

Section 2

Increasing College Retention and Graduation Rates

Priority 2. Increasing the percentage of students who enroll and successfully complete a degree.

The second priority recommended by the 2003 LR 174 Task Force is to increase the percentage of students who enroll and successfully persist through degree completion. To achieve this result, the LR 174 Task Force concluded that Nebraska's postsecondary education system must (1) decrease the percentage of students who fail to persist beyond their first year(s) of enrollment, (2) increase the percentage of students who complete associate degrees within three years and baccalaureate degrees within six years, and (3) expand upon and strengthen existing associate degree to baccalaureate degree transfer programs.

To monitor the extent to which the first and second strategic objectives are being achieved, this section focuses on freshmen retention rates and college graduation rates that are based on data collected through the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), maintained by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in the U.S. Department of Education.

The NCES is the best available source of data for monitoring the retention and graduation rates of institutions over time, either on an individual basis or by sector. However, the retention and graduation rates that are reported to the NCES or calculated using data collected through IPEDS are generally for first-time freshmen who continue their studies at the same institution where they started college. This type of student represents a steadily decreasing percentage of postsecondary students. Consequently, a statewide analysis of retention and graduation rates based on NCES-IPEDS data does not provide any information about Nebraska college students who transfer to other institutions to continue their studies, including students who start college in the academic transfer programs offered by Nebraska's community colleges and then transfer to four-year schools to earn bachelor's degrees.

To overcome the limitations of the data available from the NCES and directly address the third strategic objective recommended by the 2003 LR 174 Task Force, the University of Nebraska, the Nebraska State College System, Nebraska's community colleges, and Commission staff conducted an extensive research project in 2006 using data obtained through the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). Based on the findings of the 2006 NSC Research Project, about 11% of full-time freshmen and 14% of part-time freshmen at Nebraska's public institutions transfer to other schools. At least 10% of full-time freshmen who enrolled in bachelor's degree programs at the University of Nebraska or state colleges earn bachelor's degrees after transferring to other institutions. The study also found that about 19% of students initially enrolled in academic transfer programs completed a bachelor's degree within six years, while about 16% completed the academic transfer program but did not transfer to a four-year institution. About 4.4% of students in academic transfer programs earned degrees/certificates at other institutions.

A full report of the 2006 NSC Research Project is in Section 2 of the *2007 Nebraska Higher Education Progress Report*, which is available on the Coordinating Commission's Web site: www.ccpe.state.ne.us. Given the stability of Nebraska's postsecondary education system, repeating this extensive research effort every four or five years should be sufficient to determine if any significant changes occur over time in the transfer, completion and persistence patterns of Nebraska college students. In the interim, this progress report will continue to provide policymakers with an annual analysis of retention and graduation rates based on NCES-IPEDS data.