

Approved Graduation Rate Outcomes Study Study Protocol

The Graduation Rate Outcomes Study is a national partnership among the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, The Education Trust and the National Association of System Heads. It is staffed by professionals from the partner associations and is overseen by a commission of sitting system heads and campus presidents. The study will be conducted by a group of 96 higher education professionals, nominated by their campus presidents or system heads to participate in this study. Their costs are underwritten by the campus or system that nominated them.

The Graduation Rate Outcomes Study seeks to understand the success achieved by the study campus with respect to graduation rate outcomes. The study will try to discover elements of institutional intentionality, integration of efforts, proactive intervention with students, leadership and the extent to which information driven processes contribute to the success that has been achieved. The study will focus on twelve public sector campuses that have much higher than average reported graduation rates or much higher than average reported improvements in graduation rates.

A study team comprised of a study leader and 6 to 7 other study group members will visit each study campus. The study team leaders have participated in the development of this study protocol. Each team will include individuals with expertise in areas such as admissions, retention, academic support, effective management and institutional data use. Each member of the study team will have been nominated by her or his campus president/chancellor.

All study team members will have been oriented in the use of the study protocol and their respective roles during the study campus visit.

Each study team will develop a report of their visit based on the use of this study protocol. The study campus will be given an opportunity to review the draft of the study team's report to identify factual errors prior to its submission. The study team reports will be forwarded to staff of the sponsoring associations for compilation, analysis and public reporting. The Graduation Rate Outcomes Study Commission, a supervisory committee made up of system heads and campus presidents who are directing this project, will review the reports.

A national report, to be developed based on the information gathered during the study campus visits will be prepared. This national report will be distributed to campus chief executive and chief academic officers as well as state and federal higher education policy and oversight officials.

Please note: the use of 1996 as a baseline year is the result of that being the first year that the federal government required reporting on the six-year graduation rate success of first-time full-time students.

In responding to the inquiries made during this study each study campus is asked to answer candidly about historical efforts and their outcomes, good and bad, so as to inform campus leaders about what processes and what resources were needed to achieve the good outcomes reported.

Pre-Visit Information Request

In response to requests for study related information the institution will only be expected to provide documentary evidence that already exists. In addition a series of conversations and brief written answers to the following lines of inquiry will be requested.

Please provide us with:

- Existing charts that
 - Depict the overall organization of the institution
 - Identify the elements (e.g. individuals, offices, committees, task forces, etc.) of the organization with explicit responsibility to positively impact the retention and graduation rates
 - Show changes in the organization since 1996 that were/are intended to positively affect graduation rate outcomes
 - Depict retention and graduation processes a student might encounter (such as points of intervention) from pre-admission through graduation. In what ways are any of these points of intervention designed to impact student progress toward a degree (e.g. as a gate keeping mechanism or otherwise)?
- Your current mission statement and any changes in the mission statement sine 1996
- Any existing strategic planning documents that specifically address the various aspects of graduation rate outcomes (e.g. admissions, orientation, freshman seminar, advising, tutoring, early alert, academic progression, sophomore and junior levels, senior capstone, senior experiences, etc.)
- Please direct us to or provide us with any existing policy, programmatic or procedural statement whose purpose is to positively affect retention and graduation rates. We are particularly interested in knowing what, if any, changes have occurred in these statements since 1996
- In addition to the materials we have requested, please feel free to provide any other existing information that reflects deliberate plans or choices made in your institution that you think has led to your success in overall or improving graduation rates.

Please provide brief responses to the following queries:

1. What do you think are the most important features (e.g. policies, practices, initiatives, expectations, culture, etc.) of your institution that have contributed to your success in graduation rate outcomes? How do you know each feature has contributed to your success? Why do you think these features have been important to your success? Who are

the most knowledgeable people, with respect to each identified feature, with whom we should speak?

2. Is there one school or college within your institution that deserves particular attention vis-à-vis its approach or effectiveness of its practices? If so, how is that effort different?
3. Please describe any initiative that was intended to improve graduation rates that was not successful. How did you know it was a failure? What happened when the initiative was recognized as a failure?
4. Please provide us with a profile of your undergraduate student population and identify those features that most help to explain the institution's graduation rate success.
 - a. Which groups of students make up the majority of your student body?
 - b. Have there been changes in the make-up of your student body since 1996? If so, were the changes the results of demographic shifts in your service area or are they a result of changes in your recruitment or admissions policies and practices?
 - c. Has the institution assessed whether its reported graduation rates, given the profile of incoming students over time, are as good as or better than should be expected from such a group? If so, what did you conclude?
5. Please describe any routinely used data driven policy or decision making processes that are used to contribute to student success in progressing toward a degree (please consider things such as, but not limited to, degree audits, determinations of which students require remediation or inclusion in first year programs, assessment of which students require academic interventions, analysis of why students do not graduate, etc.).
 - a. What kinds of processes do you employ to share these kinds of data throughout your campus?
 - b. Who receives such data?
 - c. How is the data used?
 - d. Is use of the data reported back to a central authority?
 - e. Do those receiving it perceive the data that is disseminated as useful?
6. How are faculty members involved in efforts to improve graduation rates?
7. Where does responsibility lay for achieving/ensuring your graduation rate outcomes?
8. Who assisted in/contributed to the preparation of this document?

The study team leader or study team members will conduct telephone conversations with campus representatives prior to the campus visit, coordinating this work with the study campus point of contact. The purpose of these phone calls will be to gain an understanding of the critical campus features contributing to graduation rate performance and the pervasiveness and impact of those features. In particular these conversations will touch upon how the institution got to its present level of success and, where improvement has occurred, and how the campus achieved buy-in to the emphasis on graduation rate outcomes.

In order to do as much pre-visit exploration of your institution as possible, we would like to explore your web site and information systems from the perspective of a student and from that of a faculty member. Recognizing that privacy concerns may be raised by such a request, we want to make it clear that our interest lies in the availability and use of information that may affect retention and graduation rate success. We are not interested in perusing individual student or faculty data. Is it possible to arrange access to these systems for members of the study teams?

Campus Visit Activities

Observation and interviews will be the primary mode of information gathering employed by the study teams during their campus visit. The study team will focus its inquiry on the institution-identified features that the campus thinks contribute to its graduation rate outcomes success.

During the campus visit the study team will probe for evidence of the pervasiveness of knowledge about, understanding of, and buy-in for intentionally pursued goals affecting graduation rate outcomes. The team will seek to identify and understand the formal and informal dynamics that have contributed to success.

The team will also seek to understand the extent of multi-level formal and informal leadership contributions to the institution features identified. Evidence of leadership impact, inspiration, collaboration and cooperation will be sought.

The study team will attempt to assess to what degree the study campus is a learning organization informed by its experiences and outcomes regarding graduation rate success. It will also seek evidence of past learning in this regard.

Aspects of process, relationships and the substance of campus initiatives contributing to graduation rate outcomes success will be explored in an effort to understand the overall organizational culture that affects graduation rate outcomes.

Finally, the study teams will seek information about how the institution sustains, or plans to sustain, its efforts or its environment that the campus believes contribute to success in graduation rate outcomes.