



# DEFINING STUDENT SUCCESS DATA RECOMMENDATIONS ON DIFFERENTIATION FOR DISAGGREGATION

## Introduction

Across higher education as a whole, in the U.S. Congress and in other places where the accreditation of colleges and universities is of interest, the discussion is wide ranging and the issues are many. At the most general level, the discussion seems to distinguish between three overarching models for accreditation: mission-driven, differentiated, and risk-based. “Mission-driven” accreditation is more or less the model which currently informs accreditation by HLC and other regional and specialized accrediting agencies in the United States. Institutions are free to define their own missions and are then reviewed against HLC’s Criteria for Accreditation. “Differentiated” accreditation envisions beginning with a scheme of categories into which all colleges are placed, and then evaluating all colleges within each category according to accreditation criteria specific to those categories. “Risk-based” accreditation could, at least in concept, be applied to either mission-driven or differentiated accreditation schemes; its focus is most heavily directed to institutions that are at risk of failing to fulfill their missions and/or to achieve acceptable outcome levels on key educational variables.

The group considered each of these models for accreditation and found each of them wanting. The missions that colleges and universities articulate for themselves are usually quite broad in scope. Common to all is the offering of degree-granting programs in one or more academic or professional fields of study, but to that common core is typically added a variety of additional ventures and functions. Some of those embody educational programs designed for specific non-degree-granting purposes; some include activities that are only tangentially connected to student success in the educational programs. Beginning with a relatively wide-ranging mission, accrediting agencies and their evaluators might well find their attention diverted from

the performance of an institution in its core educational role to its performance in the roles more tangential to that core.

The schemes of classification that underlie “differentiated” accreditation typically use institutional variables to differentiate institutions. The scheme originally developed by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education in 1970, and elaborated many times after its initial creation, is a case in point. The Carnegie classification categorizes colleges and universities by a variety of variables, including (but not limited to): size of the student body, levels and types of the degrees offered by the institution, size and scope of the institution’s research program, and affiliation

of the college with a religious group or denomination. The degree to which a college's students are able to achieve success is often as variable within these categories of schools as it is across them.

Finally, the utility of "risk-based" accreditation depends on the specific risks on which it is based. To the extent that those risks differ across colleges and universities, and to the extent that they are risks relevant to the pursuit of mission elements not directly attached to the college's educational programs, they are in jeopardy of diverting the attention of accreditors no less than does "mission-driven" accreditation.

Every year, colleges and universities recruit and admit students who bring, in the aggregate, a wide and varying set of intents or purposes. For some students, those intents or purposes are focused on the degrees or certificates they seek to earn. For some students, however, those degrees are not their primary foci. The focus may be transfer to another institution, completing special programs designed to introduce them to opportunities in the labor force or the job market or pursuit of further learning on a topic of interest. The intentions that the students bring with them to the doors of the colleges or universities they attend can be, in the aggregate, wide-ranging and variable over time.

Granting that, the success of students in pursuing their educational goals, as varying as those goals might be, should be the primary focus of accreditation evaluations. This paper is intended to apply to any college or university seeking new or continuing accreditation. In a nutshell, we are saying to colleges and universities that for the full population of students that they enroll:

**You recruited them. You admitted them.  
You need to support them to succeed.**

Accreditation focused on student success, differentiated by the background characteristics and levels of academic preparation of the students who enroll at those colleges and universities and by their intentions for enrolling at those institutions, is the vehicle for ensuring their accountability for the successes of their students.

## **Defining and Measuring Student Success**

To put student success first as a standard for accreditation is to recognize that the measures of success that are probably most familiar both within higher education and to the general public are limited in their utility. Chief among these are the measures of retention and graduation that colleges and universities report annually to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System

(IPEDS) of the U.S. Department of Education. Both are defined by and for populations of first-time, full-time undergraduate students. (In recent years, IPEDS has expanded its data reporting and handling procedures to try to account for the population of students who enter a baccalaureate-granting institution not as first-time students but as transfers from another college or university.)

Retention is defined as the rate of persistence of those first-time, full-time undergraduates from the fall semester of the first year to the fall semester of the second year, while graduation is measured as the share of an entering population of first-time, full-time undergraduates that graduates within 150% of the time – six years for baccalaureate institutions, and three years for associate institutions. These measures, and especially the six-year graduation rates, are regularly reported by the media and are among the measures employed to rank the "best" colleges and universities in the nation.

This paper does not debate these particular definitions and measurements of student success. Rather, it questions the almost exclusive focus that is placed on them. Given the varying intentions that motivate students to enroll in college and the varying types of programs and experiences that institutions deploy to address those intentions, these two variables are simply inadequate for measuring the student success for the full population of students in attendance at a college or university. Consider the following:

1. The retention and completion rates gathered by IPEDS and reported by others do not address student success at the graduate level, in the master's, specialist or doctoral programs in many academic disciplines that many universities offer. Neither do they address student success in the professional schools, such as law, business, divinity, or medicine. Student success in these areas and settings is no less a concern than it is for undergraduates. Retention and graduation rates may or may not be the most appropriate measures of success to adopt here; time to degree may well constitute an improvement. Whatever measures are adopted, some are needed.
2. For colleges and universities granting baccalaureate degrees, the conventional measures of retention and graduation do not exhaust the relevant measures of student success. Additional measures of success for these institutions might include: rates of student continuation into graduate or professional school; rates of winning prestigious grants or fellowships for further study; and rates of post-college entry into the Peace Corps, Teach for America, and other

service settings. Whether these apply to any given college or university will depend on the mission of the institution. The point is that some measures may be quite appropriate for measuring student success in such mission contexts.

3. At many community colleges that offer associate degrees, many students enroll with the intention of completing courses at a reduced financial cost that will enable them to transfer smoothly to baccalaureate-granting institutions. Many of those students are uninterested in earning an associate degree, and many will transfer before completing all of the courses required to do so. IPEDS now accounts for these students at their transfer destination, but accounting for their success at their transfer origins is no less necessary to capture student success. In such cases, successful transfer is not less a success than is degree attainment and measures of student success need to reflect this.
4. For some undergraduate institutions, student success might constitute successful completion of a “core curriculum” of courses or experiences, accompanied or not by the attainment of a specific degree or certificate. One example is offered by the state of Indiana, where completion of a core curriculum at either a two-year or a four-year institution is measured. The intentions of the students entering Indiana’s colleges and universities may not be relevant to this definition of student success, but its value to and for the people of the state and its role in public policy as an evaluative tool makes it a worthwhile option to consider.
5. Some colleges work closely with businesses and professional organizations in their surrounding regions to develop educational programs designed to prepare students for work and career settings in those regions. These programs may or may not include formal credit-bearing courses and the students enrolling in them may or may not be seeking formal degrees or certificates. For colleges that develop and offer such programs, the most appropriate measures of student success may well be specific to the programs.
6. Most colleges will welcome the enrollment in their courses of the “curious” – those who wish simply to learn more about a topic. For such students, persistence and completion may be irrelevant. Measures of success for such programs might well be drawn from questionnaires or surveys of student satisfaction with the material learned, and of whether

the amount learned was worth the price paid.

**Note:** such measures might also be worthwhile for those students who are enrolled in more traditional degree-granting or certificate-granting programs.

These points do not cover all of the student intentions or the institutional responses to those intentions for which measures of student success should be developed, implemented and reported. Neither do they cover all of the possible dimensions of student success that may be of interest to students, their families and the larger public. Compendia like the College Scorecard, which includes measures of student indebtedness upon graduation or separation from the college, post-collegiate earnings, and post-graduation loan default and repayment rates, raise complex issues of the meaning and definition of student success, especially in the context of the accreditation of colleges and universities. This paper takes no position on those issues, other than to highlight their possibilities as measures. This paper advocates for the development and deployment in the context of institutional accreditation of measures of student success that will encompass all of the differentiated groups of which the larger “student body” at any given college or university is composed. In one way or another, using one measure or another, the college is accountable for all of them.

Some have argued that, for every college or university, student success should be measured against an absolute standard and that the accreditation of that college or university should be reaffirmed or questioned based on that absolute comparison. This paper does not subscribe to that position.

There are too few measures of student success, and too little extant research on what such an absolute standard should be controlling for other variables that affect student success, to offer a valid and reliable standard or evaluative method.

A more appropriate evaluation will focus on trend data, on the measures of student success reported over a string of years. On any given measure of student success as defined and deployed for any given group of students, it is easy to imagine variation over time in the results reported. It is also easy to imagine variations across groups of students for whom the measurements are being taken. Without such a time-based analysis of trends in student success, it is impossible for an HLC reviewer to infer whether a college or university is consistently performing at an acceptable level, and whether it is organized to generate and sustain that level of performance. It is also impossible for that HLC reviewer to infer whether the measure of student success being reported for a single

year comes from a particularly good or a particularly bad year for the measure invoked. Finally, it is difficult for the reviewer to identify from the analysis of any one year or from any one measure whether the student success being studied and reported is a central focus of the institution's mission. For all of these reasons, trend data on student success from all or almost all of the groups of the larger student body should be differentiated.

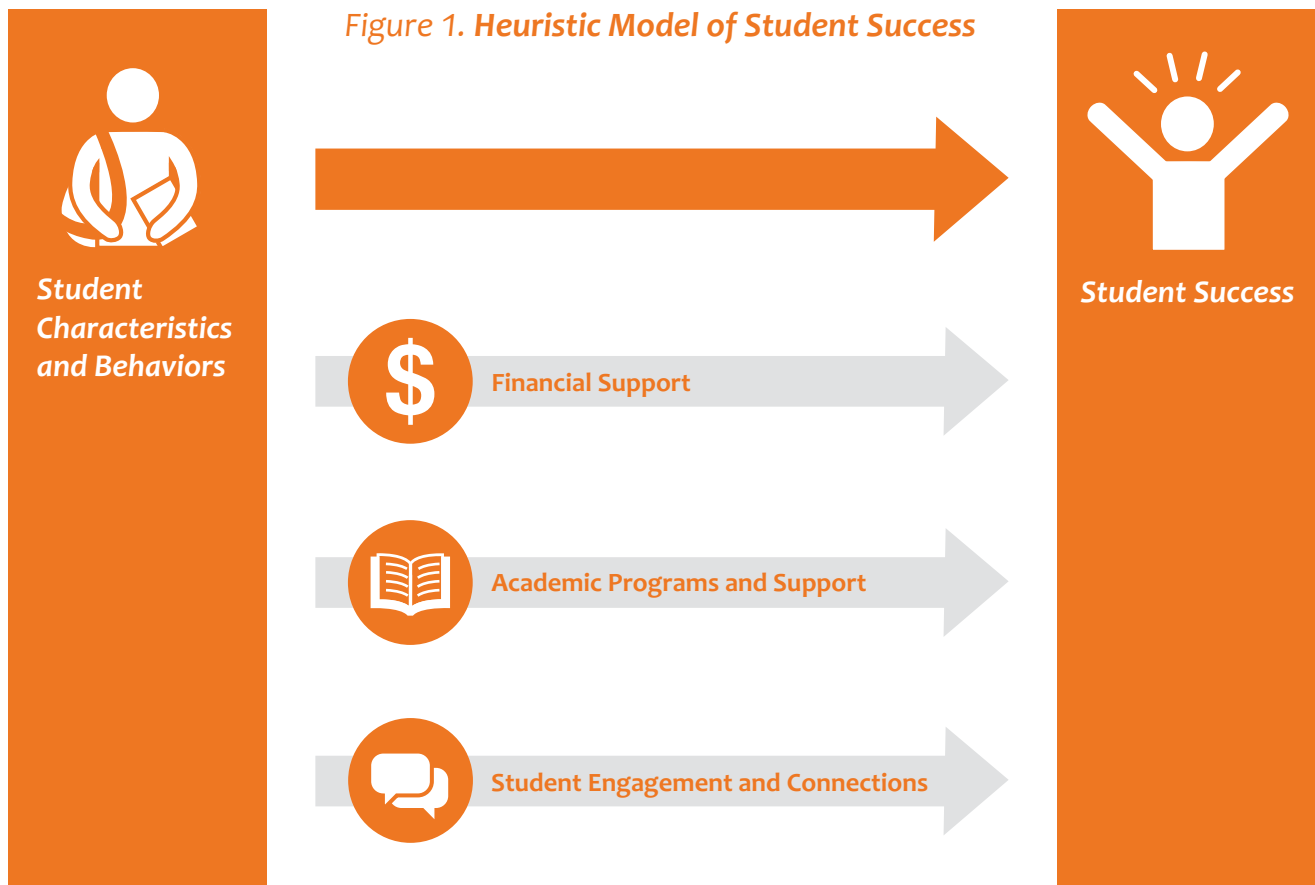
## Explaining Student Success

If student success is to be measured and analyzed on a longitudinal basis, then it follows that the explanations for student success must likewise be measured and analyzed. If nothing else, those explanations should be data-informed in ways that are linked to the measures of success. Toward that end, this paper introduces a heuristic model of student success that identifies, at a high level of generality, the primary variables that might explain trends in student success. See Figure 1.

This model features the key variables or clusters of variables that research and practice have demonstrated to be linked to student "success" in higher education.

The variables displayed here are probably best thought of as clusters of more specific variables that have more direct and measurable effects on student success and that can help provide explanations for success trends at a college or university.

- 1. Student Characteristics** include all of those background characteristics of students and their families or households that are linked to student success, including sex, race/ethnicity, marital status, academic preparation, socioeconomic status, and status as a first-generation-in-college student, to name a few. This cluster also includes Behaviors that are linked to retention and/or completion as well. Full-time/part-time attendance patterns, stopping or dropping out, and time spent working at an unrelated job (whether by choice or necessity) are examples.
- 2. Financial Support** includes the amount of financial assistance a college can provide its students to preclude them from either needing to work extensively to cover their educational costs or to graduate with extraordinary levels of indebtedness.



**3. Academic Programs** includes the menu of certificate/degree options offered to students at a college and the associated pre-requisites, program requirements and expectations which characterize those programs. Support includes the various means of support or assistance a college can offer students as they pursue their academic programs, but especially those “high impact” practices that are conducive to students achieving higher levels of success.

**4. Student Engagement and Connections** includes the variety of means by which a college can encourage and facilitate connections between students, to the faculty and staff, and to the larger college culture. This category of variables includes surveys like the National Survey of Student Engagement.

**5. Student Success** includes various measures already discussed. They may be based on measures of time spent in academic or other programs, or on rates of attainment of degrees, certificates or other formal credentials. They may also be based on measures of satisfaction of the students with their experiences in the program or initiative.

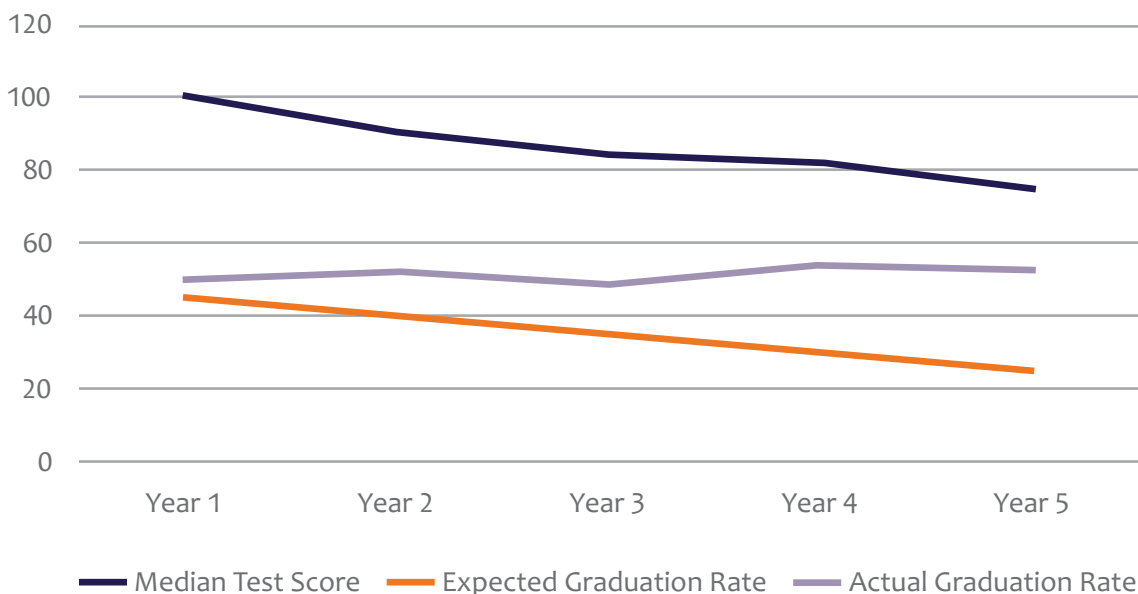
Without meaning to be prescriptive about specific variables to be included in such a model or about specific levels of student success to be deemed acceptable, the model is sufficiently general to be applicable to all of the institutions accredited by HLC (or by any other regional accreditor).

The “explanation” of student success involves a comparison of trends. Trends in student success would be displayed, along with trends in college level activity.

Consider one hypothetical case for such an explanation. A college’s mission states that it serves those historically underserved by higher education. This involves recruiting students whose levels of preparation for baccalaureate programs are low by conventional standards and assisting those students in earning certificates or degrees. Suppose that the college measures its entering students’ median scores on standardized aptitude tests like the SAT or the ACT. The college also chooses to measure student success with the conventional six-year graduation rate, comparing its actual graduation rate to one expected based solely on its test score patterns. Suppose further that its trend results for all three of these variables are displayed in Figure 2.

This hypothetical college registers the graduation rate that is at least level and perhaps marginally growing over the years for which the data are reported. At the same time, it registers a growing level of academic under-preparedness among its entering students, as measured by the median test score indicator, which suggests that it is remaining true to its core mission over time with increasing intensity. Based on the trend in the test score measure, an observer might have expected a declining trend in the graduation rates. That is not what appears in the actual trend. This hypothetical college has a success story to tell.

**Figure 2. Median Test Scores and Graduation Rates**





Suppose this hypothetical college had found that the primary barrier to raising levels of student success was financial need among its students. To address that need, suppose it deployed more resources toward need-based grant aid applicable to students' educational expenses. The college measures its need-based aid expenditure against its expected graduation rates, with its expected graduation rates based on test score patterns, and its actual graduation rates. The results are displayed in Figure 3.

This hypothetical college still has a success story to tell based on its actual graduation rates; they rise regularly above the expected graduation rates based solely on entering students' median test scores. By the same token, the graduation rates do not rise to the extent that might have been expected had barriers to graduation resided solely in their students' financial situations. The explanation for the pattern of student success at this hypothetical college that can be offered from these data is only partial, but it has the benefit of being data-informed and focused on the actual pattern of student success.

There is importance in maintaining a strong distinction between means and ends. For colleges compiling evidence for their accreditation reviews, and for HLC peer reviewers evaluating that evidence, the end is student success. The means toward achieving that end include the "financial support", the "academic programs and support", and the vehicles for promoting "student engagement and connections" as specified in the heuristic framework. The "student characteristics and behaviors" included in the

framework suggest limiting or enhancing conditions for the achievement of student success. The means and the conditions do not substitute for the ends. The primary factor to be analyzed and explained is the achievement of student success, however that is defined, measured and reported.

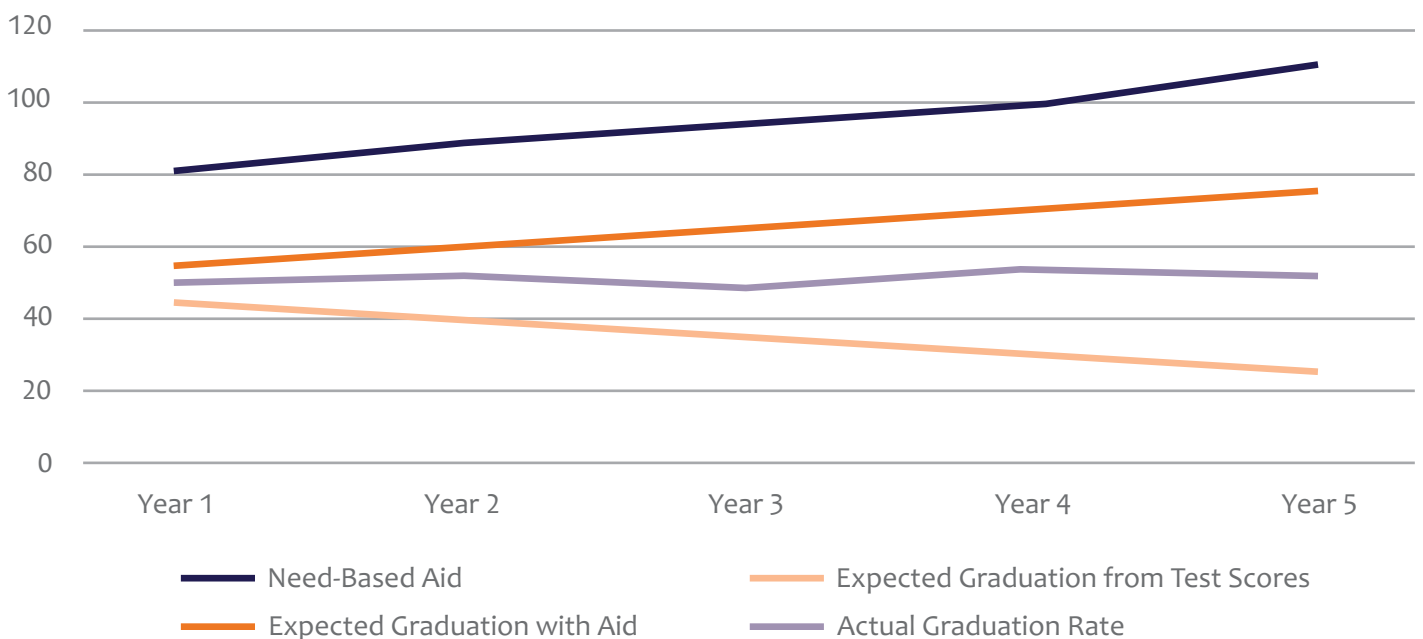
## Some Implications for the Practice of Accreditation

When HLC evaluates a college or university for initial accreditation or for reaffirmation of accreditation, it does so against the Criteria for Accreditation.

This paper further suggests that HLC's Criteria for Accreditation should be re-evaluated and possibly rewritten to reflect the centrality of student success for the accreditation process. The rewritten Criteria for Accreditation should be reordered, so as to bring to the forefront the ones directly addressing student success. That said, putting student success first does not imply that the accreditation process no longer address other topics. Evaluations of topics like governance and finances remain important topics for the accreditation process. Colleges and universities should continue to be evaluated along all dimensions identified in the Criteria for Accreditation.

Accreditation processes are synchronic in nature. Colleges and universities generally address the Criteria for Accreditation at one point in time, the present. As does the peer review process. To be sure, some materials

**Figure 3. Need-Based Aid and Graduation Rates**



relevant to a more diachronic approach may be included. Even where that span is relatively long, however, the contents are not organized in a fashion conducive to a more diachronic assessment of colleges.

To build an accreditation process that is more diachronic or longitudinal in nature, this paper suggests two dimensions. The first is to require as a part of every Assurance Filing an explicit discussion by the college being reviewed of substantive changes it has experienced since its last HLC comprehensive evaluation. These changes should be tied to the Criteria for Accreditation, so as to limit them and their discussion to the most important developments since that last review. (In this regard, a college may well not have changed since the last review.)

The second is to require as a part of every Assurance Filing data displays and discussions of selected measures of each of the major components of the heuristic model. The display and the analysis should portray measures over time, so that both levels and trends in the achievement of student success—however that is defined at and for the institution being reviewed—can be readily observed. The span of time to be covered by these displays should probably be in the range of five to seven years, a sufficient span to enable a reader to distinguish trends from anomalous single-year occurrences. Similar presentations

for measures of the other variables included in the model should also be provided over that same span of time. With these, the colleges and universities being reviewed can offer data-informed discussions of major changes in the factors that have produced those levels and trends with regard to student success.

Through the Institutional Update, colleges and universities already provide HLC with data elements which might prove useful in developing and implementing the suggestions for trend displays and analyses. Some additional data might need to be gathered during that process to more fully implement the model. HLC could specify and include them without making the annual update process unduly cumbersome or complicated. HLC also provides regular training for its peer reviewers. The training would need revision were these suggestions actively pursued and implemented

Implementing these suggestions would more closely focus accreditation on the primary variable against which colleges and universities should be assessed. That key variable, of course, is student success.





# 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 on Differentiation for Disaggregation.
- 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](http://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.