

**Testimony of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities
(AASCU)
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prepared for the
National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education
May 10, 2004**

Accountability and Student Success: Bridging the Gap

I. The Current Disclosure-Reality Gap

Any discussion focusing on the improvement of accountability policies and practices in higher education, particularly in the area of student success, must consider the “fit” between the higher education system’s current capacity to account for student progress and the environment in which such an accounting is being done. In other words, do the student success measures currently employed represent an accurate, comprehensive account of a campus and/or system’s performance? For a growing segment of public higher education, the answer, unfortunately, is a resounding “no.” Existing metrics, particularly those used in federal data collections, provide an incomplete and even misleading account of student’s progression through postsecondary education. On behalf of our 430 member campuses and university systems, AASCU offers an alternative approach to gauging student success, one that is not without limitations, but one that better comports with contemporary realities.

The sources of the disconnect between accountability measures and student behavior are widely known and well-documented. First, the number of part-time and older students on our campuses has grown considerably within the past generation. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the share of postsecondary students in the United States 25 and older has climbed from 28 percent in 1970 to 39 percent in 1999. At the same time, alternative attendance patterns related to life and career choices have emerged, giving rise to terms such as “stopping out” and phenomena such as students that obtain associate degrees after baccalaureates. While it is now almost cliché to say that non-traditional students are the new traditional students, NCES data confirm that in 1999-2000, just under 60 percent of undergraduates at public four-year institutions reported at least one of seven primary characteristics of non-traditional students.* These data have very real implications for the public colleges and universities—two-year and four-year—that are charged with providing educational access for a community, region, or state.

The disconnect between these realities and existing student success measures is similarly well-known, especially in federal (and most state) data collections. The primary (if not only) measure is the graduation rate, calculated on a cohort of first-time, full-time freshmen. This fails to account for a number of increasingly prevalent patterns in public higher education, including part-time attendance and transfer. Moreover, there is a single point of measurement (150 percent of standard time-to-degree in the federal

* delayed enrollment, part-time attendance, full-time employment, financial independence, dependents other than spouse, single parenthood, alternative secondary credential

collection, more or less in the various state collections), which commonly fails to account for “stop-out” behavior. In short, our accountability systems are built to measure the success of students that are the exception, rather than the rule, for the institutions that serve the vast majority of the nation’s postsecondary students (community colleges and public comprehensive universities).

The significance of this disconnect in the policymaking world cannot be overlooked. In recent years, the focus in higher education accountability has shifted decidedly from inputs to outcomes and “value added.” This shift has raised the profile—and scrutiny—of metrics such as persistence, completion, and even student learning. Assuming that this shift in emphasis is permanent, such a disconnect is simply untenable for public “access” institutions to be truly accountable. While the path to a more comprehensive and inclusive measurement of student success is fraught with technical and methodological complications and controversies, simply preserving the status quo is not—or at least should not be—an option.

But how to proceed? As implied above, any proposed effort to reshape data collection (state or federal) must run the gauntlet of data system limitations, privacy laws, and institutional/system objections regarding the burden of data collection. However, a collaborative effort by public two-year and four-year institutions in the mid-1990s—one recognized by the U.S. Department of Education—offers at least a starting point for re-engaging the issue of measuring student success. While the product of this effort is far from the ideal solution to capturing student progress and success, it offers tools for bridging the disconnect between what is really happening and what is reported. As scrutiny of colleges and universities by members of Congress, state policymakers, and consumers continues to grow, data providers, disseminators, and analysts should carefully consider whether the perfect should really be the enemy of the good.

II. JCAR and Student Advancement, Graduation, and Transfer Rates

Overview

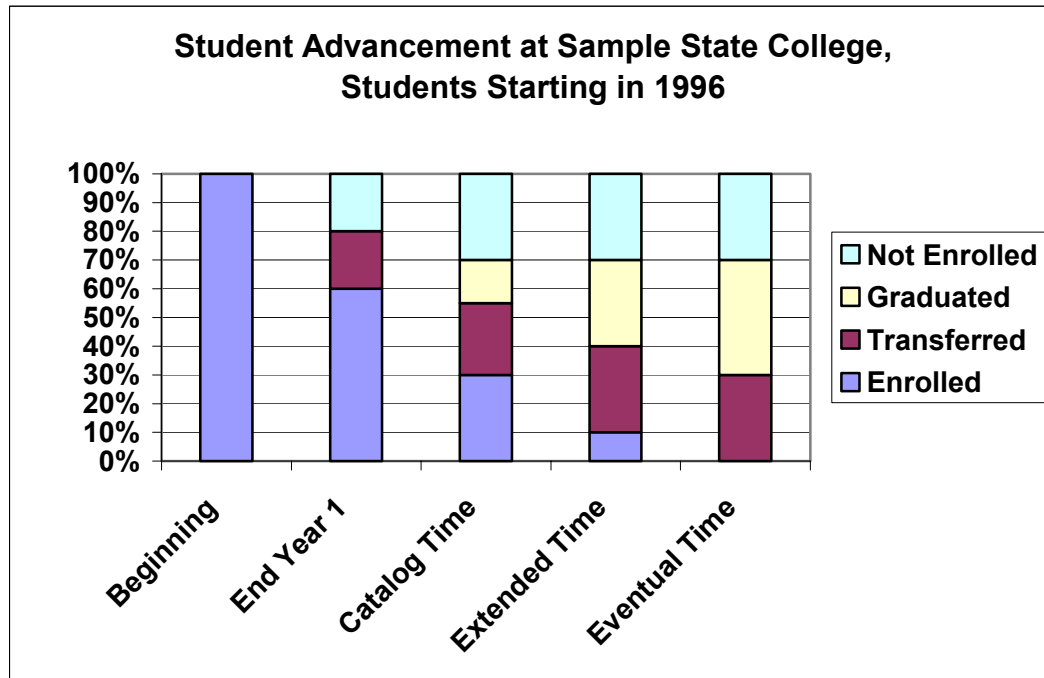
In 1996, the Joint Commission on Accountability Reporting (JCAR)—comprised of member representatives of AASCU, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC)—confronted the limitations of federal Student Right-to-Know reporting and proposed student advancement, graduation and transfer indicators designed to provide a more comprehensive accounting of student progression through postsecondary education. A detailed explanation of the measures (including calculation protocols) can be found at http://www.aascu.org/pdf/jcar_technical.pdf, but following is a summary of the primary measures:

a. Student Advancement Rate

This indicator examines the beginning undergraduate population (first-time freshmen and transfers-in) as the cohort, and marks progress (enrolled/graduated/transferred) at three points in time: *catalog time* (conventional time—two years for an associate degree, four years for a baccalaureate degree), *extended time* (150 percent of conventional time—the Student Right-to-Know standard), and *eventual time* (point at which 95 percent of students continuously enrolled have completed their program). [see Figure 1] The student advancement rate accounts for a considerably larger

share of enrollment for “access” institutions and provides a richer picture about where an institution’s students go—and when.

Figure 1.



NOTE: Student advancement rate at catalog time and beyond is 70 percent.

b. Student Graduation Rate

On this measure, the JCAR formulation moves beyond the first-time, full-time freshman cohort to embrace categories that are more sensitive to student enrollment patterns. The JCAR methodology divides students into three groups: *catalog-load students* (whose average courseload over their period of enrollment meets conventional degree-completion requirements, typically 15 semester hours or more for an undergraduate); *extended-load students* (whose average courseload over their period of enrollment falls between 10 and 15 semester hours for an undergraduate); and *partial-load students* (whose average courseload over their period of enrollment totals less than 10 semester hours for an undergraduate).

As with the student advancement rate, student progress in each of these categories is marked at catalog time, extended time, and eventual time. [see Figure 2] It is important to note that the methodology allows for (and recommends) a separate graduation rate calculation for first-time freshmen and transfer students.

Figure 2.
Sample State College Freshman Graduation Rate—1996 Cohort

Student Courseload Category	Cohort Size	Portion of Total Cohort	Graduation Rate By:		
			Catalog Time	Extended Time	Eventual Time
Catalog-Load Students	108	54%	65%	69%	74%
Extended-Load Student	28	14%	0%	54%	64%
Partial-Load Students	64	32%	0%	0%	50%
Total First-Time Freshmen	200	100%	35%	45%	65%

c. Student Transfer Rate

Though one of the most difficult (and contentious) measures of student progress/success, the transfer rate is also one of growing importance because of student mobility. The JCAR conventions call for calculating this rate as a share of an institution’s entering cohort transferring out, divided into two subcategories: *committed students* (those receiving grades for at least 12 semester credits [or quarter equivalents]) and *occasional students* (those graded for less than 12 semester credits [or quarter equivalents]). [see Figure 3]

Figure 3.
Sample State College Transfer Rate for First-Time Freshmen—1996 Cohort

	Committed Students	Occasional Students	All Students
Number in Cohort	75	125	200
Number Transferred	15	13	28
Transfer Rate	20%	10%	14%

Analysis

As with any measure (or set of measures), the JCAR proposals offer improvements that are counter-balanced by very real limitations. On the positive side, the Commission’s recommended metrics stand to improve the quality of public policy and institutional management conversations, adding context that has been sorely missing to date,

particularly with respect to students that don't fit the time-honored mold. Additionally, these measurement conventions place needed focus on students, reflecting the core of the higher education enterprise and acknowledging the fact that student success entails work by students and campuses alike. Finally, the JCAR measures aim to correct pervasive, long-standing misperceptions about student success—or lack thereof—at public colleges and universities.

Such an approach is not without its drawbacks, however. First, implementing the JCAR recommendations would require increased data gathering and significant investments in data systems for most public institutions—a difficult request at a time when campuses and state higher education agencies are facing severe resource constraints. Moreover, these measures fail to reach areas of the enterprise that continue to grow in popularity and vex analysts, those of non-degree and non-credit enrollment. Finally, and most importantly, the JCAR indicators might prove to be more nuanced and differentiated than policymakers are willing to allow—witness how the graduation rate gained favor because of its simplicity and relative ease of calculation.

That said, the JCAR measures have had “real world” experience, as the New Jersey Council for Excellence in Accountability Reporting and the Louisiana public higher education system adopted them for use by their constituent institutions. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, the U.S. Department of Education determined in 1996 that the student graduation rate measure satisfy the requirements of the federal Student Right-to-Know protocols (see following letter).

III. Conclusion

It is often said that the diversity of the American higher education system is one of its greatest strengths. Public colleges and universities exemplify that diversity, reaching an ever-changing mix of at-risk students and top scholars at campuses of varying size, location, and mission focus. This broad availability of opportunity has helped to propel the nation into a position of world leadership in postsecondary education.

Our accountability systems, state and federal, should acknowledge this diversity. While policymakers and higher education leaders must navigate the narrow channel between comprehensive and concise, it has become increasingly apparent that student success measures, particularly at the federal level, lean toward the latter at the expense of the former. As campuses are challenged to serve growing enrollments from historically underserved populations, the need—and call—for a better accounting of student success will only grow.

AASCU forwards the JCAR framework not out of a conviction that it represents a cure-all for the failings of the current approach, but out of a commitment to move accountability conversations beyond the status quo. As preparers of students and stewards of the public's resources and trust, we can do no less.



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

OFFICE OF POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY

OCT 30 1996

Mr. John Hammang
JCAR Project Coordinator
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Dear Mr. Hammang:

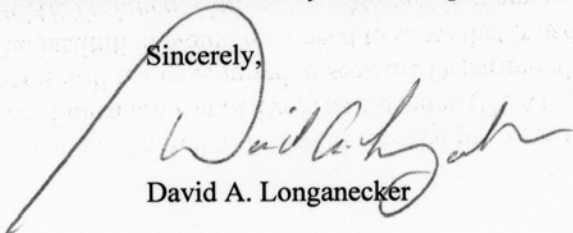
I am happy to confirm the response given you by Brian Kerrigan of the Department regarding the Joint Commission on Accountability Reporting (JCAR) and the requirements of the Student Right to Know Act and regulations.

The protocols for calculating graduation and transfer-out rates contained in the publication, *JCAR Technical Conventions Manual*, may be used in compliance with 34 CFR 668.46 to calculate the graduation rate information required of institutions participating in programs authorized by title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended (HEA). As such, an institution using the JCAR protocols will not be required to seek the Department's approval of its graduation rate methodology. The institution would only need to show that it had correctly followed the instructions in the *JCAR Technical Conventions Manual* if at any point a program reviewer were to review the institution's compliance with the regulations in §668.46.

Of course, institutions that use the *JCAR Technical Conventions Manual* must still fulfill the statutory and regulatory requirements to make this information available to students, prospective students, and the public as outlined in §668.41, and, if the institution awards athletically-related student aid, to calculate and disclose graduation and transfer-out rate information on student-athletes as required by §668.49. Institutions will also be required to complete the Graduation Rate Survey issued by the Department's National Center for Education Statistics.

JCAR's cooperation in this matter is greatly appreciated. The Department recognizes that states and other entities also require graduation rate and other outcome information from institutions. We are pleased not only that you have taken an active role in helping institutions gather this information in a meaningful form, but also that you have worked so diligently in helping us reduce burden on institutions by providing a simple way for institutions to calculate and present this information in a fashion that satisfies the needs of many interested parties.

Sincerely,



David A. Longanecker