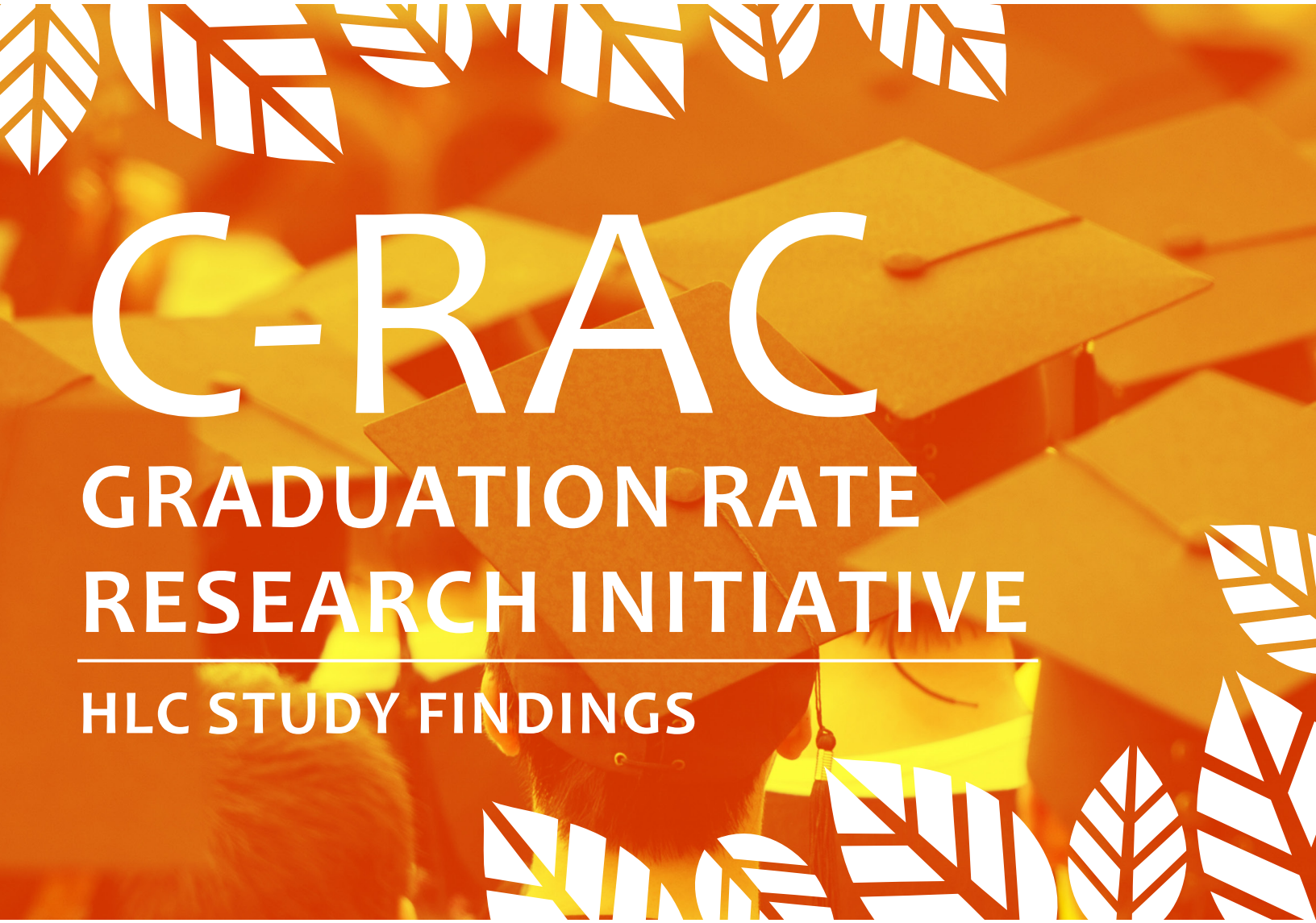
HIGHER LEARNING COMMISSION



C-RAC

GRADUATION RATE RESEARCH INITIATIVE

HLC STUDY FINDINGS

HLC, as a member of the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC), participated in a national initiative to increase focus on helping institutions improve retention and completion rates.

HLC surveyed member institutions that have federally reported low graduation rates and member institutions that have federally reported high graduation rates for information to help HLC better understand how institutions track the academic outcomes of students, how institutions have been working to improve those outcomes, and the context affecting specific student populations.

THE RESEARCH METHOD

Data for this report were gathered from two surveys conducted by HLC, differentiated by the graduation rates of institutions. The first survey was of institutions with low graduation rates (defined as at or below 15 percent for two-year institutions or at or below 25 percent for four-year institutions and/or below one standard deviation threshold in each Carnegie classification). This survey was conducted in Fall 2016 and included 187 HLC institutions. The second survey, of institutions with moderate to high graduation rates in each Carnegie classification, was conducted in Spring 2017 and it included 175 randomly selected HLC institutions. Each survey had identical questions, allowing for comparisons of information across types of institutions. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to perform the analyses. The quotes referenced below are from survey responses.

THE FINDINGS

GRADUATION RATE IS INSUFFICIENT

The graduation rate alone does not provide an accurate picture of student success. For colleges and universities with low graduation rates, their rates would be higher if they included all students. (The U.S. Department of Education only counts first-time, full-time, degree or certificate-seeking students.) The mean graduation rate for low graduation rate colleges and universities increased from 19 percent to 33 percent when all students are included.

THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN HIGH AND LOW GRADUATION RATES ARE RESOURCES AND ENROLLMENT REQUIREMENTS

A widely reported issue across groups was the **declining resources** for the college or university and the student. About half of responding high- and low-graduation rate institutions noted a decline in funding, specifically state and local funding.

> "We are just beginning to look for ideas to improve these [graduation and retention] rates. We have limited resources due to the decline in state funding. We need to add additional staff in order to really address this issue, and we are unable to do that at this time."

An exception was high-graduation rate, four-year institutions. Only one-fourth of this group noted a decline in funding as a challenge. Yet, one-third of the group noted affordability and access to aid was a more widespread issue for students.

Additionally, the majority of institutions indicated student income level as an issue.

> "Many community college students have a variety of life circumstances that contribute to retention and completion rates. The financial pressure is one that prevents their continued enrollment. The 2015 Noel Levitz sample of full-time students indicates that 73 percent work, with 33 percent working full-time. Balancing the pressures of working, family, and other obligations puts students at risk for not completing on time and not being retained."

While the majority of institutions have improvement plans related to persistence and completion, the differences identified by the data points here indicate that the more funds an institution is able to put toward the student's success, the better they are likely to do.

All groups indicated that **students were underprepared**. Many of the institutions have low admission standards, providing opportunity and access to students who are not fully prepared to succeed at college. This is a representative response from an HLC institution:

> "As an open door institution, the College accepts students of all levels, which means a majority of the College's students must take developmental education course work. A student starting at the lowest level of remediation will end up spending an extra year due to the remedial course sequence–that is, if the student is successful in the course work. As studies completed by the Community College Research Center have shown, only 25 percent of students who are assigned to a developmental course will eventually graduate."

To ensure access and opportunity for students to higher education in America, many of HLC's institutions have made a commitment to open or near open access campuses. This philosophy results in lower graduation rates and in many circumstances, is a mandate placed upon certain institutions by policymakers.

> "The student population is a big consideration which is not generally considered when comparing rates. Nontraditional students are attending school while juggling many commitments, and the expectation for institutions serving these students should be different than those serving traditional students."

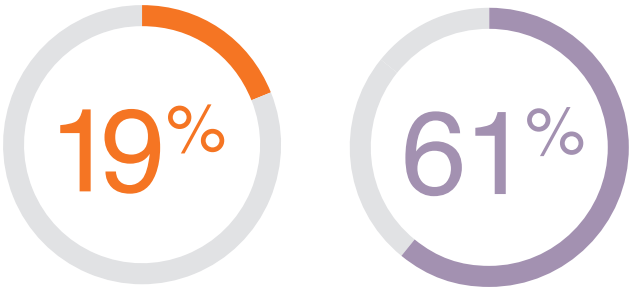
> "We are surrounded by several four-year colleges and universities that actively recruit community college students before they complete a certificate or degree. The majority of students transfer out having accumulated less than 30 credits. A high percentage of students see the College as an economically viable alternative to the four-year institution."

WHETHER HIGH OR LOW PERFORMING, INSTITUTIONS ARE TRACKING STUDENT SUCCESS

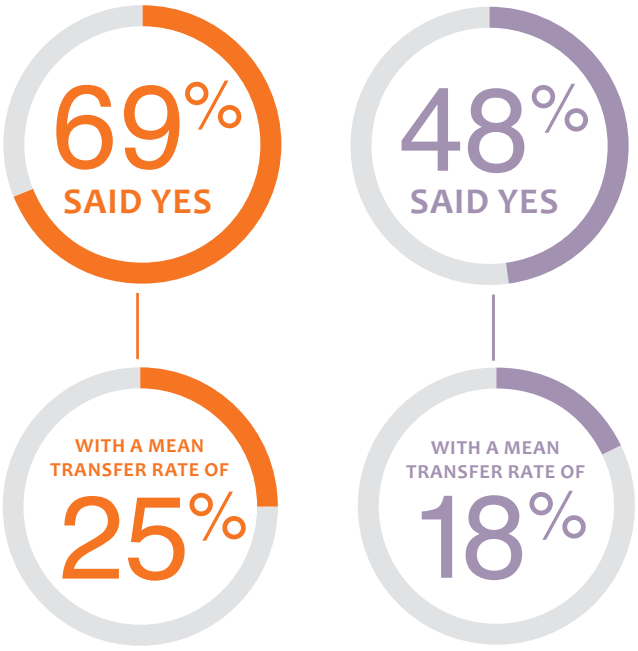
Institutions from both groups consistently track additional data regarding student success beyond the graduation rate including transfer rates and course completion rates.

SUPPORTING DATA

Mean Graduation Rate

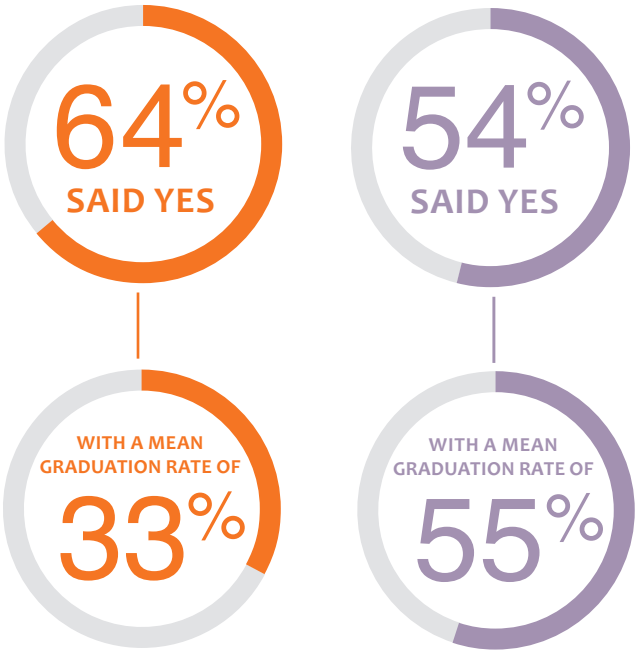


Q: Does your institution monitor the transfer-out rate of its students?



Q: Does your institution monitor the graduation rate of students who are not included in the graduation rate reported to the U.S. Department of Education?

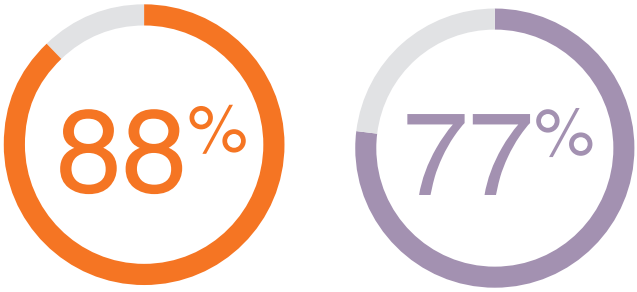
(The U.S. Department of Education only counts first-time, full-time, degree-or certificate seeking students)



Q: Does your institution monitor course completion rates of its students?

Q: Does your institution have a specific plan for improving completion and retention?

Q: What percentage of applicants did your institution accept in Academic Year 2014-15?



LOW GRADUATION RATE GROUP

HIGH GRADUATION RATE GROUP

Q: Does your institution require an entry exam for admission?

Q: What is your institution's minimum grade point average for admission?

LOW GRADUATION RATE GROUP

HIGH GRADUATION RATE GROUP

Q: What challenges does your institution have in improving retention and completion rates?

2 YEAR INSTITUTIONS, LOW GRADUATION RATES : TOP 5 RESPONSES

37 INSTITUTIONS

DECLINE IN FUNDING (STATE / LOCAL)

30 INSTITUTIONS

STUDENT PREPAREDNESS/ UNDERPREPARED STUDENTS

27 INSTITUTIONS

AT-RISK POPULATIONS

11 INSTITUTIONS

TRANSFER OUT TO FOUR YEAR COLLEGES OR UNIVERSITIES (HIGH TRANSFER RATE)

10 INSTITUTIONS

ACCESS TO STUDENT SERVICES

Q: What challenges does your institution have in improving retention and completion rates?

2 YEAR INSTITUTIONS, HIGH GRADUATION RATES : TOP 5 RESPONSES

28 INSTITUTIONS — DECLINE IN FUNDING (STATE / LOCAL)

15 INSTITUTIONS — STUDENT PREPAREDNESS/ UNDERPREPARED STUDENTS

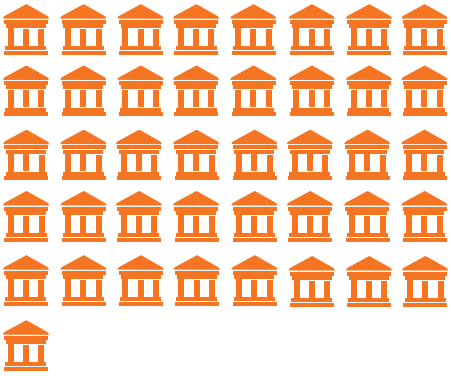
10 INSTITUTIONS — LOW INCOME

9 INSTITUTIONS — AT-RISK POPULATIONS

9 INSTITUTIONS — OPEN ACCESS

4 YEAR INSTITUTIONS, LOW GRADUATION RATES : TOP 5 RESPONSES

41 INSTITUTIONS — DECLINE IN FUNDING (STATE / LOCAL)



32 INSTITUTIONS — STUDENT PREPAREDNESS/ UNDERPREPARED STUDENTS

31 INSTITUTIONS — LOW-INCOME

31 INSTITUTIONS — FIRST-GENERATION

26 INSTITUTIONS — AT-RISK POPULATIONS

Q: What challenges does your institution have in improving retention and completion rates?

4 YEAR INSTITUTIONS, HIGH GRADUATION RATES : TOP 5 RESPONSES

34 INSTITUTIONS

COST/AFFORDABILITY/ACCESS TO AID

27 INSTITUTIONS

DECLINE IN FUNDING (STATE/LOCAL)

22 INSTITUTIONS

STUDENT PREPAREDNESS / UNDERPREPARED STUDENTS

20 INSTITUTIONS

FIRST GENERATION

19 INSTITUTIONS

LOW-INCOME

NEXT STEPS

HLC will continue to evaluate the data from this survey along with the findings from its Student Success Initiative over the next two years to define and test other measuring tools for retention, persistence and completion. This data will set the stage for HLC's accreditation standards for student success in the future.