

POLICY RESEARCH BRIEF



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Indicators of Student Success in Higher Education:

A Look beyond the Good News Regarding Graduation Rates in Florida

Educators and policy makers throughout the state took justifiable pride this summer in the great news about Florida's college graduation and retention rates. On June 22, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation awarded \$300,000 to the State of Florida and \$743,000 to Valencia Community College in Orlando to expand innovative and successful remediation programs and strengthen student success efforts. On June 24, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) released a report that ranked Florida's community college system first in the nation with a three-year graduation rate of 30%, 10 points above the national average. About the same time, the National Academic Advising Association awarded its prestigious Pacesetter Award to Larry Abele, Provost and Vice President of Florida State University, in recognition of his leadership and commitment to student support programs that have boosted graduation and retention rates at FSU.¹ As an advocacy group promoting college readiness, access, and success, ENLACE Florida offers its thanks and praise to the state colleges, and universities that have garnered this well-deserved national recognition.

While Florida's College System (FCS, former community college system) and the State University System have earned these high marks by making student success a priority, this is no time for the state to rest on its laurels. The rising costs of higher education coupled with limited state allocations to need-based aid will compel students to work more and study less, lengthening the time required to complete their degrees. The college experience is a difficult journey for even the most academically prepared student during good economic times. With budget cuts leading universities to trim programs and services, the students' journey through our colleges and universities may become even longer and less productive. The challenges we face as well as the policies we apply will be shaped by the unique characteristics and mission of each institution, but as Florida's colleges enroll more limited-income, first generation students, all of our institutions will have to do much more just to keep graduation rates at current levels. A closer look at the recent SREB report reveals a sobering reminder from SREB president Dave Spence: "College is less affordable for most families, and we must help more students complete degrees if our states are to continue to prosper and grow."²

¹"Community Colleges and States Selected to Boost College Graduation Rates by Improving Remedial Courses and Strategies," www.gatesfoundation.org/press-releases/Pages/raising-graduation-rates-community-colleges-090622.aspx ; Colleen Wixon, "IRSC's Graduation Rate Gets High Marks," TC Palm, June 24, 2009 www.tcpalm.com/news/2009/jun/24/irscs-graduation-rate-gets-high-marks/?printer=1/ ; "Our Opinion: Provost Wins A for Retention Efforts," <http://www.tallahassee.com/article/20090629/OPINION01/906290303/1006/OPINION/Our-Opinion--Provost-earns-an-A-for-retention-efforts>

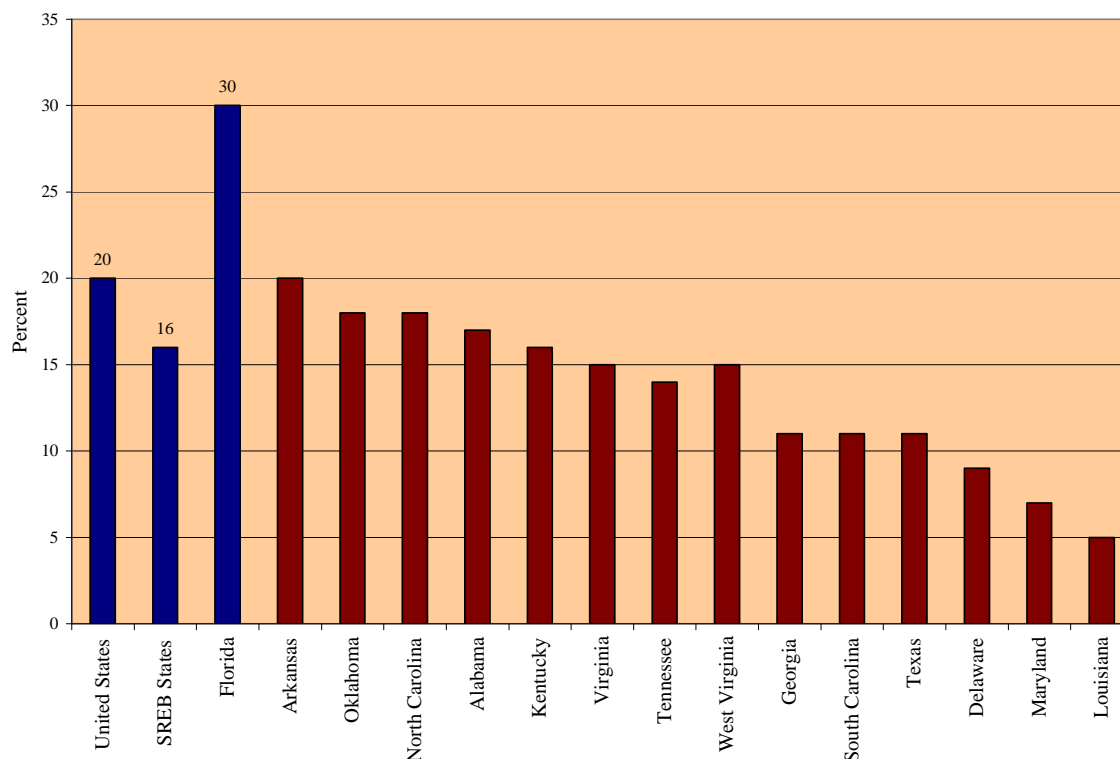
The recent reports and data highlight the need for our colleges and universities to maintain the focus on student success programs. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the national six-year graduation rate for bachelors' students was 56.4% in 2006. Only three institutions in the Florida State University System had six-year graduation rates higher than the national average: University of Florida, Florida State University, and the University of Central Florida. Behind the great news that the Florida College System leads the nation in graduation rates, one should note the broad range of graduation rates, from a high of 50.9% at Chipola to 22.1% at Broward Community College. Moreover, white students at St. Petersburg College posted a 30% graduation rate while African Americans recorded a disappointing 18% graduation rate. However, the Latino graduation rate *surpassed* the white graduation rate at 4 community colleges, while the African American graduation rate exceeded the white graduation rate at 5 universities, a powerful reminder to our higher education leaders that they do not have to accept lower graduation rates for minority students.

In this Policy Research Brief, ENLACE Florida examines the data on graduation rates and other indicators of student success in support of the emerging national consensus that we must increase the rate of college degree completion throughout the country. Moral conviction as well as economic necessity leads us to assert that all qualified students who enter higher education should be given every opportunity to succeed in a timely manner. While graduation and retention rates are not the only measure of student success and students bear the ultimate responsibility for earning their degrees, our colleges and universities, supported by our state and federal government, should do everything possible to ensure that the campus environment contributes to the success of every student.

GRADUATION RATES IN PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION

The SREB reported that the U.S. average 3-year graduation rate for students who entered a community college in 2004 was 20%. As illustrated in Figure 1, Florida exceeded the national average by 10 points, and led all southern states with a graduation rate of 30%.

Figure 1: College Graduation Rates Public Two-Year Colleges in Florida



Within the FCS, 17 institutions recorded graduation rates above the state and national average. Chipola led all colleges in the state with a 50.9% graduation rate, while South Florida, Lake City, Indian River, Santa Fe, and Brevard Community Colleges surpassed 40%. Their successes—as well as the undeniable success of the system as a whole—should not compel us to ignore or dismiss the low graduation rates at Broward (22.1%) and Edison (23.4%), even though their rates are higher than the national average.

Table 1: Florida College System Graduation Rates, 2001 Cohort (150% of normal time)

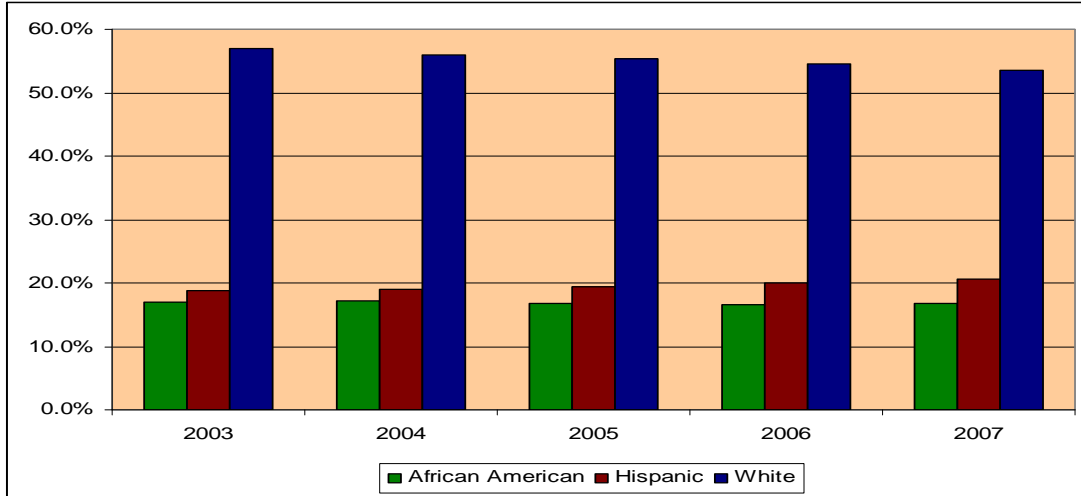
| Institution | Overall | African Americans | Asians | Latinos | White |
|---|---------|-------------------|--------|---------|-------|
| Brevard Community College | 40.4 | 21.9 | 31.4 | 34.4 | 43.6 |
| Broward Community College | 22.1 | 16 | 27.7 | 22.4 | 24.8 |
| Central Florida Community College | 33.9 | 22.6 | 66.7 | 21.9 | 36 |
| Chipola College | 50.9 | 33.3 | 0 | 25 | 55.6 |
| Daytona Beach Community College | 26.5 | 19 | 33.3 | 26.6 | 28.3 |
| Edison College | 23.4 | 15.1 | 15.4 | 9.4 | 26.8 |
| Florida Community College at Jacksonville | 34.9 | 23.1 | 36.7 | 28.6 | 37 |
| Florida Keys Community College | 36.2 | 28.6 | 0 | 37.5 | 41 |
| Gulf Coast Community College | 31.1 | 18.4 | 41.7 | 30 | 33.1 |
| Hillsborough Community College | 26.9 | 21.5 | 37.8 | 23.5 | 30.5 |
| Indian River Community College | 40.7 | 32.1 | 42.9 | 53.6 | 40.8 |
| Lake City Community College | 43.4 | 34.4 | 0 | 28.6 | 46.8 |
| Lake-Sumter Community College | 29 | 9.3 | 15.4 | 25 | 32.7 |
| Manatee Community College | 30.7 | 12.2 | 30.8 | 36.5 | 32.3 |
| Miami Dade College | 25.8 | 27.4 | 37.5 | 24 | 37.8 |
| North Florida Community College | 35.2 | 21.3 | 0 | 0 | 42.7 |
| Okaloosa-Walton College | 36.3 | 26.8 | 31.3 | 57.9 | 37.4 |
| Palm Beach Community College | 30.8 | 20.2 | 37 | 34.2 | 32.4 |
| Pasco-Hernando Community College | 28.4 | 22.9 | 54.5 | 20.6 | 29.4 |
| Pensacola Junior College | 27.9 | 15.3 | 23.8 | 23.9 | 31.6 |
| Polk Community College | 29.5 | 20.2 | 22.2 | 20 | 32.1 |
| Saint Johns River Community College | 30.5 | 17 | 33.3 | 25 | 31.7 |
| Santa Fe Community College | 40.4 | 21.7 | 54.9 | 40.9 | 43.1 |
| Seminole Community College | 29.6 | 14.2 | 34.5 | 25.6 | 33.7 |
| South Florida Community College | 45.5 | 21.4 | 0 | 33.3 | 52.9 |
| St Petersburg College | 29.2 | 18.1 | 46.3 | 28 | 30 |
| Tallahassee Community College | 30.6 | 17.9 | 58.3 | 30.3 | 39.5 |
| Valencia Community College | 34.9 | 21 | 51.5 | 32.1 | 39.5 |

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, <http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/>

Florida's policy makers and educators rightly aspire to greatness in the Florida College and State University System, so we should not accept average scores or achievement gaps, even though they are common throughout the country. Instead, we should look at these disparities as “opportunity gaps,” indicators of how we can raise graduation rates by focusing our efforts on underperforming student groups or institutions. To make even more impressive gains, we will have to raise the graduation rates at some institutions and eliminate the significant disparities that exist between racial and ethnic groups. As detailed in Table 1, for example, African American students at Lake City Community College graduate at a rate of 34.4% within 3 years, while African American students at Lake Sumter Community College graduate at only 9.3%.

The relatively low graduation rates for African American and Hispanic students present a serious challenge to the continued success of the FCS because the highest graduation rates have been recorded by white students, whose enrollment has declined in recent years (Figure 3). Moreover, Hispanic and African American graduation rates are already lower than the state average in several community colleges.

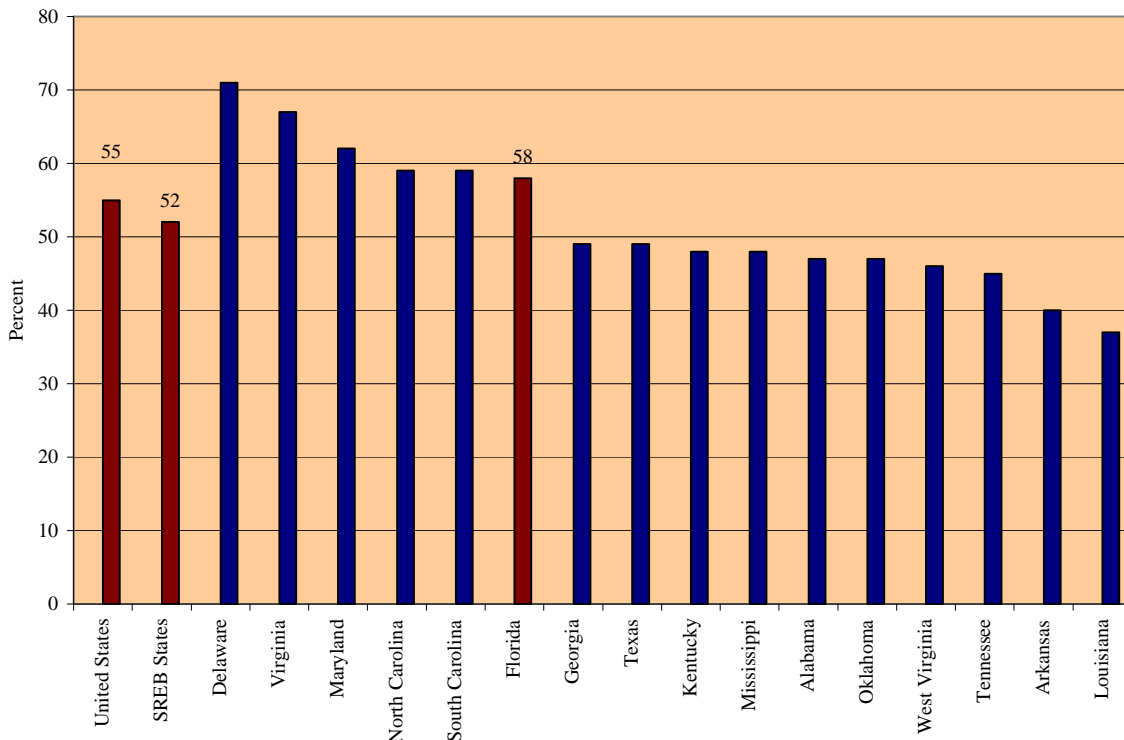
Figure 3: FTE Enrollment in the FCS, 2003-2007



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, <http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/>

Graduation rates in the State University System follow similar patterns. Although the 6-year graduation rate of 55% surpasses the U.S. average, it ranks behind five other southern states, as revealed in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Graduation Rates in the Florida SUS For Bachelor’s Degree-Seeking Students who entered in 2001



Source: SREB Fact Book on Higher Education 2009, Public Four-Year Colleges and Universities, www.sreb.org/main/EdData/eddatabase.asp

Within the SUS, the 6-year graduation rate varies widely, from a high of 79% at the University of Florida to a low of 35% at Florida Gulf Coast University, the state's newest institution. Moreover, there are significant disparities by race, gender, and ethnicity. As detailed in Table 2 below, Florida State led the state again by posting a 6-year graduation rate of 72% for African American students, 34 points *higher* than the African American graduation rate at FAU, FGCU, and UWF. Moreover, female students graduated at a significantly higher rate than their male counterparts at each institution. At UNF, for example, the African American female graduation rate was 24 points higher than African American males.

Table 2: 6-Year Graduation Rates, by Race, Ethnicity, and Gender, by Institution, 2006

| | Overall | | | African Americans | | | Asians | | | Latinos | | | Whites | | |
|------|----------|------|--------|-------------------|------|--------|----------|------|--------|----------|------|--------|----------|------|--------|
| | Over-all | Male | Female | Over-all | Male | Female | Over-all | Male | Female | Over-all | Male | Female | Over-all | Male | Female |
| FAMU | 43% | 33% | 49% | 43% | 34% | 49% | N/A | N/A | N/A | 50% | N/A | N/A | 24% | 15% | N/A |
| FAU | 37% | 34% | 40% | 38% | 34% | 40% | 43% | 48% | 39% | 37% | 29% | 43% | 36% | 33% | 38% |
| FGCU | 35% | 30% | 39% | 38% | N/A | 40% | N/A | N/A | N/A | 30% | 29% | 31% | 36% | 31% | 40% |
| FIU | 48% | 40% | 54% | 43% | 31% | 50% | 49% | 52% | 47% | 51% | 41% | 58% | 42% | 35% | 47% |
| FSU | 68% | 65% | 71% | 72% | 66% | 74% | 65% | 62% | 68% | 65% | 59% | 70% | 69% | 66% | 70% |
| UCF | 58% | 53% | 62% | 53% | 41% | 62% | 63% | 61% | 64% | 48% | 42% | 53% | 59% | 56% | 63% |
| UF | 79% | 76% | 82% | 71% | 60% | 76% | 83% | 80% | 85% | 77% | 73% | 80% | 81% | 78% | 83% |
| UNF | 45% | 39% | 49% | 44% | 28% | 52% | 46% | 49% | 44% | 40% | 43% | 38% | 45% | 39% | 50% |
| USF | 49% | 43% | 52% | 52% | 46% | 54% | 50% | 43% | 55% | 45% | 39% | 49% | 49% | 44% | 52% |
| UWF | 42% | 38% | 45% | 38% | 36% | 39% | 49% | 47% | 50% | 33% | 39% | 30% | 42% | 38% | 46% |

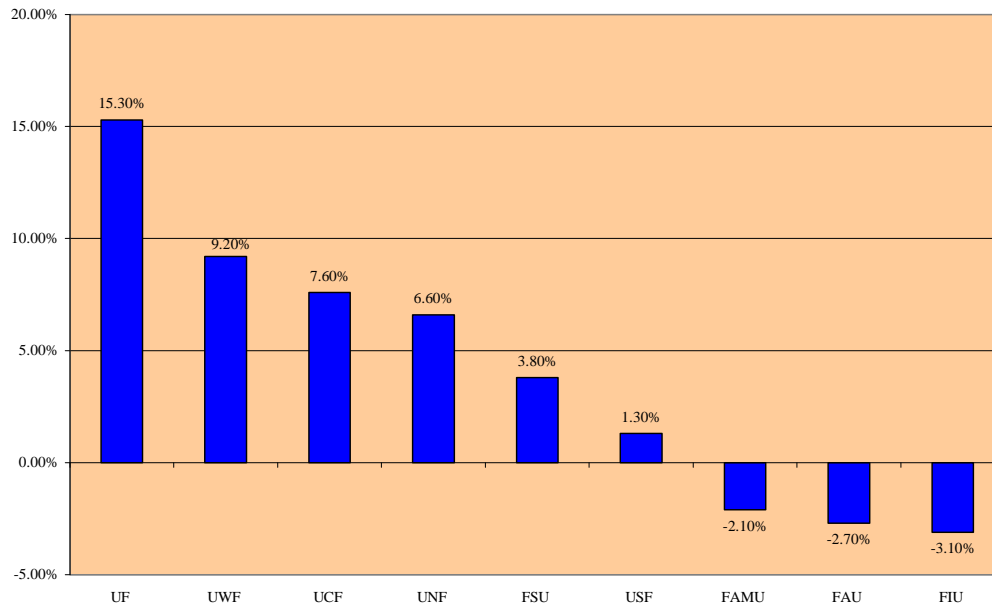
Source: The Education Trust, College Results Online, www.collegeresults.org/default.htm

As is the case with the FCS, the relatively low graduation rates for African American and Hispanic students present a serious challenge to the continued success of the SUS. The highest graduation rates have been recorded by Asian students, whose enrollment has remained relatively stable, and white students, whose enrollment has declined from 64% of total SUS enrollment in 1998 to 58% in 2007, while the enrollment of Hispanic students has increased from 14% of total SUS enrollment in 1998 to 17% in 2007.³

Unfortunately, the SUS has posted only moderate gains in 6-year graduation rates over the last six years, from 60.8% to 61.9%. Although 6-year graduation rates at the University of Florida increased an impressive 15.3% over the past ten years, gains at other universities have been more modest, and some university graduation rates have actually declined (Figure 6).

³ Florida Board of Governors, Interactive University Data, <http://www.flbog.org/resources/iud/>.

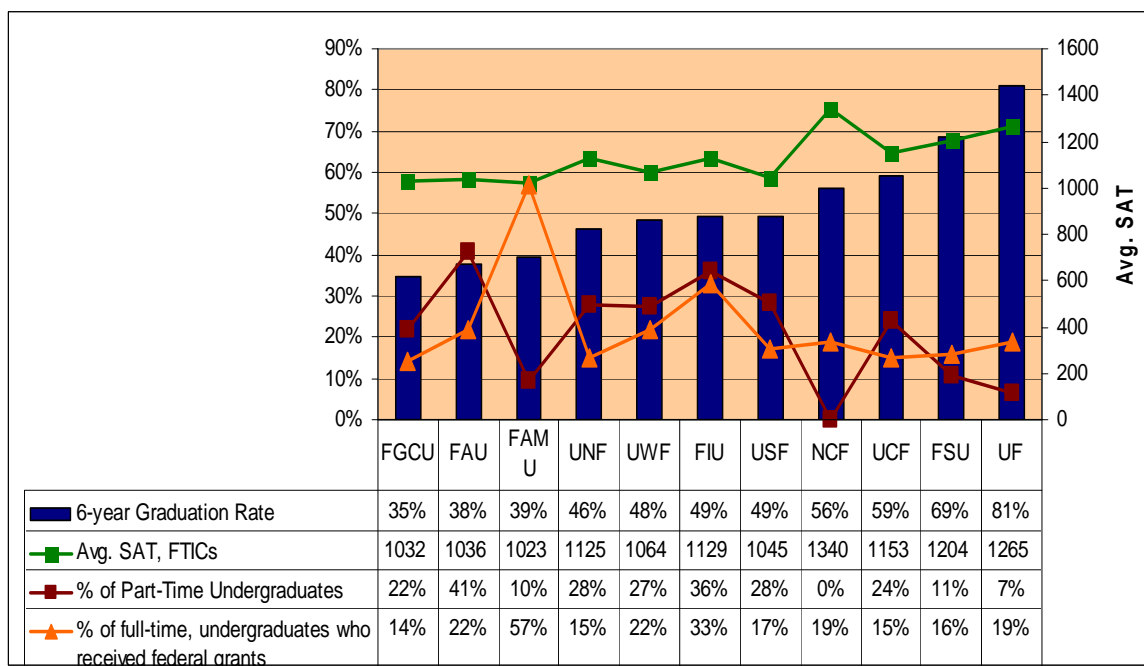
Figure 6: Change in SUS 6-Year Graduation Rates, 1997-2006



Source: The Education Trust, College Results Online, www.collegeresults.org/default.htm

The lower graduation rates at some universities may be explained in part by the higher percentages of part-time students enrolled at those institutions. There is not a direct correlation between enrollment status and graduation rates, but it is certainly no coincidence that FAU, where 41% of students are enrolled part-time, has one of the state’s lowest 6-year graduation rates (38%). The University of Florida, with a state-leading 81% 6-year graduation rate, has only 7% of its students enrolled part-time. As shown in Figure 8, however, the correlation is not consistent. Florida A&M, where only 10% of students are enrolled part-time, has one of the lowest graduation rates (39%). As shown in Figure 7, other factors, including the selectivity of institutions and the socio-economic status of the students they admit, affect graduation rates. The highest graduation rates tend to be associated with institutions that admit students with higher test scores, enroll fewer part-time students, and have fewer recipients of need-based federal financial aid.

Figure 7: Graduation Rates and Other Variables, 2007



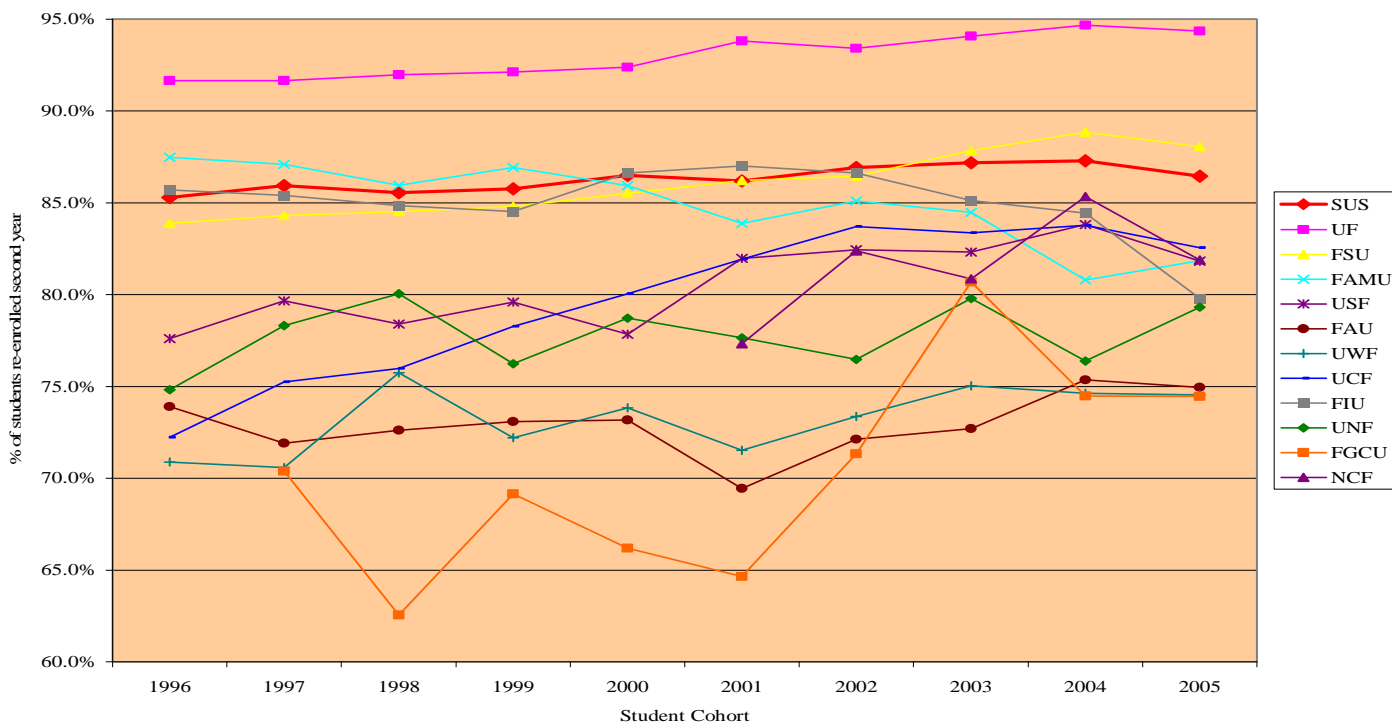
Source: Florida Board of Governors, Factbook, www.flbog.org/resources/factbooks/

If we compare the universities with the highest graduation rates to other institutions with similar characteristics, such as selectivity and the percentage of part-time students, the results continue to show room for progress. While it may be unreasonable to expect FGCU to post graduation rates comparable to highly selective institutions like UF or FSU, we have reason to ask why its 35% graduation rate fall far below institutions with similar student characteristics, such as Saint Josephs College in New York (64.6%), Westfield State (56.2%), and North Georgia College (51.2%). Similarly, if we compare the University of Florida and Florida State to other flagship institutions across the country, our universities fare relatively well. But if our system (or individual institutions within it) aspires to national prominence, we will have to adopt intentional strategies designed to equal or even surpass the graduation rates recorded at places like the University of Michigan (86.9%), Penn State (84.9%) and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (81.7%).⁴

Academic programs and student services throughout the SUS and FCS, contribute to the creation of a campus climate which facilitates student retention and persistence, particularly during the critical first year in college. As Figure 8 shows, the first year retention rate in the SUS was about 85% to 87% over the last ten years, but at UF, the rate hit 95% in 2004, an admirable rate for even a highly selective institution.

Figure 8: SUS First-year Retention Rates, First-Time in College Students

Source: Florida Board of Governors, Factbooks, www.flbog.org/resources/factbooks/



To generate an accurate assessment of student success programs and policies, we must also consider the data on transfer students. The standard 6-year graduation rates *do not* include the students who transfer into a university with an AA or AS from a community college. In the fall of 2007-08 SUS institutions admitted a total of 11,960 students with an associate’s degree. The University of Central Florida alone admitted 3,392, the highest of any university that year.⁵ In 2005, UCF formed a partnership with 4 community colleges in Central Florida that *guarantees* admission to UCF to all AA and AS graduates from those colleges through a unique regional partnership known as Direct Connect to UCF. More than 50% of UCF’s bachelor’s degrees are now awarded to community college transfer students.⁶

⁴ The Education Trust, www.collegeresults.online

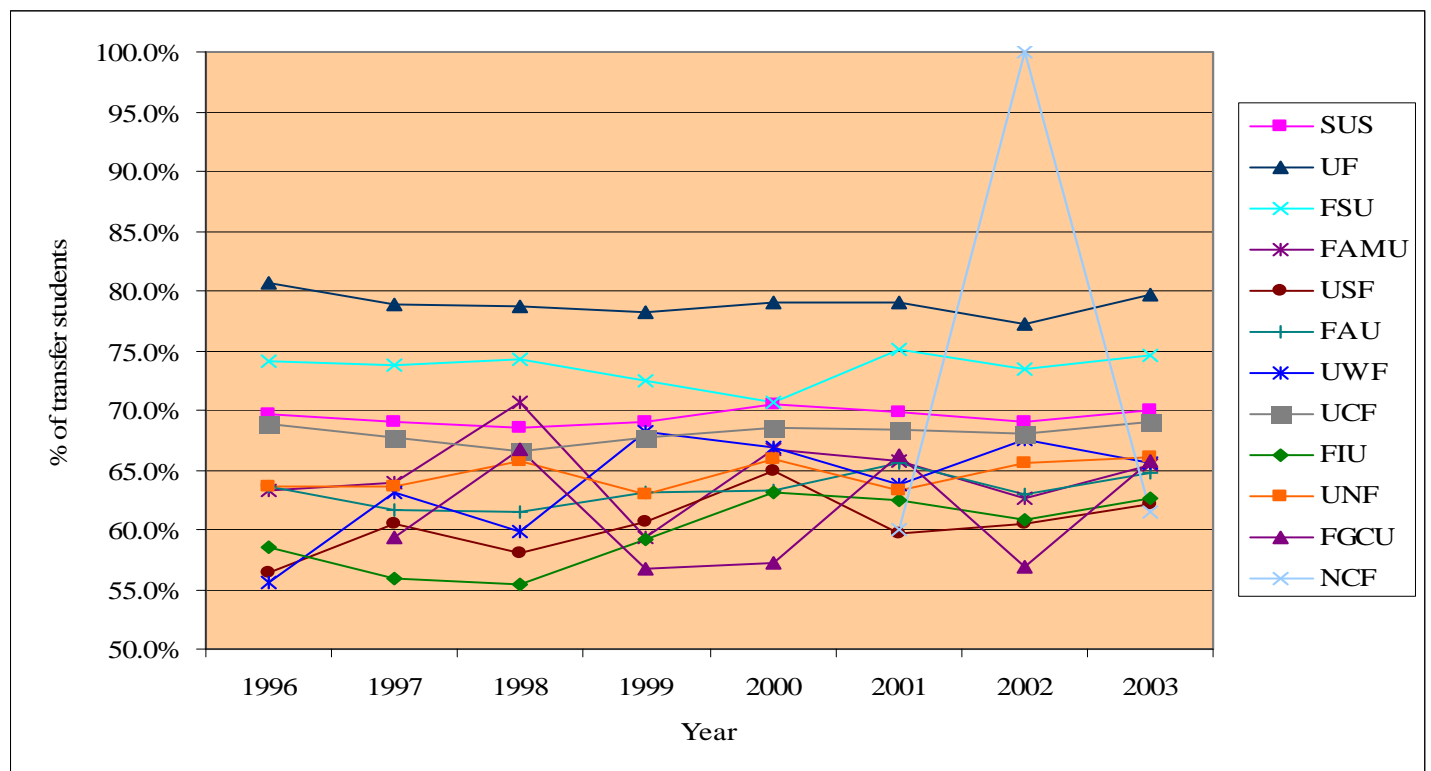
⁵ Florida Board of Governors, Factbooks, http://www.flbog.org/resources/factbooks/2007-2008/xls/t09_00_0708_F.xls

⁶ Florida Board of Governors, Factbooks, www.flbog.org/resources/factbooks/; www.regionalcampuses.ucf.edu/directconnect.asp; David T. Harrison, Community College Baccalaureate Association, “Guaranteed Access to the Baccalaureate: The Central Florida Higher

Fortunately, the community college to university pathway to a bachelor's degree at UCF and throughout the state is viable and productive. A nationally-acclaimed articulation agreement between the community colleges and universities guarantees admission to a state university to any student with an AA or AS degree. Students who transfer into the SUS as juniors are completing their degrees in a timely manner. An impressive 70% of the transfer students graduate within four years after transfer (see Figure 9).

Our community colleges are doing a great job preparing students—most of them under-represented students—to enter and succeed in a university.

Figure 9: SUS Students Graduating Four-years After Transfer



Source: Florida Board of Governors, Factbooks, www.flbog.org/resources/factbooks/

THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE GRADUATION AND RETENTION POLICIES

By any number of measurements, our colleges and universities have done a first-rate job in helping students earn their degrees. However, high graduation rates at a few selective institutions, or an above-average time to completion rates do not necessarily indicate that our higher education systems are doing everything possible to promote student success. A few exceptional programs, however, does indicate that we have the expertise and experience in Florida that can serve as the foundation for the more intense efforts that will be required to boost college completion rates, a goal that is being pushed aggressively by the federal government as well as higher education leaders throughout the country. So the path forward will look much like the road that brought us here, with the exception that higher education leaders will have to make broader and deeper institutional commitments to raise student success rates beyond current levels. According to Watson Scott Swail, President of the Educational Policy Institute (EPI) and a national authority on student success programs, “the development of any program at any university requires a multifaceted process incorporating all campus officials, including administration, faculty, staff, and especially students.”⁷

⁷ Watson Scott Swail, Kenneth E. Redd, and Laura W. Perna, “Retaining Minority Students in Higher Education: A Framework for Success,” ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report: Volume 30, Number 2 (2003), p. x, http://www.educationalpolicy.org/pdf/Swail_Retention_Book.pdf

In short, success begins with clear and unambiguous statements by chancellors, commissioners, presidents, provosts, and deans that timely college completion is a top institutional priority that will be monitored, coordinated, and even rewarded by senior leadership. A quick glance around the state reveals that the senior leadership in higher education understands the challenge and has already moved decisively to meet it.

Ironically, their confidence and optimism should be tempered by the fact that they will not be able to *control* all of the factors that impact student performance and persistence. Students enter college with cognitive skills developed at their homes and schools. Higher education can refine and improve these cognitive skills through college-level coursework and counseling, of course, but the complex and dynamic relationship between student and college is shaped by many other social factors and experiences that occurred long before the student came to campus, such as religion and culture. Many students will choose to live at home, in an environment that may or may not be conducive to learning. Our universities might have greater control over the financial aid packages that they offer students, but their options are still limited by state and federal policies that determine the level of funding for merit-based scholarships like Bright Futures, or need-based aid like Pell Grants.

Nevertheless, colleges can promote student graduation and retention by developing a comprehensive and coordinated strategy that uses all the tools available to it, including housing, curriculum, financial aid, support services, campus life, recruitment, and even athletics. No model is applicable to all institutions, and not even an expert like Swail can prescribe policies that are precisely tailored to the particular needs or interests of particular student groups. With these caveats in mind, our colleges and universities should keep in mind the essential elements of a comprehensive student retention program. According to Swail, these programs must:

- Rely on accurate data and proven scholarly research
- Fit the particular needs of a particular campus
- Engage all departments, centers, institutions and units and become a regular part of campus service
- Account for and anticipate the dynamic, evolving, and reciprocal relationship between student and the institution
- Provide extensive and appropriate retraining of staff
- Center on the needs and interests of diverse student populations
- Operate in a cost-effective way, and not tied to soft monies
- Have the support of a comprehensive student monitoring system that will become the foundation of all institutional research on campus and support every department.⁸

There is ample evidence that our senior educational leadership, from the Turlington Building in Tallahassee to every college, university, and school district, understands that it is not enough to prepare our students for and guarantee them access to college. They must follow through until the student earns the degree of his or her choosing. Commissioner of Education Eric Smith enlisted Florida in the American Diploma Project and Achieve as part of his greater goal of preparing all students to enter and succeed in college. Former Chancellor of the State University System Mark Rosenberg joined the National Association of System Heads in its ambitious Access to Success Initiative, a step in the direction of focusing on student success in higher education. Presidents and provosts throughout the system have created and funded unique programs to serve underrepresented students and facilitate their success in higher education.

Some of these programs have already received national recognition. The Education Sector reported in 2008 that the highest graduation rates for African American students in the country were recorded at Florida State, thanks in no small part to the the Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement (CARE). Established in 2000 to help low-income, first-generation students succeed by reaching out to students as early as the sixth grade and providing them with advice and support through high school and college, CARE has benefited from a strong institutional commitment to student success and

⁸Swail, Redd, and Perna., pp. x-xi.

the strategic coordination of institutional programs, such as Summer Bridge, academic support services, and academic advising. CARE admits students to FSU with lower SAT scores (average 940 compared to 1,204) and provides them with the support they need to succeed. According to Kevin Carey of the Education Sector, “FSU has managed to defy the prevailing wisdom that low minority college graduation rates are regrettable but unavoidable.”⁹

Fortunately, CARE is not the only innovative and successful student success program in the state. The University of Florida established the University of Florida Alliance in 2000 to prepare, recruit, and support students from high-poverty, low-performing high schools throughout the state. Through the office of First Year Advising and Exploration at the University of Central Florida, first-year students find counseling and support services to help them maneuver through their first critical year of college. The University of South Florida, Florida State, and the University of Florida have installed automated student tracking systems to facilitate academic planning and to help keep students on track to graduate in a timely manner without accruing excess credit hours. Florida Atlantic and several other universities has had great success with Living Learning Communities, with students in common disciplines housed together to produce a residential environment more conducive to academic success. Broward, Hillsborough, Tallahassee, and Valencia Community Colleges participated in Achieving the Dream, a multi-year national initiative funded and sponsored by a number of national organizations to help more community college students complete their coursework and earn their certificates or degrees. Colleges and universities have re-designed “gatekeeper” courses in math and sciences to promote higher passage rates in courses that are required for graduation.¹⁰

Colleges and universities throughout the state are delivering effective programs and services to their students, suggesting that the institutional recognition of the need to improve student success rates is there, though the policies may lack the comprehensive quality and institutional commitment that Swail recommends. Not all institutions have implemented comprehensive strategies, utilizing recruitment and admissions policies and procedures, student services, academic programs, financial aid, and curriculum and instruction.¹¹ In future policy briefs we will evaluate FCS and SUS programs in each of these areas. For the moment, education leaders and the general public should take note that further success requires our colleges and universities to create, improve, or refine programs and services in a number of areas simultaneously as part of a larger and well-coordinated strategy to promote student success.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The emerging consensus among Florida’s higher education leaders and institutions aligns the state perfectly with an emerging convergence of philosophy and priority about higher education. National organizations like the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO), the American Council on Education, and the College Board, along with philanthropic organizations like the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Lumina Foundation for Education, have all recently embraced one overarching goal for higher education in the United States: a significant increase in the number of Americans with a college credential to provide a stable and adequate supply of skilled workers for a changing global economy. This goal received its biggest endorsement yet in February 2009, when President Barack Obama announced his intention to raise degree production and graduation rates to the level that the United States will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world.¹²

ENLACE Florida, funded in part by a grant from the Lumina Foundation, is proud to support its “Big Goal” of increasing the percentage of Americans with high quality postsecondary degrees from 39% to 60% by 2025. Today, the per-

⁹ Kevin Carey, “Graduation Rate Watch: Making Minority Student Success a Priority,” *Education Sector Reports* (April 2008), p. 1.

¹⁰ Achieving the Dream, www.achievingthedream.org/default.tp; Valencia Community College, “Florida Leading a National Effort to Boost College Graduation Rates,” June 23, 2009, www.valenciac.edu/news/news_detail.cfm?articleID=274

¹¹ For more detail on the policies recommended by Swail, Redd, and Perna, see “Retaining Minority Students in Higher Education,” ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report: Volume 30, Number 2 (2003)

centage of Floridians age 25 and older with a postsecondary degree currently stands at 33.6%. To meet Lumina's goal, Florida will have to produce at least 6 million more baccalaureate and associate degrees by 2025. At current rates, Florida's public and private universities and community colleges will produce only 3.3 million more degrees by 2025.

To that end, the Florida Department of Education, the Board of Governors, colleges, and universities will have to apply a comprehensive and coordinated strategy to improve the college preparedness of high school graduates, expand access to higher education, and provide college students with the programs and services required for them to succeed. Boosting graduation rates in higher education will not simply result from creating or expanding counseling, tutoring, or mentoring programs throughout public higher education. Readiness, access, and success are part of a continuum that should be addressed simultaneously through a variety of policies and programs. Student success programs at community colleges and universities have received less attention in the public dialog than readiness and access, but it is no less important. Preparing high school graduates for college and giving them the means and opportunity to attend a university does not necessarily mean that they will succeed.

Student success initiatives have been built on the principle that deep and broad institutional commitments and change, driven and informed by student achievement data, is critical to the success of all efforts to boost graduation and retention rates. The common denominator among effective student success programs is **INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT**. Successful programs are the product of continuous strategic planning and intentional efforts on the part of the entire institution. Every administrator, professor, counselor, advisor, or office manager must act on the premise that the institution places such a high priority on student success and timely graduation that the failure of any student is unacceptable. To any skeptic who argues that we cannot raise graduation rates of poorly-prepared, limited-income minority students, let them take a careful look at the experience of CARE at FSU.

We must be careful to acknowledge the limitations of graduation and retention rates as the primary measurement of success. There are many valid reasons for a student to delay graduation, including changing majors, taking time off to reconsider career choices, traveling around the world, spending time with family, or transferring to another institution. Moreover, the time a student takes until graduating is not a valid measurement of the quality of the intellect or the character of the student. Colleges and universities will have to utilize a variety of measurements to inform their policies and programs.

In addition, we must also emphasize that many factors impacting student success are beyond the capacity of any single community college or university to change. The readiness of a high school graduate for college-level coursework is largely beyond the reach of a university math professor, for example, but there is no reason why university-level educators should not be involved in defining high school standards and aligning them with university requirements.

Finally, the financial aid packages offered by the state and federal government are also critical elements of success. The trend in Florida and throughout the country toward merit-based financial aid packages, coming at a time of increasing tuition, threatens to leave financially-needy students incapable of financing their college educations. The federal government has increased the maximum Pell Grant award, but the Florida legislature recently authorized a tuition increase at our state universities that would not be covered by the popular Bright Futures Scholarships. Any effort to boost graduation rates in the FCS and SUS must also take a close look at how Florida, the United States, and institutions provide financial aid to college-ready, college-eligible students. A study of Pell Grant recipients released by the Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, found that the "receipt of a Pell Grant was actually associated with a *shorter* time to degree" than non-recipients, suggesting that financial aid policies designed to support college-eligible, college-ready students with demonstrable financial need can positively impact graduation rates.¹³ We can't expect to raise graduation rates significantly when nearly 25% of the students enrolled in our universities cannot afford to be full-time students. The cost of not graduating students in a timely manner has negative consequences for the student, the institution, and the state, measured by increased

¹³ Christina Chang Wei and Laura Horn, "A Profile of Successful Pell Grant Recipients: Time to Bachelor's Degree and Early Graduate School Enrollment," National Center for Education Statistics, United States, Department of Education, July 2009, p. iii.

student debt, overcrowded classrooms, and the lower tax revenues associated with a less educated workforce.

The challenges that Florida faces in its student success efforts are not unique to the state. Higher education systems and elected officials at the state and federal level recognize the urgent necessity of boosting graduation rates and producing more college graduates. Fortunately, the statements and actions of Florida's higher education leaders, combined with notable successes in student success programs at community colleges and universities, demonstrate that we have the awareness, expertise, experience required to develop the strategies that can boost the academic performance of all students. Stagnant graduation rates, which have prevailed across the United States for over three decades, are not a fact of life. Low graduation rates for limited-income or minority students at any institution are not inevitable; they can and must be corrected through deliberate institutional strategies and commitments.

ENLACE FLORIDA is a statewide network funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and managed by NCCEP to promote college readiness, access, and success for Latinos, African-Americans, and other underrepresented students through non-partisan research, communication, advocacy, and support.

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