

Evaluating Student Success Outcomes

Student success is a central focus of the Higher Learning Commission. In recent years, we have conducted multiple research projects and initiatives to better understand how our member institutions define, measure and work to improve student success outcomes. All of our efforts have made one thing clear: in order to ensure the quality of educational offerings, it is imperative for an institution to know its students — their intent for their educational pursuits when they enter, performance while enrolled, and experiences after ending their studies.

Beginning in 2024, HLC will launch a multi-phase project to improve our ability to track student success outcomes at our member institutions and better support them in knowing their students. In the first phase, HLC will evaluate three educational outcome measures that institutions report to IPEDS: fall-to-fall retention rates of first-time students, graduation rates within 150% of normal time, and outcome measures at eight years after entry.

These measures will be used for a number of important purposes:

1. To identify concerns that require institutional attention or HLC follow-up.
2. To identify opportunities for HLC to support member institutions.
3. To increase transparency with students and other stakeholders.

This document describes the first phase of this project. The project is still in development, and details may change based on feedback from institutions, peer reviewers and other stakeholders. HLC will continuously evaluate the project as it is implemented and will make adjustments as necessary.

Phase 1: Educational Outcomes

HLC will evaluate three educational outcome measures that have been developed by NCES and derived from IPEDS survey data: fall-to-fall retention rates of first-time students, graduation rates within 150% of normal time, and outcome measures at eight years after entry. HLC will obtain institutional-level outcome data directly from the IPEDS Data Center with the latest available data in alignment with the reporting period for the Institutional Update.

Definitions

Fall-to-Fall Retention Rate (First-Time Cohort)

The rate at which students persist in their educational program at an institution.

For four-year institutions, this is the percentage of first-time bachelor's (or equivalent) degree-seeking

undergraduates from the previous fall who are again enrolled in the current fall.

For all other institutions, this is the percentage of first-time degree/certificate-seeking students from the previous fall who either re-enrolled or successfully completed their program by the current fall.

Graduation Rate Within 150% of Normal Time

The total number of completers within 150% of normal time divided by the revised adjusted cohort. Data are collected on the number of students entering the institution as full-time, first-time, degree/certificate-seeking undergraduate students in a particular year (cohort), by race/ethnicity and gender; the number completing their program within 150% of normal time to completion; the number that transfer to other institutions if transfer is part of the institution's mission.

Completion and Transfer Rates Measured at 8 Years After Entry

Completion Rate at 8 Years After Entry: Measure of student completion on a more diverse group of undergraduate students at degree-granting institutions, disaggregated by four cohorts (first-time, full-time; first-time, part-time; non-first-time, full-time; and non-first-time, part-time) and on eight sub-cohorts (based on Pell Grant recipient status) of degree/certificate-seeking students.

Transfer Rate at 8 Years After Entry: Measure of transfer outcome (without completion) of undergraduate students at degree-granting institutions, disaggregated by four cohorts (first-time, full-time; first-time, part-time; non-first-time, full-time; and non-first-time, part-time) and on eight sub-cohorts (based on Pell Grant recipient status) of degree/certificate-seeking students.

How the Data Will Be Used

Student Success Indicators

In the coming months, HLC staff will define benchmarks for these student success measures and develop a procedure for analyzing institutional data against the benchmarks. Similar to our [financial and non-financial indicator procedures](#), this procedure will help identify concerns that require additional institutional attention or HLC monitoring.

In spring 2024, we will pilot the new benchmarks and procedure using the data collected in phase 1. During the pilot project, we will gather feedback

from institutions and adjust the benchmarks and/or procedure as needed. We plan to fully implement the procedure in spring 2025, following the 2025 Institutional Update reporting period.

Beyond this new process, the data may also be used to demonstrate institutional compliance with HLC's Criteria for Accreditation.

Institutional Support

HLC will analyze the aggregate institutional data to identify trends and opportunities to support member institutions. We will consider needs for new resources and programming on student success based on this data.

Public Information

In order to provide more information to students and other stakeholders, HLC will publish information about our member institutions' student success outcomes on our website. We will add a new section to each institution's Statement of Accreditation Status that provides links to the institution's profiles in the College Scorecard and College Navigator, as well as the link to student achievement data that the institution provides in the 2024 Institutional Update.

Future Phases

In later phases of this project, HLC will evaluate other student success outcomes, which may include post-college labor market and loan repayment outcomes. We will work with institutions to identify these outcome measures and the appropriate data sources, such as the U.S. Department of Education's College Scorecard and others.

Related Resources

- [HLC Student Success Initiatives and Publications](#)
- [EVOLVE 2025 Strategic Plan: Student Outcomes Goals and Action Steps](#)
- [IPEDS Data Collection System Glossary](#)

Questions?

Contact HLC at accreditation@hlcommission.org