

# Evaluating Student Success Outcomes

## Phase 1 Update

Earlier this year, HLC launched a multi-phase project to improve our ability to track student success outcomes at our member institutions. This project will build on the research and other initiatives that HLC has completed in recent years to 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.

Our goals for this project are to:

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

## Phase 1: Educational Outcome Measures

In Phase 1 of this project, we are developing a procedure to evaluate student success outcome data in accordance with appropriate benchmarks. We are using IPEDS Fall Enrollment, Graduation Rate and Outcome Measures survey data to compute and evaluate three educational outcome measures:

- First-year retention rate
- Graduation rate within 150% of normal time
- Completion and transfer rate at 8 years after entry to college

HLC has identified proposed benchmarks (described below) for these measures. In May 2024, we will survey institutions whose performance falls below these benchmarks to better understand

how they track and use student outcome measures and how these data relate to their institutional mission and student body. We will use this information to finalize the benchmarks and evaluation process, with the aim of launching the new process in spring 2025.

## First-Year Retention Rate (First-Time Cohort)

The rate at which first-time students, including both full-time and part-time, persist in their educational program at an institution, computed using IPEDS Fall Enrollment survey data.

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.

### Institutions reporting:

All institutions that enroll a first-time, degree/certificate-seeking, undergraduate cohort

### Students included in the cohort:

Full-time and part-time, first-time, degree/certificate-seeking undergraduates

### Basic formula:

Students from the previous year cohort who re-enroll  
or complete their program by the current year

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All students in the adjusted cohort from prior year

### IPEDS survey data variables and formula:

(RET\_NMF + RET\_NMP)

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(RRFTCTA + RRPTCTA)

## Graduation Rate Within 150% of Normal Time

The percentage of full-time, first-time, degree/certificate-seeking undergraduate students in a particular cohort year who complete their educational program within 150% of normal time, computed using IPEDS Graduation Rates survey data.

### Institutions reporting:

All institutions that enroll a full-time, first-time, degree/certificate-seeking undergraduate cohort

### Students included in the cohort:

Full-time, first-time, degree/certificate-seeking undergraduates

### Basic formula:

Students in the cohort who complete their  
program within 150% of normal time

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All students in the adjusted cohort

### IPEDS survey data variables and formula:

(GRTOTLT where GRATYPE = 3 or 30)

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(GRTOTLT where GRATYPE = 2 or 29)

# Completion and Transfer Rate at 8 Years After Entry

A broad measure of student success that adds together the completion and transfer rates into one measure, computed using IPEDS Outcome Measures survey data. The combined measure provides the percentage of all entering undergraduate students in a particular cohort year, inclusive of all Pell Grant status, prior college experience and attendance levels, who completed their educational program or transferred to subsequent institutions, measured at 8 years after entry.

### Institutions reporting:

All institutions that enroll degree/certificate-seeking undergraduate students

### Students included in the cohort:

All entering degree/certificate-seeking undergraduates

### Basic formulas:

Completion and transfer rate at 8 years after entry = completion rate + transfer rate.

#### Completion rate

Students in the cohort who complete their program within 8 years after entry

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All students in the adjusted cohort

#### Transfer rate

Students in the cohort who transfer out of the reporting institution without completing their program and subsequently enroll in another institution anytime within 8 years after entry

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All students in the adjusted cohort

### IPEDS survey data variables and formulas:

#### Completion rate

(OMCERT8 + OMASSC8 + OMBACH8 where OMCHRT = 50)

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(OMACHRT where OMCHRT = 50)

#### Transfer rate

(OMENRAI where OMCHRT = 50)

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(OMACHRT where OMCHRT = 50)

# Proposed Benchmarks: Methodology

HLC has analyzed institutional-level data from the three most recent years of the IPEDS Fall Enrollment, Graduation Rates, and Outcome Measures surveys and developed performance benchmarks in the three measures noted above.

The data analysis described below was conducted in January 2024.

## Dataset and Pooled-Cohort Approach

HLC extracted and used complete data files from IPEDS 2020–21 and 2021–22 collection years (final release data) and from IPEDS 2022–23 collection year (provisional release data, made available in mid-January 2024). To calculate institutional-level outcome measures, we used a pooled-cohort approach by combining student cohort data from these three survey years to account for institutions with a small enrollment size and year-over-year variations in entering student cohort characteristics. We combined raw data values, such as the adjusted cohort total and the number of completers within 150% of normal time, from these survey years to calculate the respective numerator and denominator in the IPEDS formula for each outcome measure.

## Data Coverage of the Membership

HLC's dataset accounts for 93% of HLC membership. These are the institutions that (1) participate in the federal student financial aid programs, (2) have an undergraduate student population, and (3) reported data for at least one of the three student outcome measures in the three most recent IPEDS survey years.

Specifically, among 958 HLC member institutions:

- 895 institutions meet the criteria described above.
- Four institutions do not participate in federal student financial aid programs and do not report data to IPEDS.
- One institution did not admit entering undergraduate students in the timeframe of the outcome measures that HLC has selected.
- 58 institutions do not have an undergraduate student population. (Of these, 52 report data to IPEDS, and six do not.)

## Institutional Peer Groups by Enrollment and Admissions Selectivity

In order to identify benchmarks appropriate to institutional characteristics, HLC divided institutions into peer groups based on their undergraduate enrollment profile and admissions selectivity. We adapted the [2021 Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education](#) to assign institutions into four peer groups:

- **Two-year:** Institutions that predominantly award two-year degrees or certificates.
- **Tribal colleges:** As per the Basic Carnegie Classification.
- **Four-year, inclusive:** Institutions that predominantly award four-year and/or advanced degrees and are open admissions institutions or accept 80% or more of applicants.
- **Four-year, selective:** Institutions that predominantly award four-year and/or advanced degrees and are categorized as “selective” or “more selective” in the 2021 Carnegie Classification.

While tribal colleges are identified as a group under the Basic Classification methodology, all other member institutions are identified “as two- or four-year based on a combination of IPEDS Completions and Institutional Characteristics data (institutional level),” as noted in the Undergraduate Profile Classification methodology.

Four-year institutions are identified as “inclusive” or “selective” based on the admissions selectivity index provided in the 2021 Carnegie Classification database of institutions or by admission rate if the institutions were not assigned an admissions selectivity index. Note that HLC chooses to combine the “selective” and “more selective” categories in the 2021 Carnegie Classification as “selective.” In the 2021 Carnegie Classification framework, the [admissions selectivity index](#) was identified based on institutions’ percent of applicants admitted and/or submitted entry test scores (SAT, ACT). Open admissions institutions are all placed into the “inclusive” category.

In cases where the 2021 Carnegie Classification public dataset did not provide a specific admissions selectivity index, HLC used aggregated data from the most recent three data collection years of the IPEDS Admissions survey to calculate the institutional-level admissions rate. Where the percentage of applicants admitted was used to identify admissions selectivity, “inclusive” institutions are defined as those that accepted 80% or more.

# Benchmarks by Peer Group

HLC summarized the variation of institutional-level outcomes in each peer group using the following statistics (see Table 1): the average (mean), the standard deviation, and the lowest 5th percentile of the distribution of an outcome measure.

Each institution’s outcomes were compared against the mean of their peer group and categorized as one of the following:

- At or above the mean
- Within one standard deviation below the mean
- More than one standard deviation below the mean
- Within the lowest 5th percentile

Table 2 on page 6 provides the number of institutions and range of values in each benchmark category.

**Table 1. Benchmark Values**

Measure by Peer Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	One Standard Deviation Below the Mean	Lowest 5th Percentile
<b>Two-Year</b>				
Retention Rate	55.39%	9.79%	45.60%	41.30%
Graduation Rate (150%)	34.13%	12.94%	21.19%	15.42%
Completion + Transfer Rate	58.59%	10.20%	48.39%	41.06%
<b>Tribal Colleges</b>				
Retention Rate	47.89%	12.18%	35.71%	32.91%
Graduation Rate (150%)	17.19%	9.44%	7.75%	6.38%
Completion + Transfer Rate	37.88%	19.74%	18.14%	12.26%
<b>Four-Year, Selective</b>				
Retention Rate	77.99%	10.45%	67.54%	59.89%
Graduation Rate (150%)	64.43%	14.86%	49.57%	37.96%
Completion + Transfer Rate	84.44%	11.98%	72.46%	59.01%
<b>Four-Year, Inclusive</b>				
Retention Rate	65.03%	11.57%	53.46%	40.20%
Graduation Rate (150%)	46.37%	13.94%	32.43%	22.02%
Completion + Transfer Rate	72.24%	14.19%	58.05%	45.32%

**Table 2. Number of Institutions and Range of Values in Each Benchmark Category**

<b>Two-Year Institutions</b> Total: 321 institutions					
Measure	At or above mean	Within 1SD below the mean	More than 1SD below the mean	Within lowest 5th pctl.	Data not reported
Retention Rate	143 ( $n \geq 55.39\%$ )	33 ( $55.39\% > n \geq 45.60\%$ )	16 ( $45.60\% > n > 41.30\%$ )	16 ( $n \leq 41.30\%$ )	13
Graduation Rate (150%)	52 ( $n \geq 34.13\%$ )	119 ( $34.13\% > n \geq 21.19\%$ )	34 ( $21.19\% > n > 15.42\%$ )	16 ( $n \leq 15.42\%$ )	0
Completion + Transfer Rate	161 ( $n \geq 58.59\%$ )	113 ( $58.59\% > n \geq 48.39\%$ )	30 ( $48.39\% > n > 41.06\%$ )	17 ( $n \leq 41.06\%$ )	0

  

<b>Tribal Colleges</b> Total: 26 institutions					
Measure	At or above mean	Within 1SD below the mean	More than 1SD below the mean	Within lowest 5th pctl.	Data not reported
Retention Rate	11 ( $n \geq 47.89\%$ )	8 ( $47.89\% > n \geq 35.71\%$ )	1 ( $35.71\% > n > 32.91\%$ )	2 ( $n \leq 32.91\%$ )	4
Graduation Rate (150%)	11 ( $n \geq 17.19\%$ )	11 ( $17.19\% > n \geq 7.75\%$ )	2 ( $7.75\% > n > 6.38\%$ )	2 ( $n \leq 6.38\%$ )	0
Completion + Transfer Rate	10 ( $n \geq 37.88\%$ )	11 ( $37.88\% > n \geq 18.14\%$ )	2 ( $18.14\% > n > 12.26\%$ )	2 ( $n \leq 12.26\%$ )	1

  

<b>Four-Year, Selective</b> Total: 274 institutions					
Measure	At or above mean	Within 1SD below the mean	More than 1SD below the mean	Within lowest 5th pctl.	Data not reported
Retention Rate	140 ( $n \geq 77.99\%$ )	80 ( $77.99\% > n \geq 67.54\%$ )	20 ( $67.54\% > n > 59.89\%$ )	13 ( $n \leq 59.89\%$ )	21
Graduation Rate (150%)	135 ( $n \geq 64.43\%$ )	85 ( $64.43\% > n \geq 49.57\%$ )	23 ( $49.57\% > n > 37.96\%$ )	13 ( $n \leq 37.96\%$ )	18
Completion + Transfer Rate	166 ( $n \geq 84.44\%$ )	72 ( $84.44\% > n \geq 72.46\%$ )	20 ( $72.46\% > n > 59.01\%$ )	14 ( $n \leq 59.01\%$ )	2

  

<b>Four-Year, Inclusive</b> Total: 274 institutions					
Measure	At or above mean	Within 1SD below the mean	More than 1SD below the mean	Within lowest 5th pctl.	Data not reported
Retention Rate	157 ( $n \geq 65.03\%$ )	81 ( $65.03\% > n \geq 53.46\%$ )	17 ( $53.46\% > n > 40.20\%$ )	14 ( $n \leq 40.20\%$ )	5
Graduation Rate (150%)	146 ( $n \geq 46.37\%$ )	80 ( $46.37\% > n \geq 32.43\%$ )	29 ( $32.43\% > n > 22.02\%$ )	14 ( $n \leq 22.02\%$ )	5
Completion + Transfer Rate	150 ( $n \geq 72.24\%$ )	72 ( $72.24\% > n \geq 58.05\%$ )	37 ( $58.05\% > n > 45.32\%$ )	15 ( $n \leq 45.32\%$ )	0

# Next Steps in Phase 1

To help ensure that the proposed benchmarks are appropriate for our membership, in May 2024 HLC will survey institutions that have at least one measure more than one standard deviation below the mean or within the lowest 5th percentile of their peer group. Institutions will be asked to explain their performance in the context of their mission and student body and to provide information on how they use these and other outcome measures. See page 8 for the survey questions.

Institutions that have one or more outcome measures within their peer group's lowest 5th percentile will be required to complete the survey. In total, 107 institutions are in this category.

Institutions with one or more outcome measures more than one standard deviation below the mean of their peer group will be asked, but not required, to complete the survey. An additional 145 institutions are in this category.

See Table 3 for a breakdown of these institutions by peer group.

Responses received from these institutions will help us better understand the context, strategies and ongoing efforts made by institutions to address performance gaps in student success outcomes. HLC will use this information to finalize the benchmarking and evaluation process prior to formal implementation in spring 2025.

**Table 3. Number of Institutions That Will Be Surveyed**

Peer Group	Number of Institutions		
	Total in Peer Group	With 1+ Measure Within Lowest 5th Percentile* (% of group)	With 1+ Measure More than 1SD Below Mean** (% of group)
Two-Year	321	42 (13.08%)	57 (17.76%)
Tribal Colleges	26	5 (19.23%)	4 (15.38%)
Four-Year, Selective	274	25 (9.12%)	39 (14.23%)
Four-Year, Inclusive	274	35 (12.77%)	45 (16.42%)
<b>Totals</b>	<b>895</b>	<b>107 (11.96%)</b>	<b>145 (16.20%)</b>

\* These institutions will be required to complete the survey on outcome measures

\*\* These institutions will be asked, but not required, to complete the survey on outcome measures.

## Survey Questions

1. Considering your institution's mission and student body, provide additional background context to explain your institution's numbers for these three measures.
2. Does your institution have performance goals for any of these three measures?  
If yes:
  - Which of the three measures?
  - What are your goals?
  - Who at your institution is responsible for setting these goals?
3. List some key institutional initiatives that aim to address these measures, if applicable.
4. How does your institution track progress in student success outcome measures?
5. Who is responsible for monitoring and tracking progress on these measures?
6. Is one of the measures more important than the others for your institution?  
If yes or no:
  - Please explain.
7. How would your institution define its peer/comparison group for these measures?
8. Does your institution track other student outcome measures?  
If yes:
  - What other student success outcome measures does your institution track?
  - Are any of these other measures more important or relevant to your institution than the three measures HLC is reviewing?  
If yes:
    - Please explain.
  - Do any of the three measures that HLC is reviewing have a connection or relationship to the other measures that your institution tracks?  
If yes:
    - Please explain.
9. Are there other factors that HLC should consider as it develops benchmarks for student success outcomes?  
If yes:
  - Please explain.

## Phase 2 Preview

HLC will begin planning Phase 2 of this project in summer 2024. The next phase will move beyond educational outcomes toward analyses of post-college labor market and other economic outcomes. This may include measures such as post-graduation employment rates, median earnings, federal loan repayment rates and median total debt after graduation, among others.

HLC is aware that institutions' capacities and approaches to tracking these measures may vary greatly through our membership. We will work with institutions to identify and define measures for Phase 2, as well as to identify appropriate data sources.



### Questions?

Contact HLC at [accreditation@hlcommission.org](mailto:accreditation@hlcommission.org)