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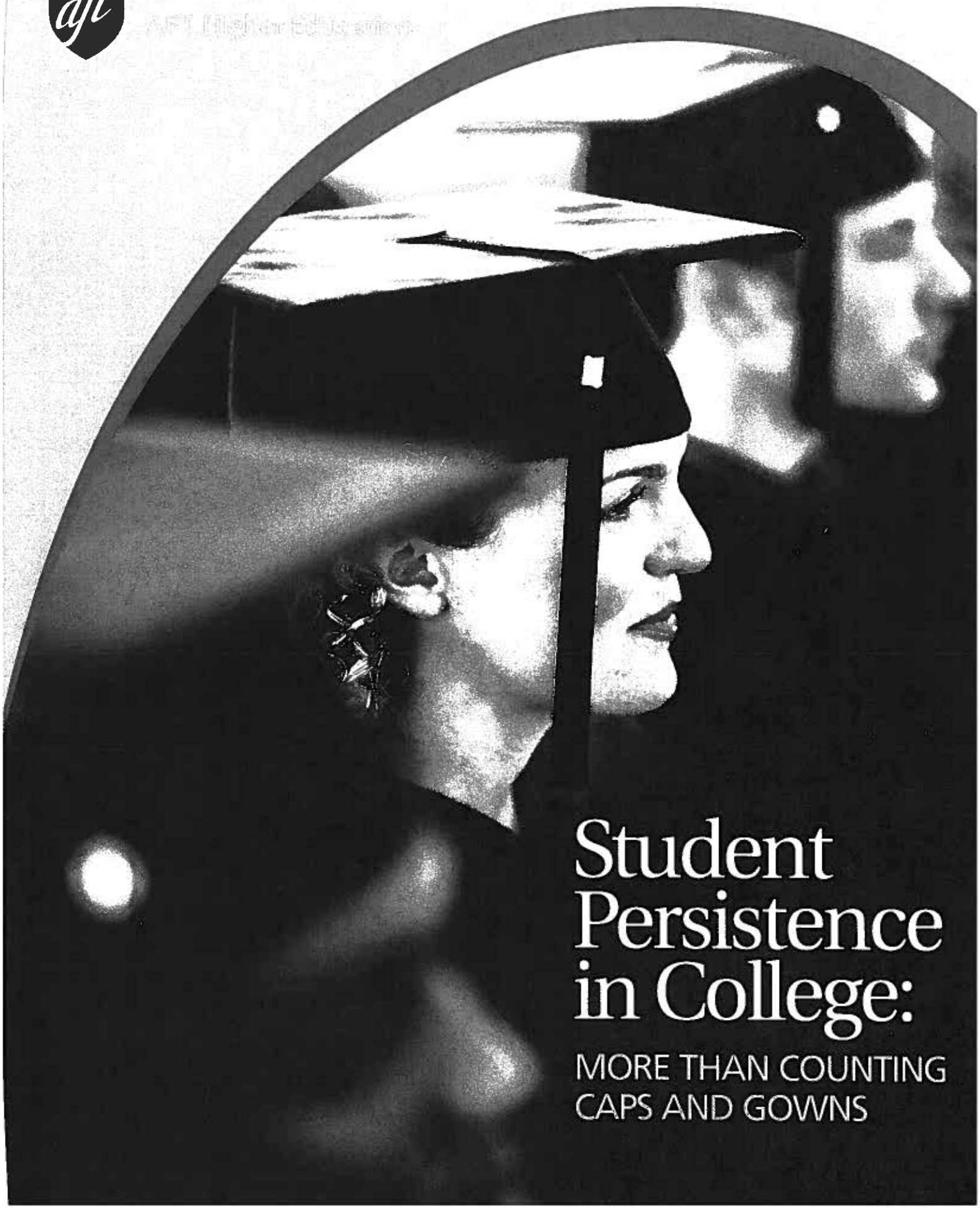

Student Persistence in College:

MORE THAN COUNTING CAPS AND GOWNS

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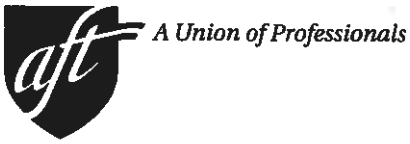

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Acknowledgements

To help us prepare this study, we turned to two experts on public policy and higher education: John B. Lee, president of JBL Associates, and Lawrence E. Gladieux, a consultant and former director of policy analysis for the College Board. They have summarized what the data tell us about persistence and pointed us toward solutions that make sense. We are grateful for their assistance.

Lawrence N. Gold
Director, AFT Higher Education

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Executive Summary

The American Federation of Teachers represents more than 125,000 college and university faculty and professional employees around the country. As educators, our professional lives are devoted to helping students succeed in their studies, their careers and their personal lives. A central part of that mission is to bring educational opportunity to students who were not usually in college 40 years ago, such as students from low-income families and working adults, women, minorities and immigrants.

Oftentimes, it is not easy for our members to help their students, particularly nontraditional students, persist in their studies in light of the financial, educational and family situations many of them face. Therefore, we have been pleased to find that college persistence is being talked about more often in the public arena.

However, it is also true that persistence is greatly misunderstood and, unfortunately, some bad ideas are being floated to correct persistence problems. The most troubling proposals call for rewarding or punishing institutions of higher education on the basis of the graduation rate of their students. These proposals are based on graduation data that every college is supposed to compile under the federal Student Right to Know Act (SRK). The SRK rates are essentially institutional snapshots of the number of students who started as full-time freshmen and graduated within six years (for four-year colleges), or three years (for two-year colleges.)

The argument goes as follows: The SRK data indicate that many colleges have low graduation rates. From that, the conclusion is drawn that the schools with lower graduation rates must not be doing a good enough job educating their students, or else their graduation rates would be higher. What's the solution? Beef up rewards for colleges with high graduation rates and impose sanctions, including reduced funding, on colleges with lower graduation rates. These rewards and sanctions would get the schools with lower graduation rates to do a better job or shut down. Proponents of this argument contend that it mirrors the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which rewards or punishes PK-12 schools based on the performance of their students.

The problem is that doing no more than counting caps and gowns presents a factually incorrect and misleading picture of what is going on and how to cure the problems we face. The purpose of this report is to sort fact from fiction by summarizing what the data actually tell us about college persistence; debunking the myths that surround persistence; and putting forward ideas that policymakers, particularly federal policymakers, can use to make a constructive contribution to student success in college.

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Summary of Principles and Findings

Our analysis begins with two basic principles.

- We believe that institutions of higher education, particularly public institutions, must be—and, in fact, are—accountable for providing students with a quality education and for the proper management of federal funds.

- We believe that student success should not be just a concern of college faculty and administrators, but of states and the federal government as well. Opening financial doors is not enough. Many constructive things can be done to alleviate persistence problems.

With these principles in mind, the report makes the following findings.

1. Judging college persistence in terms of a school's SRK graduation rate is a mistake because the SRK graduation snapshot is completely out of focus. Among many shortcomings, the snapshot fails to account for part-time students who represent more than 40 percent of the student population. It fails to account for the fact that a large number of students transfer between four-year institutions, or between community colleges, during their academic careers. It also fails to account for the fact that many students get what they want from college in terms of job skills or personal enrichment without graduating. The SRK snapshot labels such students as failures when they are really successes.

2. Focusing on the college graduation rate also confuses two separate issues—the issue of dropping out of college and the issue of simply taking a long time to get a degree. Students all over the country are persevering in college up to and beyond the six-year snapshot period, even if they have not graduated yet. For example, some students are staying in college even though they had to switch from full-time to part-time attendance. Others have to drop out for a while to tend to a child or sick relative and then return. Both these situations show up as failures if the focus is on the six-year graduation period, but such students are actually profiles in dedication *and* persistence.

3. Drawing an analogy between appropriate policies toward PK-12 and higher education is a mistake. PK-12 schools are charged with achieving relatively uniform results for their students based on standards that every child is expected to meet. In higher education, there is tremendous competition among institutions offering an almost endless variety of curricula. College students can and do pick (and pay for) the higher education they want, including the amount of education they want. A policy based on uniform standards, and imposing rewards and sanctions for achieving them, makes no sense.

4. Rewarding or punishing colleges on the basis of their graduation rates creates a perverse incentive for them to stop serving students who are likely to have problems in persistence, or alternatively, it could create an incentive to lower academic standards to ensure that graduation rates stay high.

5. More reliable data on college persistence can be found in a federal survey that followed postsecondary students over six years, 1995-2001. This survey provides data that is much superior to SRK's because it tracks students through college transfers and other changes in enrollment. By this measure, college persistence rates are higher than they often are assumed to be. More than three-fourths of the students starting at four-year institutions earn a bachelor's degree or are still enrolled six years later. Of students enrolled in public two-year colleges, more than half earned some kind of degree or were still enrolled after six years.

6. At the same time, degree completion is *not* as high as it could be and the data show a significant gap in persistence between affluent students and low-income and minority

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students. These data show that personal issues students face—finances, family background, family obligations and educational preparation before college—are the barriers to college persistence. The same data indicate that institutional quality is *not* a significant factor impeding student persistence.

7. These data suggest that public policies can alleviate students' financial and educational impediments and thus can play a significant role in improving persistence. At the conclusion of this paper, we outline some steps that can be taken. These include financial assistance, academic advisement and support, new school-college partnerships and more research into persistence.

To sum up, there are persistence problems in higher education, although raw college graduation numbers give us a wrong impression of their nature and magnitude. A number of strategies could be employed to make improvements.

One option to make the persistence picture look better would be to stop admitting into college the nontraditional students who are likely to have persistence problems. We hope this course would be rejected out of hand.

A second option would be to ignore the situation, allowing some people to surmount the obstacles they face and others to drop by the wayside.

A third option would be to pretend that persistence is an accountability problem that can be fixed with institutional rewards and punishments. As we have seen, this option is based on a false premise and would do more harm than good.

The fourth option is to commit ourselves to provide the assistance needed to help all students succeed. This report urges policymakers to join us in concentrating on this last, constructive approach so that all students can advance as far as their ability, motivation and hard work carry them.

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Wrong Turn: Accountability, Persistence and Graduation Rates

This section explains why treating persistence as an issue of institutional accountability, and treating college graduation rates as markers of institutional quality, can lead policymakers in the wrong direction. Our primary focus will be on federal policy.

Background: The Connection Between College Persistence and National Policy

Linking college persistence to national policy is rooted in three separate aspects of the federal Higher Education Act—*financial aid for students, educational assistance for students* and *institutional accountability.*

Financial aid for students: In 1965, Congress made a historic and enduring commitment to the American people—a commitment to ensure that no student is denied the opportunity to pursue a college education because he or she lacks the financial means to do so. An extensive array of programs—grants, loans, work-study and now tax policies—has been assembled to back up that commitment even though, as we will see, funding is far from sufficient.

Educational assistance for students: Right from the beginning, it was recognized that financial aid would bring opportunity to students who generally had not been in college up to that time. Many of these students lacked the kind of educational preparation at home and in their schools that would enable them to succeed in college. Many encountered shifting family obligations that interfered with their studies. Most of these nontraditional students had to work part-time or full-time to manage. As a result, Congress understood it needed to couple student financial aid with programs to help high schools and colleges provide educational and advisory support for nontraditional students. Over the years, this has spawned, among other things, the federal TRIO and GEAR-UP programs.

Institutional accountability: Finally, the federal government decided that it had to ensure federal dollars would not be misspent on fly-by-night or inferior institutions. One manifestation of this is U.S. Education Department oversight of the manner in which institutions manage federal funds, backed by an array of regulations. Another manifestation of the concern for accountability is limited oversight of the college accreditation process, under which the federal government periodically reviews private accrediting agencies to ensure that they are reliable indicators of institutional quality.

The Accountability Argument

Persistence might be a legitimate accountability issue if there were little or no accountability imposed on colleges and universities, or if higher education were demonstrably doing a bad job. Neither is the case.

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Is higher education accountable for quality? Traditionally, accountability in higher education has rested in three places: 1. in the states, 2. in the nation's unique system of private accreditation and 3. in the tremendous diversity and competition built into the system.

The states license and review the performance of all institutions in their jurisdictions. The accrediting system is a web of dozens of general and specialized accrediting agencies that periodically re-examine the accreditation of colleges and universities by conducting peer reviews after a lengthy, months-long process of reporting, self-study and examination. To receive public funding, higher education institutions must be accredited by these agencies.

Just as important in terms of accountability is the tremendous amount of competition built into the American system of higher education. Attending higher education is completely optional and costs money. College students are adults who select the education they want with their feet and their pocketbooks. They decide what quality means; they decide whether an institution is meeting their needs. They have thousands of institutions of all types to choose from. No fair reading of the facts could conclude that higher education is unaccountable.

Is higher education successful? All the accountability mechanisms in the world would not count for much if colleges and universities were doing a bad job. However, no fair reading of history could conclude that American higher education has failed our country in any way. Higher education is one of America's greatest success stories. The United States extends college opportunities to a wider segment of the population than any country in the world. Degree-granting institutions enrolled nearly 15 million students in 1998. That's 2.5 times the number enrolled in 1965, more than six times the enrollment in 1950, and 10 times pre-World War II levels. Twenty-five percent of today's population over 25 years of age has completed four years of college or more, compared to five percent in 1940. In 1985-86, about 988,000 bachelor's degrees were awarded. By 2001, the number had increased to 1.2 million and by 2010 the federal government estimates 1.4 million bachelor's degrees will be awarded.

Economic incentives play a big role in the demand for higher education. On average, the more education one has, the more one earns, and the earnings advantage of the most highly educated workers has increased in the past two decades. An increasingly educated citizenry also strengthens our democratic institutions and our competitive position in a global economy.

Is higher education doing a bad job in terms of student persistence? Even if accountability mechanisms were everywhere, even if the overall success rate of higher education was terrific, there would still be an argument for treating persistence as an accountability issue if colleges and universities were doing a bad job educating a large segment of their students. This is exactly what some observers are saying today. Pointing to one set of graduation data, they argue that more accountability—that is, the imposition of rewards and punishments—should be added to get colleges on the right track concerning persistence. This is the argument we turn to next.

The Complexity of Measuring and Making Sense of Graduation Rates

The issue of student persistence in higher education is complicated by the increasing mobility of our society, changing enrollment patterns and the diverse objectives of individual students. Growing numbers of students no longer follow a straight line to a degree. Many stretch out their education, attend part-time or intermittently, and attend more than one institution before graduating. Thirty percent of those who start at a community college transfer to a four-year institution, some are simultaneously enrolled in two- and four-year institutions, and some who start at a four-year institution become reverse transfers, i.e., transferring to a community college.

The openness of U.S. higher education is unique in the world. It is a system of first, second and third chances, allowing students to move in and out of the postsecondary system over a lifetime. Because of these patterns, data collection on student persistence is anything but cut-and-dried. There are proxies and survey estimates, some better and some worse, which we will discuss.

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The federal government now has two primary sources of data on student persistence:

Student Right to Know (SRK) compliance: In 1991, Congress passed legislation, which has since been amended a number of times, requiring institutions participating in federal student aid programs to disseminate information to prospective and enrolled students about the costs of attendance and aid available from the institution, degree offerings and a variety of other information—including *completion rates of certificate or degree-seeking full-time undergraduate students* entering such institutions. To that end, the Student Right to Know Act requires institutions to submit a once-a-year snapshot containing all this information to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) at the U.S. Department of Education.

Longitudinal survey research: A much better source of information about student persistence can be found in NCES longitudinal surveys. These surveys trace students through the postsecondary system—and provide a variety of useful information on persistence, which in this case is defined as earning a degree *or* staying enrolled. Carefully conducted longitudinal research can help in understanding factors that contribute to persistence and what policies would make the most difference in improving rates of student success in postsecondary education.

The problem with SRK graduation data: The SRK standard measures the percentage of a matriculating cohort of students who:

- Originally enrolled as full-time students; and
- Graduated within 150 percent of the expected time. For four-year baccalaureate institutions, the graduation rate represents the share of an entering full-time class that graduates six years later with a baccalaureate degree. For full-time two-year institutions, the graduation rates are compiled after three years.

However, the snapshot that the SRK data presents is completely out of focus.

The institutional graduation rate doesn't include all students: The SRK measure contains a series of arbitrary rules as to which students are and are not included in the calculation. The resulting statistic does not represent all students or every outcome at the college.

First, the measurement does not take into account those who begin their education part-time, which is a substantial population at schools serving nontraditional students. Part-time students take longer to complete degrees, and the percentage of undergraduates who attend college part-time has risen steadily in the 1980s and '90s. More than 42 percent of college students attend part-time.[1]

The SRK measure also fails to take into account the fact that students increasingly tend not to stay in the same place, doing the same thing, throughout their education. For example:

- If a student transfers from one four-year college to another prior to earning a degree, the student is recorded as a dropout at the first college and not a completion, even if he or she receives a degree at the second college.
- One-third of the students who matriculate at a community college attend another community college before they finish. These graduates are never counted as a success. They do not count as completions at the community college from which they graduate because they did not begin as full-time freshmen there. Even worse, they actually count as a dropout at the initial community college because they did not graduate from that school.
- Sixteen percent of community college students start their education with no specific graduation goals, yet they are included in the cohort.

[1] "New Low for College Graduation Rate, But Dropout Picture Brighter," American College Testing, Iowa City, Iowa, April 1, 1998.

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- Students can be excluded from the cohort if they died, became disabled, entered the armed forces, pursued foreign aid service such as the Peace Corps or undertook a religious mission before graduation. However, it appears that many, if not most, of the students who leave for these reasons never communicate this to the college. If they do not, they are counted as dropouts.

Community colleges face the biggest problem calculating graduation rates because they have so many missions. They provide terminal vocational degrees, academic transfer degrees, and also offer many students the opportunity to take a number of classes to gain a specific skill. This leads to some unwarranted results.

If, for example, a full-time freshman at a community college takes a number of courses to improve his or her job skills and then leaves, that student is counted as a dropout and a failure for the institution. In addition, many community college students transfer to a four-year college without receiving an associate's degree—in fact, most community college students who receive a B.A. did not bother to get an associate's degree first. Unless the community college was able to track the transfers or the students finished all the general education requirements before transferring, they would be reported as dropouts.

The graduation rate fails to distinguish between extended time-to-degree and dropping out: Another shortcoming of using snapshot institutional data is that it obscures two separate policy issues: extended time to degree and dropping out. Students still enrolled after 150 percent of expected graduation time represent a growing trend in higher education.

On average, bachelor's degree recipients in 1999–2000 who had not dropped out of college for six months or more took about 55 months to graduate. Attending multiple institutions increased the time to complete a B.A. For example, those who attended one institution averaged 51 months to complete a bachelor's degree, compared with 59 months for those who attended two institutions and 67 months for those who attended three or more institutions.

Students who started at community colleges took about a year and a half longer to complete a bachelor's degree than students who began at public four-year institutions (71 versus 55 months), and almost two years longer than those who began at private colleges and universities (50 months).

The type of institution from which graduates received a degree also was related to time to degree: graduates of public institutions averaged about six months longer to complete a degree than graduates of private not-for-profit institutions (57 vs. 51 months).

The graduation rate data do not include all institutions: It also should be noted that for 2001 data, a significant number of postsecondary institutions as of 2003 had not reported useable graduation rate data after many years of preparation. The private not-for-profit and for-profit sector institutions have the biggest problem with the reports.

Figure 1: Percent of Institutions Reporting Graduation Rates to NCES in 2001 as of August 2003

Type of institution	Public	Private	For-Profit	Average
<2-year	54.0	23.0	25.0	27.7
2-year	83.7	34.7	60.0	66.9
4-year	76.8	48.5	28.6	52.4
Average	76.9	43.4	32.4	46.4

(Source: NCES data as analyzed by JBL Associates, Bethesda, MD)

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The fact that so many institutions do not or are not able to provide graduation rate data suggests that any attempt to use them in an official function is premature. The missing institutional data will result in incomplete and skewed results for any national comparisons of graduation rates.

In the end, using graduation rates as an accountability standard could actually reduce access and weaken academic standards. As we shall see in the next section, research is consistent in identifying a cluster of student characteristics (finances, family obligations and educational underpreparation) associated with difficulties in college persistence. Holding institutions accountable on the basis of their graduation rates could very well create a perverse incentive to exclude high-risk students from enrolling in college. The simplest way to improve an institution's graduation rate would be to turn these students away. Alternatively, and even worse, the imperative of pushing up graduation rates could encourage schools to erode academic standards. Weakening standards to improve graduation rates would undermine the value of a degree for everyone and compromise the finest system of higher education in the world.

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The Better Way: Tracking Students and the Real Issues of Persistence

While graduation rate snapshots can be highly misleading, surveys that track student progress over time are more helpful. In this paper, we rely on a six-year longitudinal study of college students conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, starting with students who began postsecondary education in 1995-96. Interviews with a sample of these students were conducted every two years from 1995-96 to 2000-01, which allows the tracking of students who have changed colleges, dropped out and dropped back in. The result is the survey of Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS: 96/01.)

Persistence After Six Years

Table 1 shows the percentage of students who received any degree or certificate and the percentage still enrolled somewhere after six years by the type of institution in which they started. The total is the sum of those who received a degree or certificate and those still enrolled somewhere.

Table 1: Percentage of Students Who Received Any Degree and the Percentage Still Enrolled After Six Years, By Type of Institution in Which They Started: 2001

	Any degree	*Still enrolled*	*Total*
Total	50.8	14.4	65.2
First type of institution			
Public 2-year	35.7	17.4	53.1
Public 4-year	60.2	17.3	77.5
Private 4-year	73.5	9.4	82.9
Private less-than-4-year	60.3	3.0	63.3

(Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1996/01 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS: 96/01))

This overall picture of persistence is encouraging. Of students who started at four-year institutions, more than three-quarters had earned a bachelor's degree or were still enrolled in 2001. For students starting at public two-year institutions, the persistence rate is lower (53 percent) but not surprisingly so, given the variety of objectives served by community colleges, their open admissions policies, and the diversity of students who attend them.

A fair reading of the data suggests that there is not a general problem of student persistence in American higher education. On the other hand, there are many factors that can get in the way of students reaching their goals. Some students are at particular risk of dropping out, and there are

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wide gaps in completion rates—by family income, student aspirations and preparation, age and attendance pattern, and race.[2]

Starting Full-time and Seeking a Degree Matter

Table 2 shows the differences in graduation rates by goals and enrollment status. It also shows the difference between an institutional graduation rate and a system graduation rate. Taking the 1995-96 freshman cohorts that started at a four-year college or university, 51 percent graduated from the institution at which they had started by the end of six years, but another 7 percent graduated somewhere else.

If students started full-time at a baccalaureate institution and had a goal of getting a bachelor's degree, their odds of completion were better. Sixty-six percent of the students with both of these attributes received a B.A. within six years. This result underlines the significance of students' intentions when they enroll and looking at student, as opposed to institutional, data.

Table 2. Percentage of Students Beginning at a 4-year Institution Who Completed a Bachelor's Degree Within Six Years: 2001

	% of total	% completing at first institution	% completing anywhere
Total first-time students	*100.0*	*50.7*	*58.2*
Started full-time	90.4	54.1	62.0
Had a B.A. goal	90.3	55.3	62.7
Started full-time and had a B.A. goal	82.9	58.0	65.6

(Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1996/01 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study [BPS: 96/01])

Academic Preparation Matters

Students who have taken a rigorous high school curriculum and have high admission test scores will graduate more quickly and at a higher rate. In fact, an institution's graduation rate can be predicted by knowing its selectivity in admission standards, according to NCES data. Conversely, delaying entry into college, not having a regular high school diploma and not having taken a rigorous course of study in high school are all significant risk factors for persistence.

The first year is typically when the largest share of students leave college.[3] Compared with students who continue their enrollment, the first-year dropouts have three attributes that may compound other risk factors: lower academic expectations, lower first-year grades and change in the number of dependents (for women).

Income Matters

The higher the family income of a starting student, the greater are his or her chances of obtaining a baccalaureate degree. The following chart shows graduation rates for students who enrolled full-time with the intent of graduating with a bachelor's degree. Again, colleges and universities that

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[2] There are also gender gaps in rates of persistence and completion. Although women now receive a majority of associate's and bachelor's degrees, they have not yet reached parity with men in gaining Ph.D.s and professional degrees. We do not include a full analysis of gender gaps in this report. For more information, see "The Growing Gender Gaps in College Enrollment and Degree Attainment in the U.S. and Their Potential Economic and Social Consequences," Northeastern University, Center for Labor Market Studies, Boston, Mass., 2003. Available on the Business Roundtable Web site: www.brtable.org/document.cfm/943.

[3] Bradburn, Ellen M. "Short-term Enrollment in Postsecondary Education: Student Background and Institutional Differences in Reasons for Early Departure," 1996-98, NCES 2003-153. U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, Washington, D.C., 2002.

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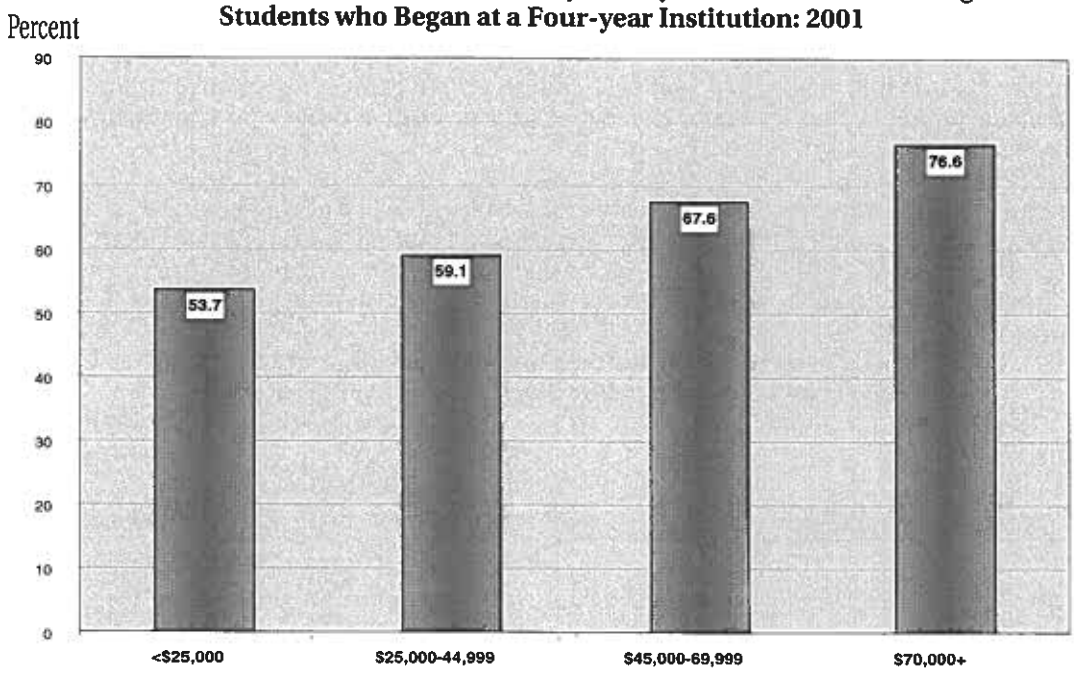
enroll lower-income students are likely to have lower graduation rates than those that enroll higher-income students.

Chart 1. Six-Year Graduation Rates by Family Income for B.A. Seeking Students who Began at a Four-year Institution: 2001



(Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1995-96, Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study [BPS: 96/01])

Reports by the federal Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance have shown that unmet financial need is considerably higher for low-income students than for middle- and high-income students, at all types of institutions.[4] Students with unmet need often must make extraordinary efforts to persist in their programs, attending part-time and intermittently, living off campus, working long hours and going into debt. Their probability of persistence and degree completion declines as a result of such patterns.

For low-income students without sufficient grant aid, the financing choices can be especially difficult. Some students work longer hours to avoid going into debt, but doing so may not be in their best interest academically or economically. Borrowing can be a pitfall, but working too much lengthens time to graduation and ultimately may jeopardize getting a degree.[5]

Older Students Are At Greater Risk

Older students generally have family and job responsibilities that compete with college and extend the time to graduation or reduce the chances of graduating. Today, at least 57 percent of undergraduates are 21 or older.[6] It is not age by itself that accounts for the higher dropout rate, but the associated risk factors common among older students:

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[4] Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, "Access Denied: Restoring the Nation's Commitment to Equal Educational Opportunity," U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C., 2001.

[5] King, Jacqueline E., "Crucial Choices: How Students' Financial Decisions Affect Their Academic Success," American Council on Education, Washington, D.C., 2002

[6] "New Low for College Graduation Rate, But Dropout Picture Brighter," American College Testing, Iowa City, Iowa, April 1, 1998.

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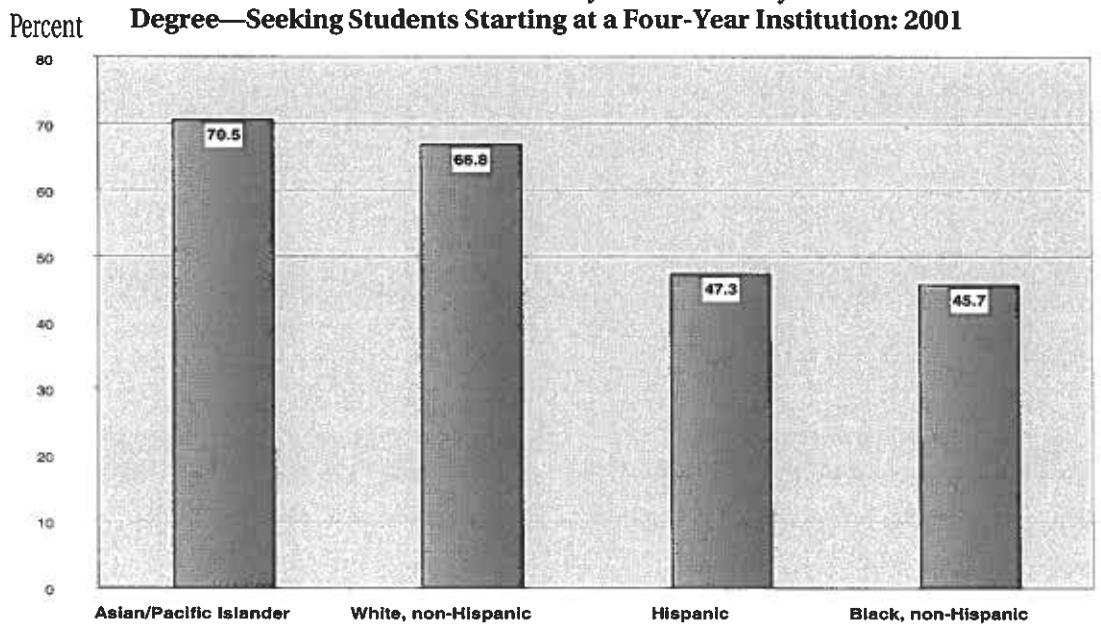
- Part-time enrollment;
- Delaying entry into college;
- Not having a regular high school diploma;
- Having children;
- Being a single parent;
- Being financially independent of parents; and
- Working full-time while enrolled. [7]

The effect of these risk factors is cumulative. The more risk characteristics a student has, the greater the chance that he or she will drop out of college. It also should be noted that many of these factors are clearly related to finances: having children, being a single parent, working full-time while enrolled, etc. According to the students participating in these surveys, the need to earn more money to support their families and/or to meet college expenses is a primary factor in their dropping out, working more or changing to part-time status.

Race and Ethnicity May Be Risk Factors

Hispanic and black students are less likely to complete college than are Asian and white students. Race and ethnicity are closely associated with family income, which makes it difficult to disentangle the two. The following chart shows the six-year graduation rates by race for students who started full-time in a four-year institution.

Chart 2. Six-Year Graduation Rates by Race/Ethnicity for Bachelor's Degree—Seeking Students Starting at a Four-Year Institution: 2001



(Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1995-96, Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study [BPS: 96/01])

Institutional Factors

As we have seen, institutional factors are much less important than student factors in determining persistence. Nevertheless, colleges can make a difference in whether non-traditional students succeed. Case studies suggest a number of effective on-campus support strategies.

[7] Berkner, Lutz, He, Shirley, and Catladi, Emily Fox, "Descriptive Summary of 1995-96 Beginning Postsecondary Students: Six Years Later, NCES 2003-151," U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Washington, D.C., 2002.

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- Because students are most likely to leave during the first year, extra effort early on helps. This includes assisting students in developing study skills, learning how to manage their time and money, and planning for their careers.

- Fostering a sense of community may be important so students do not feel adrift. Study groups, class discussions and learning communities, where first-year students are enrolled in common sets of classes, have been considered helpful in generating a sense of community, even at commuter schools.

- Students need access to tutorial support, adequate student aid, faculty advisors and counselors to help solve problems and help students stay in school.

Students who have extra problems need extra help. Vigorous outreach and support can make a difference. However, many institutions, especially open access colleges, don't have the staff and resources to intervene.

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Conclusion

More than three-fourths of students starting at four-year institutions earn a bachelor's degree or are still enrolled six years later. Of students who started at a public two-year institution, more than half earned some kind of degree or were still enrolled. At the same time, certain students are at particular risk of dropping out, and there are wide gaps in rates of completion—by income, race, age, prior schooling and other factors.

To close these gaps and ensure that all students have a fair chance of reaping the full benefits of postsecondary education, we need greater commitments from—and stronger collaboration among—institutions of higher education, the states and the federal government. But Congress should resist translating its concerns about graduation rates into a simplistic mandate based on unreliable data. Such a policy would do more harm than good, reducing postsecondary access or weakening academic standards. Instead, we must work to remove any unnecessary or unfair barriers to success.

Student Financial Issues

Income is closely related to graduation rates. Students report that financial concerns—having to care for a relative, having a child, running out of money, etc.—were often crucial in their deciding to drop out. The data also show that one of the primary reasons students leave college before graduation is that they work too much while attending college.

It may be attractive to look for a non-financial solution to solve persistence problems, but that will not help nontraditional students meet their financial obligations. At the local and state levels, greater support for public institutions and a refusal to shift the funding burden to students in the form of tuition would be a tremendous help. At the federal level, increases in the Pell Grant would make a big difference. It is reasonable to expect students to work while they are in college, but anything over 25 hours a week increases the risk of dropping out. We can not tell students to persist—and we can not tell institutions they are doing a bad job if their students do not persist—if we are not prepared to address such a fundamental cause of their problems.

Academic Advisement and Support

Although institutional factors are much less important than student factors in defining persistence problems, this paper describes a number of things institutions can do to foster the kind of supportive environment that helps nontraditional students succeed. Again, greater state and federal support are called for. Greater funding is required for the federal TRIO programs, which help students prepare for college and succeed when they get there. The TRIO programs provide intervention and guidance for low-income, first-generation students who otherwise might miss out on some of the steps necessary to succeed in their academic careers.

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Congress also should consider additional steps to improve the support services that strengthen persistence. For example, a new competitive grant program could be instituted under which institutions with large numbers of nontraditional students could strengthen their efforts to *identify* and *provide academic support* to at-risk students. Eligible institutions would be those in which a substantial number of students carry risk factors for graduation—low income, older, minority, first generation in college, etc. Under the terms of the grant, institutions would be encouraged to build early identification and outreach programs. These, in turn, would be blended with an expanded advising system to help students find the support they need to stay in college.

Today, many students start college with vague ideas about their academic and vocational goals and need guidance in identifying their road to success. Counselors can help students who must drop out to re-enroll in the future, or could ease their transition to another campus. The program also would support colleges in developing intensive first-year programs in foundation skills. Small classes with tutors may be necessary to help students build the academic foundation to succeed in college. This would be especially important in less selective colleges. The program could be housed in a number of Education Department agencies, including the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, which has a history of supporting innovation.

School-College Curriculum Collaboration

As noted one stumbling block is students' failure to take rigorous high school courses that connect to the college curriculum. To help remedy this problem, Congress should consider instituting a program to encourage school-college collaboration around high school curriculum development. Under such a program, funding would be provided to states and localities to bring curriculum specialists from the high schools together with curriculum specialists from higher education in the same discipline. These specialists would strengthen high school coursework for college-bound students so that it accurately reflects what students will be expected to know when they enter college.

"Bridge" Programs

The states and the federal government also should consider instituting or expanding summer bridge programs for students from high schools that cannot provide all the resources necessary for a college prep curriculum. Intense summer programs on a local campus could ease the personal and social transitions to college while providing the students basic skills in core areas of the curriculum. National Science Foundation and other private and public funding sources have developed models of summer programs that provide experience in science, mathematics, reading and writing that go beyond drills and memorization. They also help students meet scientists, writers and other practitioners to learn about the exciting options available to college graduates.

Research

Finally, there is a need for more and better student-centered research on the causes of persistence problems. We need to look much more closely at why students drop out, or take a long time to graduate, to know how best to apply our efforts. The newly authorized Institute of Education Sciences should have this topic near the top of its research agenda.

To help strengthen research efforts, Congress should consider broadening the charter of the federal Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance. In addition to providing policy guidance on postsecondary access and early outreach, the committee could be charged with advising policymakers on student success and degree completion. This would round out the committee's mission as specified in the Higher Education Act and better reflect the complex task of assuring college opportunities for low-and moderate-income students.

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