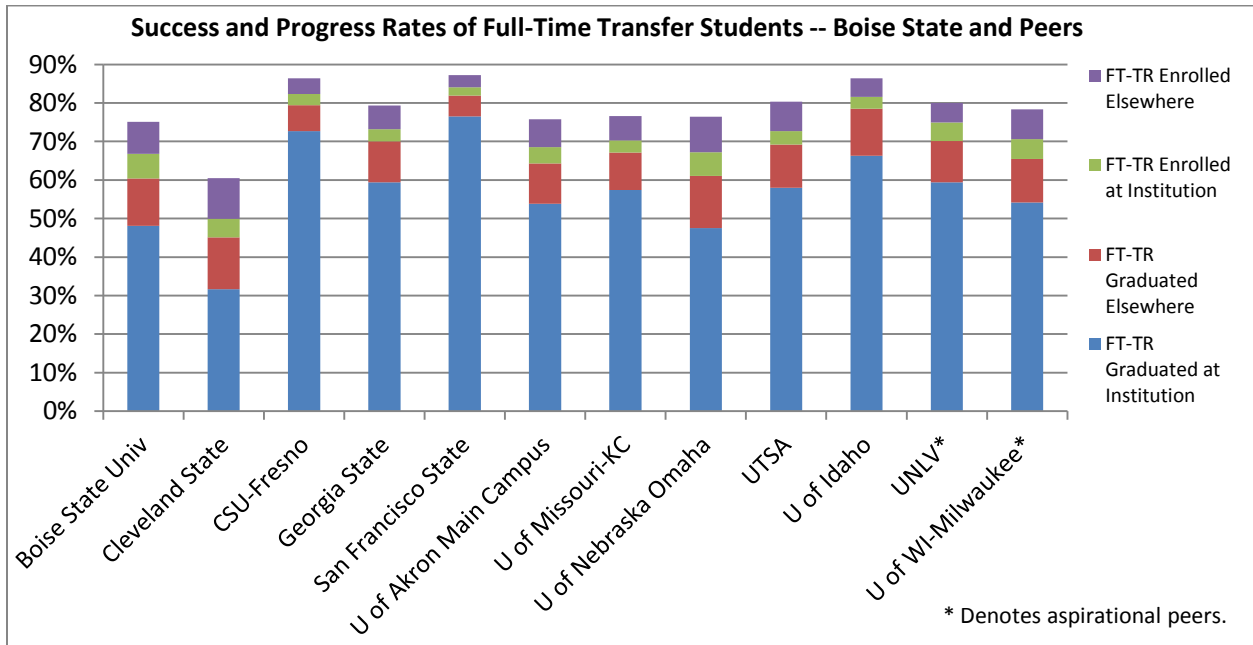
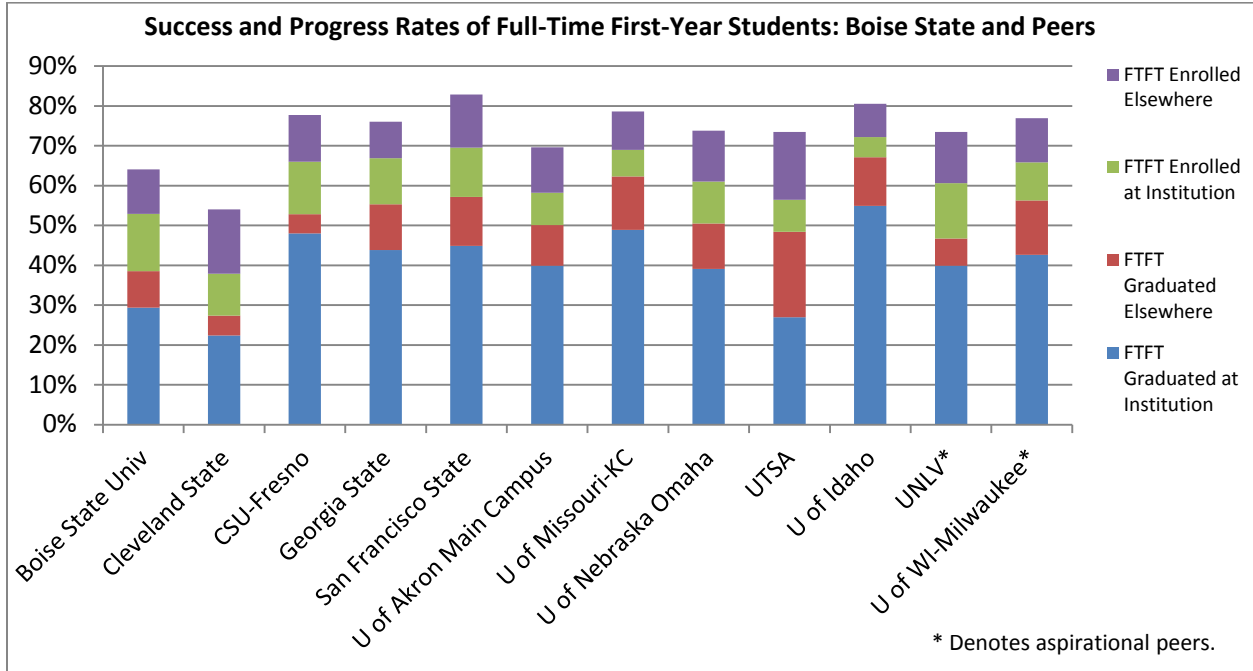
Six-year graduation rate is not a robust measure of student progress and attainment. It does not account for half of students who enroll, acknowledge differing institutional missions or enrollment patterns, or track students' activity beyond the six-year window or outside of the institution. It is an incomplete measure at best.

Given our important role in providing opportunity to individuals who face challenges not experienced by a traditional, economically-advantaged student at a residential college, it is important that we view our students and their progress patterns more holistically. To do so will improve our ability to serve them and to help them succeed.

References

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- Complete College America (2011). *Time is the enemy*. Washington, DC. Available at: <http://www.completecollege.org/>.
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- Voluntary System of Accountability. (2008). Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities.

Appendix



Source: Voluntary System of Accountability, College Portraits