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Students

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Higher-Ed Groups Unveil Alternative to Federal Student-Success Measures

By Katherine Mangan

Six major higher-education associations have teamed up to develop a new method of measuring student success that provides a more comprehensive look at how students progress through college and how many of them eventually graduate.

Beginning on Monday, colleges seeking a voluntary alternative to the federal government's method of calculating completion can sign on to the [Student Achievement Measure](#). Using information from the National Student Clearinghouse, they will be able to post data that includes graduation rates for transfer students and, for two-year colleges, those attending part time. Students who are still enrolled at the end of the tracking period will also be included.

The effort comes at a time when a growing number of states are passing laws tying a portion of colleges' appropriations to performance measures, including graduation and completion rates.

The states are relying heavily on the federal government's tracking system, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, or Ipeds, which includes only first-time, full-time students who start and finish at the same college. Those metrics, which paint a grim picture of college completion, have come under fire for leaving many students out.

More than 20 percent of students who complete a degree do so at a college [other than the one where they started](#), according to a study by the clearinghouse's research center.

The new tracking system will account for more of those students through a shared Web site and common measures that any

accredited, nonprofit college or university offering bachelor's or associate degrees can use.

Colleges will be able to start posting student-achievement measures in the fall, after data from the 2012-13 academic year are available.

The project was developed by the American Association of Community Colleges, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, the American Council on Education, the Association of American Universities, the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities, and the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities.

"Many of the students who attend Aascu colleges and universities are unable because of their life circumstances to complete college in four years," Muriel A. Howard, president of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, said in a written statement.

Correcting a Skewed Picture

Initially, colleges will report data for groups of students who entered in the fall of 2007 and will track their progress over six years, ending in this summer.

The site offers separate models for bachelor's-degree programs, which will report outcomes after four, five, and six years, and associate and certificate programs, which will examine outcomes at the end of six years.

Among the universities that are eager to embrace the new model are the University of Southern Indiana, where 30 percent of the students who graduated last year were transfer students. Indiana was one of the first states to allocate higher-education spending largely on performance measures such as graduation and course-completion rates.

"When we talk about progress through college, so many of the policy makers think about four years in and out, but students today are taking a much more complex path than they did a generation ago," the university's president, Linda L.M. Bennett,

said in an interview.

Diana S. Natalicio, president of the University of Texas at El Paso, has long argued that traditional completion measures give a skewed picture of student progress at her campus, on the Texas-Mexico border. The university accepts 97 percent of its applicants, three-quarters of whom are Hispanic. Many of its students are the first in their families to attend college.

Using the metrics the federal government relies on, only one in 10 UT-El Paso freshmen graduates within four years, and only 35 percent within six years. Those percentages would be much higher, Ms. Natalicio says, if transfer students and those who take longer to graduate were included.

"This effort recognizes that the student experience today is very different from the one people have lodged in their memories from 50 years ago," she said. "And if legislators are going to base funding on performance, it's important to use metrics that capture the real picture."

One of the project's major sponsors is the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Daniel Greenstein, director of the foundation's Postsecondary Success Strategy, said the project would provide "important information for institutional leaders in understanding whether their students continue on a path to success even after leaving their institution."

The effort builds on models like the [Voluntary Framework of Accountability](#) and the [Voluntary System of Accountability](#), which two- and four-year colleges have been working on to track success at their institutions.

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