



DEFINING STUDENT SUCCESS DATA RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Introduction

One recommendation from HLC’s Defining Student Success Data Initiative is the development of a glossary of terms to assist peer reviewers and institutions in their efforts to assess institutional performance with regard to Criterion Four (Teaching and Learning: Evaluation and Improvement), Core Component 4.C. Currently, Criterion 4.C reads as follows.

4.C. The institution demonstrates a commitment to educational improvement through ongoing attention to retention, persistence, and completion rates in its degree and certificate programs.

1. The institution has defined goals for student retention, persistence, and completion that are ambitious but attainable and appropriate to its mission, student populations, and educational offerings.
2. The institution collects and analyzes information on student retention, persistence, and completion of its programs.
3. The institution uses information on student retention, persistence, and completion of programs to make improvements as warranted by the data.
4. The institution’s processes and methodologies for collecting and analyzing information on student retention, persistence, and completion of programs reflect good practice. (Institutions are not required to use IPEDS definitions in their determination of persistence or completion rates. Institutions are encouraged to choose measures that are suitable to their student populations, but institutions are accountable for the validity of their measures.)

Individuals from HLC’s member organizations invited to participate in the Defining Student Success Data Initiative were charged to be forward thinking and aspirational. The group was encouraged to reject “tinkering on the margins”—an approach that would maintain structures of higher education institutions’ student learning and success efforts in the twentieth century. Rather, it was encouraged to come up with definitions that help both institutions and peer reviewers assess quality learning and student success as they should be understood and examined in the twenty-first century.

The group has proposed definitions and a broader “systems view” of higher education. There are “legacy terms” such as “retention” and “completion” that help institutions understand student attainment in local contexts. There also are

new terms, such as “student educational intent” and “progression” that help both institutions and students understand student attainment across institutions and time. These definitions better serve institutional efforts to evaluate and improve student learning and success outcomes in a changing higher education landscape— a landscape in which student enrollment in multiple institutions to achieve an educational objective is the norm for a steadily increasing proportion of learners.

Even with the proposed changes, higher education institutions will still have considerable latitude in how they approach fulfilling their respective missions. But they must be able to demonstrate the integrity, effectiveness, and quality of their processes and programs to peer reviewers. The glossary is intended to improve the clarity of interactions and communications between institutional staff and peer reviewers as related to the measurement, monitoring, and improvement of student progress and completion.

The glossary provides definitions for the key terms employed within Core Component 4.C. as well as a few additional terms that the committee deemed essential to incorporate into the lexicon moving forward. It also provides definitions related to some of the standard terms used by the U.S. Department of Education as related to the Core Component. Beyond those key terms, the glossary serves as a cross reference to key terms used by the other subcommittee products under the broader HLC Defining Student Success Data Initiative.

In addition, the glossary includes definitions related to other terms commonly used within colleges and universities, institutional systems and state systems, noting that there is often variation in how those terms are precisely used. At this level, the glossary is not intended to be prescriptive, but rather to identify terms that have been associated with efforts across higher education to assess and improve student success, especially focusing on persistence in and completion of programs of study that result in an award (degree or other credential) that enables students to productively engage in a range of post-graduation pursuits, including employment and career development, further education, and civic engagement.

Because of the diversity of both higher education institutions and the students they serve, it is neither possible nor desirable to completely remove ambiguity from even the most commonly used terms, such as persistence, retention, and completion. In some cases, there exist one or more relatively well-known standards provided, for example, for federal reporting purposes. The

glossary provides such definitions but also notes where and why there are ambiguities associated with the terms.

Organization of the Glossary

The glossary includes four main sections. They include:

1. Definition of key terms in the current wording of Core Component 4.C. as well as terms related to rewording suggestions from the group for the Core Component;
2. Related terms that are critical to reviewing institutional capacity and performance as related to Core Component 4.C.;
3. Federal definitions used in reporting retention, completion, and related student outcomes; and
4. Explanation of how the terms reflect the twenty-first century higher education landscape as it actually operates, the diverse twenty-first century learners that the system serves, and some considerations for HLC institutions if the definitions are to be fully adopted.

Core Component 4.C. Key Terms

The terms included in this section either appear in the current wording of Core Component 4.C. or are related to recommended changes in wording.

Suggested Wording Changes

HLC should consider revising portions of the wording of Core Component 4.C. as follows:

- Substitute the current phrase, “student retention, persistence, and completion” with “educational intent, progression, completion, and post-completion outcomes”
- Move from Core Component 4.A. the last subcomponent (currently 4.A.6.) to become 4.C.5, with the following wording:

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The institution evaluates the outcomes of its completers. The institution ensures that the degree, credential, or other completion goals it represents as preparation for further study, employment, or other student post-completion goals accomplish these purposes. For all programs, the institution looks to indicators it deems appropriate to its mission.

Table 1. Key Terms in Current and Suggested Core Component 4.C.

Term	Definition
Educational Intent	The intended educational objectives that a student has upon entry or develops through interaction with an institution's programs, supports, and staff. This intent can include an array of educational objectives such as taking a course or courses to improve a certain skill or to transfer the credit elsewhere, earning a badge or certificate, and/or earning a degree. Intent can and often does change over time. To focus more directly on educational intent, an institution can evaluate how their existing goal completion markers (e.g., degrees, other formal awards, completion modules, etc.), and prospective new or revised markers and milestones (e.g., class level standing as related to progress toward objective completion rather than credits accumulated) can assist students in developing and completing constructive educational intentions that meet students', and other constituents' (e.g., employers, state legislators, community members) postsecondary education-related needs.
Retention (rate)	The continued enrollment of students from one specified time point to the next. Most typically considered from one year to the next, but can also be marked by other progression milestones (by semester/quarter, through sequential degree requirements, etc.). Retention is an institutionally-focused measure as it focuses on students' continued enrollment within a specific college or university.
Persistence	A student-centered metric focused on behaviors that indicate continued enrollment. This may or may not be indicative of ongoing enrollment that fulfills a program of study or the student's stated educational intent.
Completion (rate)	The attainment (or rate of attainment) of a degree, other formal award, or other completion goal by a student (or among a cohort of students).
Good practice	A practice (program or process) that is generally accepted as a positive approach or standard for obtaining the desired outcome. Generally, connotes that there exists credible evidence of effectiveness, either locally or through credible publications or presentation venues.
Progression (rate)	Demonstrated student progress toward the formation and completion of their educational intent over an acceptable period of time.
Post-completion student outcomes	<p>A general term related to learning/skill gains or subsequent activities of students upon completion of a degree, non-degree credential or other completion goal. Typically these are differentiated by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning outcomes: documented gains in specific knowledge, skills or abilities • Employment outcomes: Career and other employment activities that relate to students' academic programs • Financial outcomes: employment wages, debt incurred, loan default, etc. • Civic, community and service outcomes: Engagement and participation on local, regional, national and international communities and civic behaviors (e.g., military service, Peace Corps, Americorps, voting, volunteering, civic leadership) • Quality of life outcomes: Psychological and physical health and behaviors; satisfaction; lifestyle choices; etc.

Other Important and Related Terms

The terms defined in this section were viewed to be important to fostering clarity in documenting institutional efforts toward fulfilling Core Component 4.C. and facilitating peer review of those efforts.

Table 2. Terms Critical to Reviewing Institutional Capacity

Term	Definition
Academic standing	A student's status as related to their academic performance against a minimal acceptable level (typically minimum GPA). Can also include other academic progress components, like completing a set number of credits toward the educational intent or completion goal.
Achievement/ Progress/ Performance gaps	Differences in retention, progress, completion rates or outcomes among subgroups of students, most commonly gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or among special populations (e.g., veterans/active service members; single parents; disabled students).
Completion goals	Most commonly degree (or other formal award) attainment, but can also include upward transfer (2-yr to 4-yr) or lateral transfer to desired program or other markers and milestones developed to reflect educational intent relevant to an institution's student population. Increasingly, institutions are developing completion modules, such as core course sequences (general education, quantitative requirements, etc.) that enable the student to move onward in their educational pursuits at other institutions.
Employability/ Career/Work readiness	The ability (sufficient skills) of a student to move into employment positions relevant to their area of study. Generally refers to employers' perceptions based on experiences of hiring program (degree or other formal award) completers.
Equity-mindedness	Refers to the responsibility of educators to stay mindful to the individual needs of students to successfully navigate through an institution and achieve their educational intent by providing the pathways and supports that leverage the abilities of each student. Contrasts to a deficit-based approach that focuses on how students are not properly prepared for college-level work.
First destination	The first subsequent formal activity that a graduate undertakes after degree completion. Typical categories of first destination outcomes include: employment, further/continuing education, volunteering, community service, and military service.
Graduate attributes	The skills and abilities that a degree/program completer has attained as related to subsequent career, further education, leadership, or civic/community participation.
Non-degree credential	A formal award other than a college degree, typically including certifications and licenses (with increasing attention to new types of awards, such as badges and other "micro-credentials").
Success/ Progress markers/ Milestones	Recognized attainment and completion stages or steps that mark progress toward a completion goal or other educational intent. Traditionally marked by class/credit completion and completion of program requirements. Institutions have also been creating more identifiable modules or other markers as related to existing requirements (e.g., general education, major components) or through certificates and certifications, that can be stacked toward degree completion.

Related Federal Definitions

The terms defined in this section are derived from the specific language used within the U.S. Department of Education's IPEDS data collection system. More detailed definitions can be found within the IPEDS Glossary (<https://surveys.nces.ed.gov/ipeds/Downloads/Forms/IPEDSGlossary.pdf>), or survey materials (<https://surveys.nces.ed.gov/ipeds/VisIndex.aspx>).

Table 3. Graduation, Retention, and Outcome Measures Reporting (IPEDS)

Term	Definition
Graduation rate (100%, 150%, 200%)	<p>The proportion of an adjusted cohort that graduates in either</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100%: the nominal time of the program (2 years for associate's degree, 4 years for bachelor's degree, or as appropriate to type of certificate or other award) 150%: 1.5 times the nominal time (3 years for associate's, 6 years for bachelor's degrees, etc.) 200%: twice the nominal time for a degree, certificate or other formal award.
Cohort: initial; revised; adjusted	<p>Includes [full-time/part-time] first-time degree/certificate seeking students enrolled at the institution in the fall semester of the base year (including those enrolled for the first time the preceding summer term and those whose intent was not known upon entry to the institution). The cohort for 4-year institutions should only include bachelor degree-seeking students. The time period used for reporting cohort numbers should be the official fall reporting date of the institution or October 15 for institutions that have standard academic calendar systems (semester, quarter, trimester or 4-1-4 plan). For institutions that enroll students continuously during the year and use a full-year cohort, the cohort is based on any student enrolled during the period August 1 through October 31. The student status (full- or part-time) should be based on the prior year's fall status, even if this has changed by the current year (e.g., if a student has gone from part-time to full-time, report them as part of the part-time cohort).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initial: cohort included in retention or graduation rate measures as reported when they initially entered the institution. Revised: Institutions have the option of revising their preloaded cohort if there are eligible students who were omitted in the past or students were reported who did not belong in the cohort (e.g., they were not actually first-time, or full-time). Adjusted: Revised cohort minus number of exclusions plus the number of inclusions.
Cohort exclusions and inclusions	<p>Exclusions: The number of students from the [base] year cohort, who left the institution for any of the following reasons: Died or were totally and permanently disabled; Serve in the armed forces (including those called to active duty); Serve with a foreign aid service of the Federal Government (e.g., Peace Corps); or Serve on official church missions.</p> <p>Inclusions: The number of first-time degree seeking study abroad students who were excluded from the prior year first-time full-time cohort but who have re-enrolled at the institution their second year.</p>
Retention rate	<p>The percent of the adjusted prior fall semester cohort that re-enrolled at the institution as either full- or part-time in the current year.</p>
Outcome measures	<p>Starting in 2015, the National Center for Education Statistics began collecting graduation rates for four-year institutions bachelor degree seeking cohorts for all new students who entered in a base year, disaggregated according to their entry status as: First-time, full-time; First-time, part-time; Non-first-time (transfer), full-time; and Non-first-time (transfer), part-time.</p> <p>The end-point (6 yr. and 8 yr.) status is further differentiated as: Receiving an award (degree or non-degree credential) at your or subsequent institution, Still enrolled at your institution, Subsequently enrolled at another institution, Did not receive an award from your institution, or Enrollment status unknown.</p>

Table 4. Other Federal Terms Related to Financial Aid Eligibility

Term	Definition
Ability to benefit	<p>Restored to the Higher Education Act (HEA) in 2014, makes eligible for federal financial aid, students who do not have a high school diploma or recognized equivalent either by taking a U.S. Department of Education approved test or completing six credits.</p> <p>Related resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Guidance on Ability to Benefit https://sites.ed.gov/octae/2015/06/05/new-guidance-on-ability-to-benefit/ • Dear Colleague Letter on Ability to Benefit https://ifap.ed.gov/dpcletters/GEN1609.html
Satisfactory academic progress	<p>Evidence or markers that signify a student is completing requirements toward completing an academic program in a timely fashion.</p> <p>An institution must establish a reasonable satisfactory academic progress policy for determining whether an otherwise eligible student is making satisfactory academic progress in his or her educational program and may receive assistance under the Title IV, HEA programs.</p> <p>Related resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Federal Student Aid Office https://ifap.ed.gov/qahome/qaassessments/sap.html • Federal student aid eligibility requirements https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/eligibility/staying-eligible • Program Integrity Questions and Answers - Satisfactory Academic Progress https://www2.ed.gov/policy/highered/reg/hearulemaking/2009/sap.html

The Need for Terms that Define and Serve the Current Higher Education Ecosystem and its Learners

The committee acknowledges that its recommended changes to the terms incorporated in Core Component 4.C and the proposed important related terms are forward-thinking and go well beyond current accreditation and accountability requirements when compared to the student success terms currently in use. However, the changes are highly necessary. This is because the metrics and definitions currently in use are ambiguously defined and narrowly focused. In addition, they reflect a higher education system as it may have once been at some point in the twentieth century – one that privileges traditional four-year baccalaureate completion over the many other forms, and steadily diversifying types, of postsecondary learning and attainment. As such, the current definitions do not

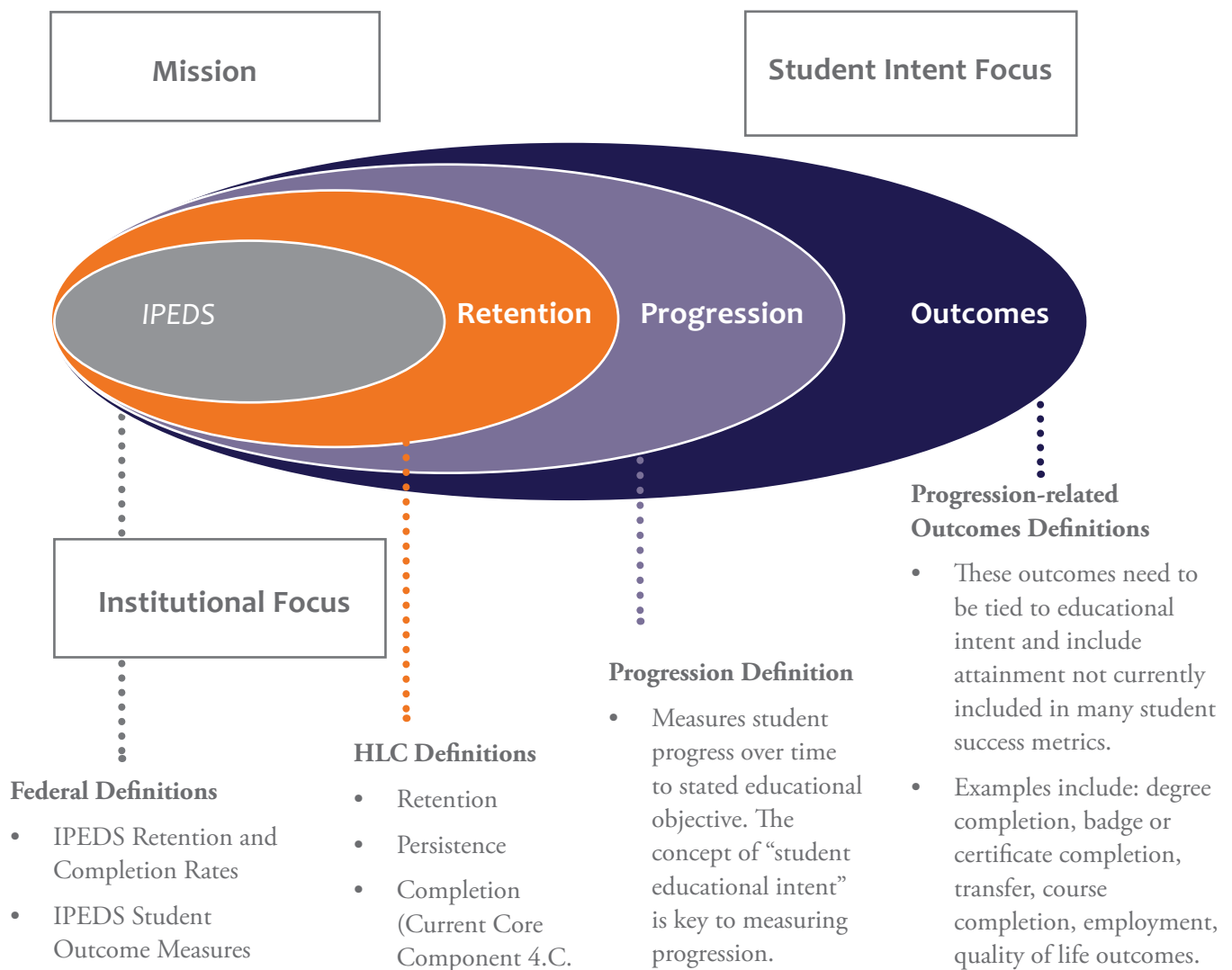
reflect the needs and lives of the vast array of twenty-first century learners. Thus, the established metrics are ill-suited for many institutions and, most importantly, the students they serve.

Understood in this context, a shift from the more institution-centric definitions of the twentieth century to the more student-centric terms the committee is advocating for would help “retool” HLC institutions for twenty-first century learning and learners. Rather than applying a deficit thinking approach— where institutions focus on attrition metrics—the proposed model and definition changes would be more growth oriented. Student educational intent would be used to both shape and reflect on institutional practices and the progression patterns for the students they serve. Two-year institutions that facilitate transfer would not be seen as being unable to retain students. Students who enroll in one or two courses to fulfill a job requirement would not be viewed as attrition statistics.

In its efforts to explain its definitions and the vision for their application, the committee created diagrams of the higher education institution in a student-intent and progression-focused system. Figure 1 shows how the definitions fit within a student intent and progression-framed system. The institutional mission and institutional-focused metrics and definitions exist on the left-hand side of the model. At its core (the gray oval) are the traditional IPEDS metrics as well as the new IPEDS student outcome measures. The next band of metrics and definitions exist in the orange oval. These include the current HLC-focused retention, completion, and persistence metrics and definitions. The third band – the light purple band – focuses on assessing progression as defined in the recommended

glossary. In order to measure progression, it is vital that institutions develop appropriate markers and milestones to accommodate the kinds of educational intentions that reflect and serve their student populations. Outcomes – the dark purple oval – include student-focused metrics such as successful transfer to another institution; completion of a course or courses for a specific purpose, such as better mastery of English, or a course required by an employer; completion of a certificate or badge; and completion of a degree that adequately prepares them for the next phase of their life. These and other outcomes as related to the intentions and objectives student brings to and develop at an institution reflect how an institution helps students move into and through the higher education ecosystem.

Figure 1. Student Educational Intent and Progression-framed System



Considerations and Challenges for Implementation

The proposed model is not without its challenges. The revised approach will require institutions to “re-tool” their student information and tracking systems which currently are oriented toward established degree completion definitions. In conjunction with this, institutions would have to develop an appropriate array of tracked educational intents or objectives as relevant to their mission and student population – as this can and should change over time. Protocols would have to be established so that student educational intent is not presented to inflate institutional performance. Also, HLC would need to work with federal bodies during Negotiated Rule Making and at other times to examine if and how the reporting and progression metrics, and possibly systems, could be altered so as not to hinder the awarding of federal financial aid.

But these limitations are not insurmountable. In short, while not without their challenges, the changes that would be required by the revised definitions could very well pale in comparison to the challenges that institutions will face if they continue to use flawed and ambiguous metrics from the past to track success for today’s and tomorrow’s learners.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) was awarded a \$500,000 Lumina Foundation grant in 2016 for programming to cultivate industry leading practices within the higher education accreditation process.

One initiative resulting from the grant is the development of HLC's Defining Student Success Data Initiative. It is comprised of representatives from institutions and national organizations that are focused on student success. This group met repeatedly and identified three main areas in which HLC might be able to contribute to the student success conversation:

- Defining Student Success Data: Recommendations for Changing the Conversation
- Defining Student Success Data: Recommendations for Perspectives on Accreditation.
- Defining Student Success Data: Recommendations for a Glossary of Terms.

HLC thanks the Initiative participants, listed below, for their work to help HLC contribute to greater student success:

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About The Higher Learning Commission: The Higher Learning Commission (hlcommission.org) accredits approximately 1,000 colleges and universities that have a home base in one of 19 states that stretch from West Virginia to Arizona. HLC is a private, nonprofit regional accrediting agency. HLC's mission is to assure and advance the quality of higher learning.

About Lumina Foundation: Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation committed to increasing the proportion of Americans with high-quality degrees, certificates and other credentials to 60 percent by 2025. Lumina's outcomes-based approach focuses on helping to design and build an equitable, accessible, responsive and accountable higher education system while fostering a national sense of urgency for action to achieve Goal 2025.