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This issue of *C&U* marks the 22nd and final one of my tenure as editor-in-chief. My thanks to AACRAO Executive Director Mike Reilly and previous editor-in-chief Louise Lonabocker who convinced me to take the assignment, Managing Editor Heather Zimar, who does the lion’s share of the work, the Editorial Board, and, of course, all of the authors. Louise told me that I would enjoy the work, and I have! A few of the highlights, for me were the series of articles on mentorship that were republished in book form as *Mentorship in Higher Education: Practical Advice and Leadership Theories*, the series of interviews with AACRAO and higher education leaders, and some of the articles we reprinted from (much) earlier editions of this journal and still hold value for today’s professionals.

I am pleased and excited that Dr. Christopher Tremblay, who has written for *C&U* and currently serves on its Editorial Board, will become editor-in-chief with the next issue. He brings a wealth of professional experience to the role. *C&U* will be in good hands with Christopher!

This edition includes two feature articles. In “Eliminating the Graduation Application: Leveraging Degree Audit Data to Promote Student Success,” Amber Cellotti, Rachel McKessock, and Adrienne Bricker, describe a project at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities to use student degree audit data to project graduation terms for students, automatically scheduling them to graduate, in order to increase degree productivity.

In “What Constitutes Success in Postsecondary Education,” Bradford Chaney and Rebecca S. Lake describe the strengths and weakness outcomes used to measure “success” in postsecondary education and argue that “college outcomes are too diverse to be adequately summarized without the use of multiple measures.”

In two additional installments of our interview series, I interview AACRAO President Luisa Havens Gerardo, the vice president for enrollment management at Virginia Tech, and Kristi Wold-McCormick interviews Mary Callahan, registrar and senior associate dean at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

There are three commentaries, “Commencement Matters: Leave the ‘One Size Fits Most’ to the Gowns; Plan the Ceremony That is Right for Your Institution”, by Jackie Schluchter, Jerri Weston, and Sara Sullivan; “At-Risk Assessments: A New Twist on Midterm Grading Policies,” by Rodney Parks and Alexander Taylor; and “Is the Grad Fair Dead?” by Ariana Balayan and Emily Kormann.

In a research in brief article, Wendy Kilgore, AACRAO Director of Research, describes AACRAO’s research in 2019.

There are three campus viewpoint articles, “Creating and Supporting a Trans-Inclusive Student Services Experience,” by Julie Selander and Stacey Tidball; “Navigating New Application Integration,” by Jamie Brandon and John Papinchak; and “Putting the SEM Endorsement to Work: Perspectives from the Enrollment Management Field,” by Nick Heisserer, Stacy Maestas, Jennifer McClure, Steven McDowell, and Kristen Taylor.

Also in this edition, we highlight two perspectives on *The College Dropout Scandal*, by David Kirp, with reviews by Stephen Handel and Susan Weisman.

My thanks to all who contributed to this edition of *College and University* (and the previous 21 issues)! I hope, dear reader, that you will be inspired by something you read here to submit an article or book review for a future edition! And, please stay safe in these challenging times!
Eliminating the Graduation Application: Leveraging Degree Audit Data to Promote Student Success

The University of Minnesota Twin Cities completed a project that used degree audit data to project expected graduation terms for students. By working together within our organization, Academic Support Resources, in partnership with colleges throughout the university, the new process was implemented. This article will explore the factors in place that contributed to the successful implementation of this process, which is aimed at increasing graduation rates and reducing student debt loads.
In August 2017, the University of Minnesota Twin Cities (UMTC) embarked on a project to use student degree progress from degree audit data to project expected graduation terms (EGT). EGT is applied to newly admitted and transfer students at the time of their admission and matriculation, automatically scheduling them to graduate, rather than requiring them to apply for graduation. By working together within Academic Support Resources (ASR) and in partnership with colleges throughout the university, the new process was implemented in summer 2018. This article explores the factors in place at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities that contributed to the successful implementation of this process, goals of which are to increase graduation rates and reduce student debt loads. While advisors and other student-facing professionals at UMTC work to refine models for student support and engagement, we sought to redesign existing systems and infrastructure that may present unintended barriers to student completion. First, we share basic background on what drives institutions to work toward these goals set by the University of Minnesota’s Board of Regents.

Recognizing the impact of debt on students’ lives, the Regents set a goal for undergraduate student loan debt not to exceed the Consumer Price Index (CPI). Student debt has become a critical issue in the United States, with astronomical balances cited in the news and plans for loan forgiveness serving as key talking points among politicians. Current U.S. student loan debt is nearly $1.4 trillion; the average debt for 2017 graduates was $28,650. Student loan debt affects choices made early in adult life; consider the widely cited statistic that homeownership rates are decreasing as students borrow more (Chakrabarti, Gordon and van der Klaauw 2017). A variety of factors may contribute to increased debt loads: Median household income has increased by 50 percent over the last 50 years while the cost of tuition at four-year public colleges, spurred by decreasing levels of legislative support, has increased by a factor of 4.5 (Baum 2018). Some studies show that student loans correlate positively with graduation rates, but only up to about $20,000, beyond which rates begin to decrease (Zhan, Xiang and Elliott 2018). This amount is lower than the national average, suggesting that proactive strategies to keep debt low are critical to students’ academic and financial success. Many universities are striving to decrease the average debt load of their graduates. One strategy at the University of Minnesota is to decrease the time it takes to complete degree requirements.

In response to their missions as well as external pressures such as performance-based funding, universities continue to focus on increasing their retention and graduation rates. A great deal of research has been focused on the impact of institutional support on student retention, from financial aid to tutoring. Academic and social integration are essential to student success, but Tinto (2010) offers a critique that this theoretically appealing concept does not inform practitioners about the practical work required to achieve that integration. Synthesizing the research, Tinto (2010) frames a Model of Institutional Action in four dimensions:

- expectations (making them clear to all students irrespective of a variety of backgrounds, from clear syllabi to robust advising);
support (academic, social, and financial structures in place to help students meet expectations);
feedback (timely feedback on student performance available to students, faculty, and staff); and
involvement (students who are more academically and socially engaged are most likely to graduate).

Related to this model, high-impact practices, such as first-year seminars, learning communities, internships, research experiences, and study abroad, are widely accepted as best practices in student engagement. Nonetheless, a recent study found that among four-year public institutions, these practices did not correlate with graduation rates (Johnson and Stage 2018). This complements findings at small, private institutions where the increased allocation of resources to student services did not relate to increased retention or graduation rates (Gansemer-Topf and Schuh 2006). Selectivity continues to be a key correlate of graduation rates, especially among students of color (Melguizo 2008); selective institutions may have more considerable amounts of available resources as, for example, from larger endowments, higher tuition, and other factors.

Institutions should continue to seek new and innovative ways to engage students and meet them where they are in their academic and personal development. A recent report from McKinsey reviewed several high-performing institutions and identified five best practices for campuses hoping to increase degree productivity, defined as “higher education’s core process of transforming freshmen into degree-holders” (Auguste, et al. 2010, 7). Intended to increase the rate at which students complete degrees and reduce cost per student, they are (with examples):

- systematically enabling students to attain graduation (identifying structured pathways to completion);
- reducing nonproductive credits (reviewing transfer credit and curricular structure);
- redesigning the delivery of instruction (controversial changes ranging from leveraging technology and utilizing contingent faculty to modifying calendars and course availability);
- redesigning core support services (IT, student services, academic support services); and
- optimizing non-core services and other operations (auxiliary and public services).

These practices require significant organizational change, but even small changes can be made in these domains that can be coupled with high-touch student support. Our project aligns with the fourth strategy and necessitates increased intentional conversations between students and their advisors about course-taking and graduation plans.

The University of Minnesota has made exceptional progress in its four-year graduation rate: It increased 47.5 percent between 1997 and 2017—a rate higher than any other doctoral-granting institution in the United States. Nevertheless, the University of Minnesota continues to strive toward goals related to graduation rates and student debt guided by the Regents. One challenge is finding ways to maintain and finetune progress. The focus of this article is to describe one administrative effort by ASR to streamline service while decreasing student debt and increasing graduation rates among undergraduate students at the Twin Cities campus. A brief overview of the university and the goals and policies that guided this work is followed by a description of the project’s goals, implementation, and possible next actions.

UMTC and ASR

The Twin Cities campus is one of five in the University of Minnesota system. It is located in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area and serves as the state’s land-grant university. An R1 institution, UMTC offers undergraduate, graduate, and professional degrees in 150 majors through eighteen colleges and schools. With a student body numbering nearly 50,000, the university enrolls a diverse population. Nearly 7,000 international students represent 130 nations. The estimated annual undergraduate cost is $28,012 (2018–19) for in-state students receiving resident tuition and $45,190 for non-residents. This cost of attendance puts UMTC in the middle (7 of 14) for resident tuition and at the lower end (12 of 14) for non-resident tuition compared to other schools in the Big Ten, the peer group against which UM is often benchmarked. Accredited by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), the university’s mission is threefold: research and discovery; teaching and learning; and outreach and public service.
The mission of ASR is to make a positive difference in students’ lives. It is a crucial contributor to undergraduates’ degree progress and the university’s retention efforts. ASR is a part of the Office of Undergraduate Education on the Twin Cities campus and reports to the executive vice president and provost. The associate vice provost and university registrar leads ASR, which includes the Office of Classroom Management, the Office of Student Finance, One Stop Student Services, Continuity and Compliance, ASR-Information Technology, ASR-Central, and the Office of the Registrar. ASR provides support for the Twin Cities campus and partners with all campuses in the university system. Much of the degree progress and advising work on the Twin Cities campus is decentralized in accordance with individual collegiate and departmental advising offices monitoring the progress and degree completion of their students. ASR has a Student Degree Progress team that uses a holistic, data-driven approach to monitoring degree progress centrally in order to ensure that the university continues to achieve and exceed the gold and maroon measures on the progress card.

University of Minnesota
Progress Card

The University of Minnesota Progress Card—a set of institutional metrics—was developed by the Board of Regents and approved in October 2015. The progress card includes two types of measures: (1) gold measures focusing on quantifiable goals for 2021 and (2) maroon measures to provide directional goals and context (University of Minnesota 2018). For this article, the focus is on gold measure metrics related to undergraduate four-year graduation rates. The current gold measure goal for 2021 is a four-year graduation rate of 65 percent for the 2017 first-year student cohort. Over the last three years, uMTc has met or exceeded the gold measure standard; it currently has a four-year graduation rate of 71.1 percent for the 2014 cohort. The campus has seen consistent increases since the 1992 cohort, when the four-year graduation rate was just 15.2 percent.

Policies and Procedures

With strong support from leadership, graduation rates have continued to increase through foundational policies and procedures. In 2009, the policy “Promoting Timely Graduation by Undergraduates” was introduced. The policy applies to the Crookston, Morris, Rochester, and Twin Cities campuses and has the following rationale:

Timely graduation is an underlying foundational principle for undergraduate education at the university. To make the best use of students’ resources, as well as university resources, students must pursue their undergraduate degree(s) in a timely fashion and are not allowed to register for courses indefinitely without having a formal plan for timely completion of a degree. This policy implements criteria and requirements for accreditation established by the Higher Learning Commission.

In addition to this policy, a procedure for “Administrative Degree Clearance” was developed for the Rochester and Twin Cities campuses. The procedure allows colleges to clear students for their degrees who have completed the required degree program and college, campus, and university requirements, even if they have not applied to graduate. While the focus is on ensuring that students complete degrees in a timely fashion, the University of Minnesota is still committed to providing a four-year experience for undergraduates. Students are not administratively cleared before the end of their fourth year.

Finally, uMTc considers students to have completed their degree requirements when they have finished university, college, and degree program requirements. Because none of the degree programs at the Twin Cities colleges requires a minor or second major, students are to be cleared for graduation when their degree is complete. This means that students frequently finish their second major or minor requirements after they graduate; a note is added to the transcript with the date the student completes those requirements.

Student Degree Progress
Data Platform

The University of Minnesota uses PeopleSoft Campus Solutions 9.2 as the student information system and uAchieve as its degree audit system. The Student Degree Progress team, in collaboration with Web development teams in ASR-Information Technology, began developing the Student Degree Progress data platform in 2010 as a way to better certify eligibility for student athletes. The data platform was scaled in 2013 to in-
all students at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities. The purpose of the platform is to leverage degree audit data as well as other student data points (e.g., admission type, financial aid status, student demographics, etc.) so as to answer degree progress–related questions, conduct research, and propose new policies and procedures to promote student degree progress. Rather than provide a simple total number of credits, the platform provides data from the degree audits about what credits have counted for a specific degree. This allows the university to represent students’ degree progress as a percentage, a key data point in this project. As stated earlier, at the University of Minnesota, this does not include additional programs a student may be pursuing, such as a minor, second major, or certificate. Data from the Student Degree Progress platform have been used to award degrees (by identifying students who have completed all requirements), to conduct outreach to students to inform them of their degree progress, to power institutional data analytics tools, and to provide data on a project basis for teams across campus.

**Project Synopsis**

The main objectives of the Expected Graduation Term (EGT) project were threefold: (1) continue to increase graduation rates, (2) reduce student debt, and (3) ensure compliance with federal financial aid regulations so students are not continuing past the completion of their degree requirements. The Student Degree Progress team and staff in the Office of the Registrar convened a working group with collegiate partners in the Colleges of Design, Education and Human Development, Liberal Arts, and Science and Engineering to identify pathways for achieving the objectives as well as recognizing potential barriers to success and ways to remove those barriers. These colleges were chosen due to their size, complexity, and curricular structures that would be most representative of all collegiate units on the Twin Cities campus and allow the project team to work through potential challenges.

This project re-imagined the way in which EGT and Degree Checkout Status fields were being used in the student information system. Before the implementation of this new process, students did not have an EGT and were not assigned a Degree Checkout Status until they applied to graduate electronically. Post-implementation, the EGT is populated for students at the time of admission and matriculation. In alignment with the Regents’ Progress Card, first-year and transfer students are assigned the term that is eight or six terms away, respectively. In the early semesters of students’ undergraduate careers, advisors and collegiate student services offices are responsible for editing the EGT as students’ plans change. The aim is to have an accurate EGT throughout a student’s career; it is hoped that the EGT will generate periodic discussions between advisors and students about planning for timely degree completion.

Using data from the Student Degree Progress platform as a source, the degree checkout status is set to “applied” when students achieve 75 percent progress toward degree requirements. Students are no longer required to apply to graduate; instead, the language was adjusted so that students are “scheduled to graduate.” At the time the applied marker and “schedule students to graduate” are added, the student information system generates an e-mail informing students that they were scheduled; naming the term and degree; and offering instructions on how to make changes, if needed. An online intake form was created for students to submit a request to change their EGT. The Office of the Registrar reviews and processes requests; typically, requests are denied only when a student requests more time than is needed to graduate.

The project was rolled out in two phases. The first focused on the continuing population, defined as any currently active undergraduate degree–seeking student who did not already have an EGT on their record. Collegiate staff were allowed to review degree progress data and estimations of an appropriate EGT and were provided a window of time to amend the EGT as needed. Then, the EGT was loaded to the student record and scheduled those students to graduate who met the 75 percent degree progress marker. The second phase focused on newly admitted students for fall 2018 and beyond; a semestery process was developed to assign an EGT based on their admit type (near the start of term) and to schedule students to graduate who have achieved 75 percent degree progress (midterm).

**Lessons Learned**

A key success factor for this project was engaging and collaborating with stakeholders and collegiate partners early and often. These partnerships allowed for buy-in and real-time feedback to mitigate issues. One example
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of feedback was a need to better understand the process for changing an EGT to create consistency across colleges. In response, the project team developed how-to guides for updating the EGT in the system. Collegiate partners also helped inform processes related to EGT changes for students who are changing colleges within the university, are discontinued, or are taking an approved leave of absence.

Two setbacks to the project were changes in scope and accurately gathering business requirements. In the early stages of the project, the scope and methodology changed multiple times. This created confusion about the direction and changed the size of the project. It also resulted in business requirements continually changing to adjust to the scope. Once the scope was more narrowly defined and business requirements settled, the project and project team were able to make progress more successfully.

Recently, “year in review” meetings were held with stakeholders from all UMTC colleges to learn what was working well and identify opportunities to improve the process. We learned that staff in the colleges appreciate having the EGT as a data point to inform planning of their respective commencement ceremonies and to target communications to their students. An unexpected byproduct of this effort was colleges using the EGT when working through waitlists; the EGT provides data that are useful in prioritizing course access, as appropriate, for students who are closer to completion. We also learned that we could improve our website content to draw attention away from the application to graduate. Finally, colleges want the EGT to be more visible to students through our portal, degree audit, and other self-service functionality so as to encourage even more dialogue between students and advisors.

Next Steps
Now that the project is fully implemented for the Twin Cities campus, we have an opportunity to review the work that was completed and determine how to move forward. There are two areas on which we will build and refine the work of the project: The first is standardizing processes and procedures across all colleges and developing best practices and expectations for how the EGT field is used and implemented. The second is focusing on the student experience. This project was driven by goals for the university and meeting federal requirements, but ultimately, we are focused on impacts on the student experience. We want to focus on better transparency in the curriculum, expectations for degree progress, and improving student understanding of degree progress.

As a project team building from institutional goals, we would also like to better understand progress barriers for segments of the student population for whom data are outside of desired metrics. This understanding could help inform what other initiatives could be put into place to increase retention and graduation and decrease total debt for students overall and for those students who fail to meet desired metrics.

We have also worked with another campus in the University of Minnesota system—the Rochester campus—to implement this project and onboard colleagues there with applying EGT at the time of admission and matriculation and using student degree progress data to schedule students to graduate once they have met desired progress markers. Ultimately, we would like this process to be an option to all University of Minnesota campuses; this possibility should be realized in the coming year as all UM campuses are onboarded to the Student Degree Progress platform.

Conclusion
The University of Minnesota is unique in its ability to track student degree progress systematically using its data platform. Goals for this project were to increase graduation rates and decrease debt while ensuring compliance with federal aid regulations. Because many projects at the university are aimed at the same goals, it will be difficult to ascertain with certainty whether this effort alone will help to achieve those metrics. Nevertheless, this project has significantly decreased the administrative burden on colleges to execute the administrative degree clearance procedure. We hope to demonstrate that policy can offer opportunities to streamline administrative processes and prevent students from spending more time and money on their degree than is required. If nothing else, students no longer need to apply to graduate. It will take some time for this to become the norm at UMTC, but feedback from students is positive: They have one less thing to worry about during an already stressful—but exciting—time in their lives.
References


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What Constitutes Success in Postsecondary Education?

Increasingly, colleges and universities are being compared and evaluated based on the outcomes that their students experience. While both self-evaluation and accountability are valuable, one should be careful that the right outcomes are measured. Using data from 21 community colleges, we find that traditional measures often ignore key positive outcomes.
While U.S. society widely accepts the value of higher education, colleges increasingly are asked to justify their cost in terms of student outcomes. Colleges find themselves competing for students on the basis of rankings or summaries that may present only a few key numbers. For example, the U.S. Department of Education offers a college scoreboard¹ that compares colleges on the bases of their average annual cost, graduation rate, and salary after attending. A variety of other college rankings are also published—as, for example, by U.S. News & World Report.

Recognizing that prospective students and their families have a right to information and that colleges can better evaluate and improve their own operations by developing and using appropriate outcome measures, reliance on just a few key measures can lead to faulty perceptions of how a college is performing. Using detailed data on students’ academic and employment outcomes, this article describes how some of the most commonly used measures may provide an incomplete picture of student outcomes. Further, as an example of the potential implications of such an incomplete perspective, this article discusses an audit conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) Office of Inspector General (OIG) (2018). The report was largely negative in tone, as evidenced by the title “Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training Grants: ETA Spent $1.5 Billion and Met Its Stated Capacity Development Goals, but Is Challenged to Determine if the Investment Improved Employment Outcomes.” Statements in the report can be challenged as incomplete or even misleading.

Some of the most commonly used outcome measures—and those discussed here—are retention rates, graduation/completion rates, employment rates, and average salaries after graduation—and, for two-year colleges, transfer rates to four-year institutions. These measures have the advantage of holding (largely) consistent meanings across all types of students and colleges; they are some of the best measures available, but they are still incomplete. Following are some of the weaknesses of these measures.

◆ These measures tend to work best when they are applied to full-time, first-time freshmen but not as well when applied to nontraditional students. Typically the measures are defined using a specific timeframe (such as graduation within five years) that largely assumes the students will remain continuously enrolled, often as full-time students, until they graduate. However, increasingly, colleges enroll nontraditional students who are simultaneously employed and have families, are part-time students, and scatter their enrollments across multiple time periods rather than being enrolled continuously. Measures that are defined only for full-time, first-time freshmen may overestimate institutional graduation rates and ignore a large portion of the student population (Offenstein and Shulock 2009; ²See <collegescorecard.ed.gov>.

¹See <collegescorecard.ed.gov>.
Reyna 2010). However, if the measures are broadened to encompass all students, then they combine students who might have a wide range of expected outcomes (e.g., degree completion may be expected to take much longer for those who are enrolled part time), making the measures less meaningful.

◆ The measures do not apply as well to disadvantaged students. Colleges that enroll such students will tend to look worse on the basis of their outcomes regardless of the quality of their academic program; that is, the colleges will tend to have lower retention rates (Engle and O’Brien 2007; Swail, Redd and Perna 2003), graduation rates, and transfer rates to four-year institutions (Bradburn, Hurst and Peng 2001). Also, because low-income students are more likely to interrupt their studies temporarily and return to higher education later, they are more likely to appear to be drop-outs when in fact they are not (Engle and O’Brien 2007).

◆ The measures sometimes are based on a misunderstanding of students’ goals, implicitly assuming that students place a high priority on academic credentials when, for students, credentials are only a means to an end. Many students enroll at community colleges to gain job skills, not necessarily to receive a certificate or associate degree (Bailey, Jenkins and Leinbach 2005). Looking across all colleges, the reason students give most frequently as being very important in deciding to go to college was “to be able to get a better job” (85%) (Eagan, et al. 2016). Weise and Christensen (2014) describe a trend toward competency-based education as a way of driving down the cost of educating students while providing specific skills needed by employers. If a student is able to parlay some attendance at college into gaining a job, then the college education may be successful from the student’s perspective. Classifying such an outcome as a “failure” to graduate might be more a judgment of the student’s goals than an indication of the college’s outcomes.

◆ Sometimes, placing a strong emphasis on one or a few measures without additional context may lead to perverse effects. A college that wishes to improve its retention, graduation, or employment rate may
choose to become more selective whereas national goals have been to increase and diversify college attendance.

Mention of the weaknesses of the preceding measures is not to suggest abandoning them. Rather, they should be interpreted in terms of what they do and do not provide and considered in the context of additional types of data. These measures might have the greatest value when applied to individual students as a means of evaluating progress in their academic careers. Their use is more problematic with respect to use in evaluations and for making comparisons across colleges; though they seem to offer the advantage of being uniformly defined across all colleges, regardless of students’ majors, the comparisons are not truly equal if there are important differences across colleges in distribution of student demographic characteristics or college majors. (The Classification of Instructional Programs provides 47 broad families of instructional programs and 1,720 generic instructional program categories within those families, providing one simple measure of the great diversity within U.S. colleges.) In such cases, differences in student outcomes can be expected regardless of the relative quality of the colleges. Further, there may be other outcomes that are equally or even more important.

This article presents the outcomes of 2,065 students participating in advanced manufacturing courses within a consortium of 21 community colleges—the Illinois Network for Advanced Manufacturing (INAM). The data are from an evaluation of a Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant that INAM received and include individual college records for each student, student surveys and focus groups, and measures of employment based on matching the students’ Social Security numbers with data from the Illinois Department of Employment Security (IDES), which receives detailed individual-level data from employers because of its role in collecting unemployment insurance. (The IDES data did not include the name of the employer(s); this analysis discusses changes in employment status but not changes in employers.)

Following are outcomes that were observed at INAM, along with the numbers and percentages of students. Some of these measures were required by DOL as performance measures for evaluating the success of the grant while others provide additional perspectives on student outcomes. These measures are defined sequentially, with each student counted only once using the first listed category which matches the student. The supplemental non-DOL measures can be seen to provide important contextual information that is needed to properly interpret the statistics, though the measures themselves are incomplete and even more contextual information would be required to fully quantify the number of “successes.”

- **Newly employed soon after graduation** (DOL measure; 41 students, or 2 percent). This might be considered the most rigorously defined and most sought-after outcome, particularly since a primary purpose of the TAACCCT grant was to help workers who had lost their jobs due to foreign competition. To be placed in this category, a student must have been unemployed at the time of enrollment, earned a certificate or degree, and had new employment either in the calendar-year quarter of graduation or in the quarter that immediately followed. (The restricted time period was specified by DOL, with the presumed purpose of making it more likely that the employment was a direct result of having graduated. The DOL definition further required that graduation must have preceded the start of new employment, not simply be in the same or following quarter, but the IDES data only showed employment status by quarter; thus, the definition used here is somewhat more liberal than the DOL specifications.) From this perspective, the INAM program might appear to be a failure, with only 2 percent of its students qualifying.

- **Graduated and moved from unemployed to employed** (not a DOL measure; 77 students, or 4 percent). This is a broader definition than the preceding one, still limited to those earning certificates or degrees and those who were unemployed at the time of enrollment in an INAM program, but not specifying when the new employment started (e.g., the student might have started employment in the quarter preceding graduation or two quarters following graduation). By removing the time restriction, one might have less confidence that the education was a factor in helping the student gain employment; on the other hand, the student’s education might have helped the student get a job

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*See <nces.ed.gov/ipeds/cipcode/>.*
even before the student graduated (e.g., the student already had learned key skills, or the student was hired in anticipation of later receiving a certificate or degree), or the student may have taken a break or needed more time to find employment.

**Newly employed, without graduating** (not a DOL measure; 188 students, or 9%). Students in this category were unemployed at the time of enrollment but later found employment without (yet) graduating. Changing status from unemployed to employed is itself an important change; however, one cannot be sure of the extent to which attending college helped the student gain employment. (The relationship between college attendance and later employment is always an issue, even for those who found employment shortly after graduating. For example, graduating may both free up a student’s time for employment and start the clock on student loan repayment, thus improving a graduate’s ability and incentive to obtain a job. The job itself may or may not be dependent on the student’s education.) However, interviews with students and their professors revealed that in fields such as welding, where Illinois businesses had a strong demand for additional workers, the students’ education sometimes led directly to employment even after taking just one or a few courses and without the student completing a certificate or degree.

**Employed at the time of enrollment and received a wage increase** (DOL measure; 760 students, or 37%). Fifty-one percent of INAM participants had a job at the time of enrollment and thus did not meet the description of any of the preceding categories, which are based on the transition from unemployment to employment. Because the students were already employed, one cannot say that they changed their employment status (employed vs. unemployed) as a result of their education, but holding a job is not the only important potential employment outcome. If the student experienced a wage increase, that increase may be due at least in part to the student’s enrollment, as through qualifying for a promotion or a different type of position. Perhaps paradoxically, a large wage increase could provide a reason for the student to discontinue enrollment in college; the student may no longer feel that additional education is needed to succeed professionally. Among INAM students, 37 percent received a wage increase (61 percent of those were employed at the time they first enrolled in INAM), and the increases were often large enough to be consistent with a qualitative change in the jobs they held. Over the roughly two-year period for which post-enrollment wage data are available, the cumulative inflation rate was 1.7 percent. During that time, 80 percent of those with wage increases had increases greater than 10 percent, and 50 percent had increases greater than 40 percent. Whether the wage increases were associated with students’ INAM experiences is unclear. The wage increases were calculated based on the total wages received over the quarter, not hourly wages (which were not available), so some of the wage increases may have resulted from working a greater number of hours, such as by switching from part-time to full-time employment or acquiring a second job. Thus, these data are consistent with students’ education having made a major difference. (Obtaining data on hourly wages would be useful.)

**Earned a certificate or degree** (DOL measure; 208 students, or 10 percent, when calculated using the same sequence of outcome measures provided here; 285 students, or 14 percent, if only DOL measures are used and thus the students in the second category above are also included). This measure is one of the most standard student outcomes that is used. It is also one on which INAM students may appear to have performed poorly, depending on one’s expectations. However, the measure is almost always defined in terms of a specific timeframe, such as receiving an associate degree in two or three years or a bachelor’s degree in four or five years. A weakness of imposing a time restriction is that not only does the time required depend on what degree or certificate is earned, but the time period is often based on what would be typical for a full-time continuously enrolled student. For those students who enroll part time and may have breaks in their enrollment, earning a certificate or degree may take considerably longer, and the chosen time period may be too short to accurately measure completion rates. Also, if a study includes multiple cohorts of students who started at different times, but the study ends at the same time for all students, then some students will have had less time available than others before the end of the study period. At first glance, the INAM
situation might appear well-structured for a measure based on certificate or degree completion: the INAM certificates were all less-than-one-year certificates. This might appear to offer ample time for the students to earn certificates. However, analysis of student outcomes for those enrolled in comparable programs in the INAM colleges but prior to the changes introduced by INAM found that the mean time required to earn a less-than-one-year certificate among those who completed a certificate was 2.7 years, with 31 percent taking more than three years and another 18 percent taking between 2.1 and three years. The INAM students, by contrast, had a maximum of 2.3 years available before the study period ended, and those who started later than the initial fall 2013 enrollment period had even less time available: 77 percent started after fall 2013, and 33 percent started after fall 2014.

- **Earned an outside credential without earning a college certificate** (not a DOL measure; 83 students, or 4%). Often, the typical sequence is for a student first to earn a college certificate or degree and later to earn an outside license or credential. However, in some of the advanced manufacturing fields offered by INAM, it is possible to earn an outside credential without first completing a college certificate or degree. Thus, some INAM students commented that they saw little benefit in continuing their college education, particularly if the college imposed additional requirements (such as courses in mathematics). This is one situation in which a college may find itself working at cross-purposes. INAM colleges intentionally chose to emphasize the earning of outside credentials as a means of increasing the attractiveness of the program based on the portability of credentials; sometimes the colleges even arranged to cover the cost of licensing exams. By doing so, though benefiting their students, the colleges may have undermined their ability to meet their retention goals.

- **Still in college without having completed a certificate or degree** (DOL measure; 200 students, or 10%). Continuing to remain in college may be considered a positive indicator of later graduation and is also especially relevant for students who enrolled relatively late in the program and had little time remaining in the study period before their outcomes to date were measured. One might be hesitant to label retention a success (i.e. if one is focused on ultimate outcomes), but retention is an encouraging sign of a student’s continued interest and likelihood of meeting all requirements. Yet retention is most meaningful when considered in regard to a traditional student who is enrolled continuously until acquiring a certificate or degree. A student who stops out and returns later may or may not be counted as being retained depending on when the measurement is made. In INAM, at least 21 percent of students had a temporary break in enrollment between fall 2013 and fall 2015; others who appeared to be drop-outs instead may turn out to be stop-outs over a longer time period. This measure also frequently omits students who transferred to another institution, in large part because colleges often lack knowledge of what their students do after leaving. Particularly for two-year colleges, transfer to a four-year college might be considered a success in terms of advancing a student’s education but a failure in terms of student retention.

- **Employed in last quarter of study period without having completed a certificate, without being newly employed, without continuing enrollment in college, and without an increase in wages** (not a DOL measure; 191 students, or 9%). Such an outcome would generally not be considered positive because there is no clear improvement in the student’s employment or educational status. However, it is possible that a student’s college enrollment may have helped the student retain a job (or find another job), when otherwise the student might have become unemployed; thus, obtaining additional contextual information could reveal that some suspected “failures” in fact were successes. Still, this category seems one of the least likely to include large numbers of successes.

- **Other outcomes** (not a DOL measure; 317 students, or 15%). This group consists primarily of students who dropped out or stopped out of college without earning a certificate or degree and were unemployed at the end of the study period. However, some of the students may have been self-employed or may have moved out of state, in which case the IDES data would not provide a record of their employment. Also, some may return to their college education at a later time, in which case they would be better classified as stop-outs than drop-outs.
The preceding data indicate that students appeared to perform poorly on the two classic measures of student outcomes: obtaining a job soon after earning a certificate or degree and after having previously been unemployed (2 percent) and otherwise earning a certificate or degree (14 percent). However, both of these measures depend on earning a certificate or degree. INAM participants did better with regard to other types of outcomes: earning a new job without a certificate (9 percent), getting a wage increase (37 percent), earning an outside credential but not a college certificate (4 percent), and remaining in college (10 percent). Collectively, these additional groups comprise three-fifths of the students and present a different perspective on student outcomes than one focused only on the first two.

To better understand the implications of the choice of outcome measures, consider the OIG audit mentioned above in regard to three of the specific statements in the report. The OIG statements were about the national TAACCT program, summarizing the outcomes for the 185 grants awarded in the first three (annual) rounds. INAM was a grantee in round two.

The OIG report (2018) said, “However, as of September 30, 2017, only 40 percent of enrolled students had completed training” (5). This implicitly assumes that students had adequate time to complete their training—which they often did not. The maximum time that INAM students had to complete a certificate during the study period was 2.3 years, whereas program completers in the INAM comparison group took a mean of 2.7 years (even though these were less-than-one-year programs), with roughly half taking more than two years. There are three major reasons for the prolonged completion times. First, employment obligations often preclude quick certificate or degree completion. Among INAM students, 74 percent were employed in at least one calendar year quarter associated with their academic terms, 66 percent were employed in at least once quarter in all of their academic terms, and 35 percent were employed in every quarter in which they were enrolled (some academic terms spanned two quarters). Second, temporary interruptions, or stop-outs, delay completion. Of the 593 INAM students who started in fall 2013 (those who had the maximum time available to complete a program), 21 percent had a temporary break in enrollment, and another 49 percent made either a temporary or permanent departure, with their final status dependent on what happened after the study period. Third, students varied as to when they first enrolled in INAM and thus in how much time they had in which to earn a certificate. In INAM, 78 percent started after the first term, and 18 percent were enrolled for less than a year before the grant evaluation period ended.

Second, the OIG report (2018) said, “Of those students who were not employed at enrollment, 44 percent had completed training and entered employment” (5). This statistic omits many other positive outcomes among those who were not employed at enrollment: obtaining employment without completing training (36 percent of those not employed at enrollment in INAM), continuing to be enrolled (22 percent in INAM; see the preceding discussion regarding whether students had adequate time to have completed their programs), and completing certificates but not employed (representing academic progress though not yet resulting in employment—7 percent in INAM). Depending on what definitions the OIG report used, it may also have excluded those who obtained jobs with the wrong timing relative to completing training (in INAM, 7 percent of those who were unemployed at the time of enrollment both received a certificate and were employed in the last quarter with data, but not in the quarter after completion of the certificate). All of these are potentially positive outcomes for participants in the TAACCT grants, though the data do not indicate whether the employment in these situations is related to the TAACCT grant.

Third, the OIG report (2018) also said, “Grantees had not achieved targeted employment outcomes at the end of the first three rounds” (6). In one sense, it seems appropriate to note if grantees have failed to meet their targets. On the other hand, this criticism ignores whether the actual outcomes were acceptable, regardless of whether the outcomes met the targets, and may say more about the setting of targets than about program success. It seems inherently difficult to predict the impact of creating a new program or revising an existing program, and grantees may have felt pressure to provide optimistic projections in order to win the grants. It seems likely that many of the grantees, when writing their grant applications, were not aware of the frequency of the alternative outcomes described in this article. Thus, this criticism may be more applicable to the grant submission process than to the performance of the grantees.

Seifert, et al. (2017) wrote, “We do not feel that a single definition of experiences or outcomes is neces-
sary, or, in some cases, even desirable for college impact research” (3). As these data show, college outcomes are too diverse to be adequately summarized without the use of multiple measures, and reports that focus on just a few measures may present misleading results.

References


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Bradford Chaney, Ph.D., is a Senior Study Director at Westat with more than 35 years of experience in policy-related research. He specializes in survey research, policy evaluation and design, statistical analysis, and project management, with a particular emphasis on education-related topics. Prior to working at Westat, Dr. Chaney was a Senior Project Analyst at Applied Management Sciences, and an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Washington College.

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An Interview with Mary Callahan

Mary Callahan is the Registrar and Senior Associate Dean at MIT. She was named Registrar in 1999 and Senior Associate Dean in 2015 and sets the strategic direction for a continuum of student and faculty support activities. Among her many responsibilities are oversight of registration, grades, degree audits, tuition, and scheduling; supporting educational innovation through the curriculum development funds and programs that recognize excellence in teaching; serving as a partner in faculty governance; leading efforts to evolve the student systems; and helping senior administrators understand the character and impact of programs. She has received several MIT awards including the Billard Award for “special service of outstanding merit performed for the Institute,” and two Institute Excellence Awards. Mary recently served as Chair of the Association of American Universities Registrars and is a regular presenter at educational conferences. Her discussion about fraud prevention and the benefits of offering digital diplomas through the blockchain is available on the Helix Education podcast.
Wold-McCormick: Tell me about your professional journey. How did you come to be registrar and senior associate dean of the world-renowned Massachusetts Institute of Technology?

Callahan: I took the path every registrar takes to get to their position. After college, some friends and I moved into a MIT fraternity for a summer! I enjoyed the people and got to know some of the students and the community, and that began my long love affair with the institute. I began in the registrar’s office doing class and classroom scheduling. It was a great first job because it brought me into the thick of things very quickly. People relied on me for information, and I was working with student groups. I thought, OK, I’ll do this for five years, and...Here we are, it’s been 35 plus years. I progressed in different ways, mostly in the registrar’s office, but also spent some time working in student life for dean of students, which gave me another perspective on how important dialogue needs to be at a college.

I began working at MIT in 1981, became registrar in 1999, and was named senior associate dean a few years ago, which has been a really interesting addition to my portfolio. My position has evolved to working a lot more with faculty governance and supporting educational innovation. My role is about making that whole continuum work: helping new classes get developed, conducting assessment through subject evaluation, and then we celebrate teaching through managing three programs that recognize excellence in teaching. So, it’s very close to the academic mission. The addition of these responsibilities added staff who previously reported to a faculty member, but who were part and parcel to our every day mission. As a result, we reshaped the registrar’s office, created a strategic plan, a mission and vision statement, and brought together an integrated group of professionals, all of which has benefited the entire MIT community.

Wold-McCormick: Based on your experiences and observations, what makes MIT different from other higher education institutions, and what unique challenges and opportunities have those differences presented to you as a registrar?

Callahan: MIT is a community of problem solvers and risk takers, which won’t surprise you, and it is very entrepreneurial. It has this magical blend of imagination and knowledge. The pace and pressure for students and faculty creates a thriving and unique environment that is 24x7 and has high expectations, yet we all call it home.

This also might not surprise anyone, but because we are the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, there has always been a strong appreciation for innovation and all that goes with it. We were a bit ahead of our game when, in the 1990s, a student developer created an integrated subject listing schedule, which was so cool and I was so proud of it. It was really helpful to the students. I was explaining it and promoting all its search capabilities to a member of the MIT Visiting Committee, who also happened to be the founder of one of the earliest search engines. He then asked me if it could do a search in less than three seconds (sigh).
Over time, however, we have evolved into a much more nurturing environment. Now, if you do a good job and rise to the occasion, there is recognition for finding excellence in all things.

We also have a very strong faculty governance system which, surprising to some, is very inclusive. It's a melding of faculty, students, and staff; my staff is a very large player in support to the committees and around policy development and practice. MIT is governed by a democracy, which presents unique aspects that we need to manage, but it also represents a strong voice of community. I’m lucky because I am the one MIT registrar and we have only five schools which operate on the same calendar, grading scale, and, by and large, tuition model. So, a one MIT approach has been very valuable.

Wold-McCormick: MIT has been a leader in technologies and innovation that have helped set the stage for changes in educational delivery. Talk about your role in leading, shaping, and supporting these innovative initiatives.

Callahan: This is my sweet spot because I have always had a deep appreciation for how technology can improve the lives of students, faculty, and staff. Along the route, there are times we need to make decisions about how best to do that. What I’ve tried to do is be innovative and somewhat of a risk taker to make sure that what we’re doing fits with what the students and faculty expect. Most recently, I have spent a lot of time on the digital diploma and seeing if the blockchain leads to actual benefits that the lifelong learner might need.

Another strategic direction we have taken is to open up our data, so we now have a lot of community members developing apps by taking advantage of that data. We even have cross-registration between Harvard and MIT using APIs. So, there’s some real potential in looking at how technology serves us moving forward.

Some of the MOOC business came out of MIT sharing our best knowledge and perspectives. What this ends up doing is changing how students navigate their educational experience, and I like that aspect.

MIT has also created some micro-masters, which are very new in the world of “degrees.” A quote that drives my thinking as I design either a roadmap of how we’ll evolve or actual projects is, “Good innovations solve problems that formerly had only inadequate solutions.” I think even in educational delivery, if we look at technology in the world in this broadest sense, it has brought people even closer in different ways. It’s easy to talk about technology, but I want to deliver on it, and I’ve tried to be very intentional in thinking about what to do and how to do it.

Wold-McCormick: Working on college campuses, we, as registrars, are surrounded by bright, ambitious, and creative people. What steps have you taken to ensure you or your office has a seat at the table when new projects or innovations are being discussed, particularly those that impact curriculum delivery, student user experiences, and academic records?

Callahan: It’s all about partnerships, and a partnership means participation. It’s working toward a common goal. My staff and I spend a lot of time talking about this. Several years ago, when there was so much change going on, there was a lot of trepidation about how to handle change. In order to confront what challenges we were facing in my office, I referred to Stephen Covey’s circle of influence and extended that to reduce our circle of concern. We have really worked on gaining influence, and we do that through expertise, knowledge, opening up, and listening to others. We’ve strived to create that environment in the Registrar’s Office, which is infused throughout our teams. We have to live with some ambiguity because sometimes, in order to hatch a new program or idea, it may feel messy.

We hope that our experience and knowledge contributes to the discussions, and as a result, the design becomes better. Our language changed, and our expertise has become much more valuable in generating options, so I give much credit to the staff. We now have a seat at multiple tables, which is great. It gives us confidence and we are now able to see ourselves as change agents. We question things with a sense of excitement by being engaged as a partner. One of our strategic objectives as an office is to emphasize our role as a key partner in the ecosystem that enhances the educational experience. So, people get jazzed about that and seeing that in writing helps them solidify that this is what the registrar of now needs to be. There is a true partnership on campus and the registrar’s office is the connective tissue of that community.

Wold-McCormick: What do you believe has most significantly contributed to your advancement and suc-
cess as a woman leader in higher education? Have you noticed any changes as the higher education landscape and role of the registrar have evolved over time?

Callahan: I would have to say confidence that I would be a good registrar and the drive to reach that goal helped lead me to where I am today. While career advancement was important to me, I reached an “aha” moment when the previous registrar left and someone in the administration said the Institute would probably need to do a national search for a replacement. The registrar at MIT had long been a man and an MIT graduate, and in both cases, I didn’t fit the profile. This belief that I could do it, while innocent enough, still motivates me to this day. I said to myself that I needed to translate my own aspiration into action. While the position was vacant, I took advantage of some opportunities to distinguish myself. The skills that the previous registrar brought to the table were different than mine, and so I made it a point to try to embrace my unique strengths rather than fit into others’ preconceived notions.

It was clear to me that my leadership skills, while still developing, were what would benefit MIT at the time. Over the years, I had observed at MIT (and at other places across the country) that the role of registrar was evolving from more of a background role and academic policy wonk to a service provider and institute-wide collaborator. In order to be a collaborator, you would have to welcome diversity of opinion, be comfortable sharing information, and be responsive to change. Over time, the role has opened up to more women and minorities, enabling colleges to be better equipped to serve all students. Seeing a multicultural workforce become a reality in our profession is a joy for me to witness, and so critical for the future. Seizing the opportunity with self-confidence and a little self-promotion made all the difference for me. Bet on yourself, get specific encouragement, and you can flourish!

Wold-McCormick: Of the many projects and initiatives in which you’ve played a key role, which one makes you most proud or brings you the greatest sense of accomplishment?

Callahan: While this doesn’t really fall neatly under a project or an initiative, I’m most proud of the way I lead this great office. I think the best leaders never stop learning, and I’ve taken time to try to inspire and share this with others. I just shared with my senior staff an article about not being blinded by our expertise, written by Sydney Finkelstein. In it, he cites a Buddhist philosophy about having a beginner’s mind. There is some irony because even though we are relied on for our expertise, we will most always be learning. So, to me, when you are a leader, you have to be able to inspire. Also, we’re in higher ed, so we should be focused on learning. I’ve asked each staff member to develop a learning plan, and they’ll be evaluated on that. It can be on anything from the latest technology to learning Excel or making fondue. It’s all about taking the initiative to go find something to learn. I really think this is important for the team.

Also, a couple years ago, we did a group effort around unconscious bias as I believe it’s important for our staff to be prepared for the range of diverse students we have here. That was really great because we had people who are typically on the more quiet side really get engaged. We also did bystander training and then had our own exercise on putting this all together. As a leader, I hope I promote a culture of caring that translates into everyday actions and a real desire to be part of something larger than ourselves.

Wold-McCormick: What is the greatest obstacle you have faced as a registrar or higher education leader, and how did you overcome it? In retrospect, is there something you would have liked to have done differently with the benefit of hindsight?

Callahan: You are stirring up memories here, and I still sometimes wake up at night worried (laughs). I would say it was the economic crisis of 2008. It was a very challenging time, particularly from a budget standpoint. Sometimes people think that the private universities have endowments that will help them weather storms, but this really was a crisis. We needed to figure out how to reduce the budget, which was not something we had experienced before, and there was no playbook. So, I needed to do some modeling around how to adjust to large budget cuts of 10 to 15 percent. A dean at the time told me I couldn’t do the Washington Monument strategy of just closing and stop registering students. Because we didn’t have programs to cut, it came down to people, and that was really tough for me because we were pretty lean already. I needed to consider things like reducing staff or taking time off in the summer.
Those were difficult conversations because we were still churning away at the work we had to do for the institute.

In the end, we went more with a model of revenue generation, and found different pockets and ways to cobble together additional funding, some of which I may have picked up from registrar colleagues. So, this exercise really sharpened my ability to strike a vivid narrative of the important role of the registrar at an institution. My boss understood that if we reduced significantly in our area, we would all suffer the consequences because of how our office contributes to the whole. While it was tough going through it, we didn’t suffer the deep budget cuts that other areas experienced. The value that we brought to the process helped others on campus understand many things that were previously taken for granted, and that was a positive outcome.

**Wold-McCormick:** Looking back on your registrar career, what do you believe have been the most significant changes to our profession? How have these changes impacted your role?

**Callahan:** There is a timeless quality to the work of a registrar’s office, but there is an innovative side as well. So, over time, I’ve really tried to figure out what’s that right balance. How do you innovate? How do you lead? How do you follow? Where do you find policies and procedures and adhere to those things while also enabling others to move forward? So, these challenges have grown over time as the institute has really expanded on its mission. But, our goal has always been to be a partner, so I’ve had to figure out how to accomplish that.

Operational excellence is critical and we can’t forgo protecting the records that have to be around as long as the institute is, and integrity in this area is critical. At the same time, we also have to look at ways to streamline things to create better services. So, these developments advance our profession. We can’t have one over the other as that wouldn’t be good for our students or our faculty.

**Wold-McCormick:** What do you anticipate to be the most significant changes for higher education in the next ten years? How can we, as registrars, best prepare ourselves or our organizations to successfully adapt, navigate, and support these changes?

**Callahan:** It’s crystal ball time (laughs). There will be some continuations of where we are now...access, affordability, and student retention will continue to be a challenge, and may require some schools to re-evaluate their business models to balance costs and maintain quality. I also worry a lot about the student body as they are coming to us much more stressed. I believe registrars have a role in helping to reduce this stress, and there are different ways we can contribute, such as focusing on barriers, degree pathways, providing clearer options for students, and making sure the information they receive is accurate.

Also, the educational experience will continue to evolve. The faculty will drive a lot of this whether it’s in the area of new degrees, new programs or new delivery modes. I believe the registrar’s relationship to the teaching and learning center or lab must continue to grow. If we understand more about innovations in pedagogy and teaching styles, we will be better able to frame and maybe complete a picture of where we need to be. We have to be strategic and more immersive in the teaching areas and certainly serve as integrators across these different dimensions.

We know our data will be critical, and we’ll need to serve as data managers, data governors, data providers, and data analyzers. We can add value by helping make sense of the data because sometimes what a requestor thinks they want is different from what they need. At a time of educational change, the character and impact of programs is important to understand and assess. Policy development with curricular innovations will remain critical, and being present and being heard is very important for registrars.

We also manage a lot of the key elements of the academic infrastructure with classrooms and student systems, all providing synergy for success. Will our classrooms align with our teaching approaches? Are there more proactive ways to make known if classroom supply is meeting demand? Of course, there are always changing technologies, but what should we be doing in this area? Do we want to be on the bleeding edge of technology or fast followers? Where do we want to position ourselves in this realm of ever-changing, yet predictable, unpredictability? Finally, regarding staff, our skills need to follow these changes and adapt accordingly. As registrars, we have to help create nimble organizations. While there is not a magic wand that makes us nimble, we can create these environments by aligning the aspirations and necessary job skills accordingly.
To find or post a job, visit jobs.aacrao.org or e-mail us at jol@aacrao.org

AACRAO Jobs Online is the only employment site specialized for admissions, enrollment management, student service and other higher education administration professionals.
Wold-McCormick: You mentioned that your approach is about your team first. Tell me more about this approach and your philosophy on developing your team?

Callahan: Team means everything to me. At MIT, we are selfless and high performing. There is a quote I like from the basketball coach, John Wooden. “It’s amazing how much can be accomplished if no one cares who gets the credit.” That really defines my team as they are always so willing to pitch in. With the expansion of my portfolio, the collaboration between teams has been seamless. They have a full set of information and context so balls don’t get dropped. People aren’t territorial, so it really operates on a continuum. We have a tech team, a communication team, a curriculum and faculty support team, and a management team with scheduling. This cross-team collaboration really makes a difference in helping us be high functioning at this place that never sleeps. I’ve had team members who have been here for many years, and not many end up leaving, but when they do, they do so for better positions and they always reflect back saying how much they’ve learned here.

Wold-McCormick: Are there any individuals, such as faculty, students, or mentors who have impacted your development as a leader or influenced your work as a registrar?

Callahan: It’s so critical to have mentors, and I’ve been lucky to have several who have impacted my leadership journey. The first is Larry Bacow who is the current president of Harvard. He was previously here at MIT as chair of the faculty and later became chancellor. He took a chance on me and named me registrar, as I didn’t fit the profile of former MIT registrars. He felt ready to break that mold and felt comfortable that what I could bring is what the institute needed. I think back to him quite a bit when I am faced with difficult situations. He taught me so much about how to construct arguments. For example, as registrars, we know that classroom negotiation is part science and part art. He was so good at helping me reinvigorate a program to renovate rooms that had been dormant for a while. He had a wonderful ability to construct data-driven arguments, but did so in a way that the narrative made it sound so common sense. I was fortunate to pick that up from him.

I’ve had two other bosses who really impacted my thinking. They are both aerospace/astrophysics professors, so we can laugh about it not taking a rocket scientist to mentor me, but it does. The first was Dan Hastings and he taught me about having a strategic mindset, and he was excellent. He had been very involved with government where he learned a lot about strategy, and I soaked that all up. He was the best at strategy, tactics, and budget—always willing to listen to a better way to do things. One of his quotes that I still remember to this day is, “Fortune favors the prepared.”

Currently, I look to Ian Waitz, and from him I’ve learned so much about how to think about educational change. He is very adept at advancing information to think about how education is done. One of the things he has taught me is how to use different levers to evaluate who might need to know certain things in order to affect the change and get it done. We made an academic calendar change recently, which is not easy. We spent a lot of time collaborating and getting feedback on the potential change. He built a coalition of support and was very up front with people even when arrows were swinging at him about this change.

Wold-McCormick: As someone who has had a long and successful career in higher education, what advice would you give to someone either new to or seeking to advance in our profession?

Callahan: Go join a MIT frat (laughs)! In all seriousness, it’s really about people and connections. The registrar role is a people position, and I think we’ve come a long way in our profession and moving beyond the back room. I like to do a lot of reading and found an article recently about how the mind works. I think it’s relevant to how people might be drawn into our profession. It compared problem solving to play and how we play with information in our minds to come up with new ways of doing things, like taking things apart and recombining them in different ways for planning solutions to our problems. I think it’s relevant to how people might be drawn into our profession. It compared problem solving to play and how we play with information in our minds to come up with new ways of doing things, like taking things apart and recombining them in different ways for planning solutions to our problems. I think registrars really are deeply analytical, and we figure things out. So, to younger people coming into our profession, I would say that you can learn a lot, and you can engage. I feel so confident that our profession is in great hands with those who are currently registrars, and a whole new generation is bringing
great energy, flow, and insights both to their campuses and to each other as we share experiences.

I keep on my desk a lovely document from 1958 called, “Study of the Office of the Registrar at MIT.” It’s a classic, and the characteristics of the registrar as explained in 1958 are as follows: “The registrar is at once this keeper of records, an educational coordinator and a guardian of the best educational standards. The registrar must embody and express the spirit and purpose of the institution he represents. In his contacts, he must show warmth and friendliness while preserving poise and presence. With due courtesy, he yet maintains objectivity of judgement. He perceives the genuinely exceptional situation and is able to depart from strict rules in order to obtain consistency and principle with purpose.” It’s timeless—other than the gender pronouns—and our role has been around since the 12th century!

**Wold-McCormick:** What makes Mary Callahan tick? In other words, what interests, hobbies, or favorite pastimes help you achieve work-life balance?

**Callahan:** I’ve always been about that balance. I work very hard as a registrar and the balance part goes into my family by spending a lot of time with my husband and two children. I’m a soccer mom from way back, driving and flying places, which led to both of my children getting D1 scholarships on different coasts. The experience they both had was marvelous. It was fun to do college tours with them and watch them become established individuals who are now in the workforce. Nowadays, I play with my dog who greets me at the door. I also work out, play golf, and I might even try pickle ball.

Overall, my career has been a journey that has been most rewarding for many reasons. It’s the greatest job, and I’ve come across some very wonderful people. And that’s what matters…It’s about people.

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**About the Author**

Kristi Wold-McCormick has served as University Registrar of the University of Colorado Boulder since 2014. In her leadership role, she focuses on student data privacy, business process improvement, academic policy, inclusion initiatives, and academic record and enrollment innovation.

Wold-McCormick currently serves as Vice President for Records and Academic Services on the AACRAO Board of Directors, has served on both the Program and Nominations and Elections committees, and recently chaired an AACRAO committee that developed guidance on disciplinary transcript notations.

Prior to joining CU Boulder, Wold-McCormick was registrar of North Dakota State University and has held various other positions in admissions and enrollment management. She earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees from NDSU and a Ph.D. from the University of North Dakota.
An Interview with Luisa Havens Gerardo

Luisa Havens Gerardo is Vice President for Enrollment Management at Virginia Tech. She has served AACRAO as president, vice president for access and equity, chair of the international admissions committee, and member of the nominations committee and the program committee for the Annual Meeting. She’s a frequent conference presenter on a wide range of topics, including student success, transfer student completion, change management, international admissions, technology and analytics, and SEM. Luisa holds a degree in elementary school teaching from the Escuela Normal Mixta “Pedro Nufio,” in Honduras, and B.S., M.S., and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Idaho.
von Munkwitz-Smith: How has your own experience as an international student influenced your work with international education?

Havens Gerardo: My experience as an international student was instrumental in my effectiveness as an associate director of admissions. One of my very first projects in that position was to reengineer the international admissions process and to inform associated policies and procedures. Bringing the student perspective to the forefront as we reimagined the entire process was key to the success of that project.

von Munkwitz-Smith: You had a background that included new student recruitment, undergraduate and graduate admissions, and work as a registrar before becoming a VP for enrollment management. How does that influence how you work with your EM colleagues?

Havens Gerardo: Having been in the trenches in those areas gives me a level of credibility and commands a level of respect from professionals in those fields that I otherwise would not have. It also prepared me to speak the language and translate the symbiotic nature of our professions in a more direct, and therefore more impactful, way to others. My operational experience allows me to use real-life examples from each of those professional perspectives.

von Munkwitz-Smith: Tell me about your work with AACRAO before you joined the board? How did you first get involved? Who were your early mentors?

Havens Gerardo: I am a little bit of an oddity in that I began my professional involvement directly at the national level, rather than at state or regional organizations. I was working at the University of Idaho as an associate director of admissions, and during my first AACRAO, I attended every single international admissions presentation I could and asked a lot of questions. Eric Staab, then at Grinnel College and program coordinator for the international group in the program committee, caught up with me after one presentation and asked me to get involved in the international admissions committee. I said yes, and that’s all it took; I was hooked. During that meeting I met a lot of people who became life-long colleagues and mentors: Nora McLaughlin, Nancy Krogh, Reta Pikowsky, Bob Bontrager, Janet Ward, Christine Kerlin, Dave Stones, Gloria Nathanson, Glenn Munson, Betty Huff, Ange Peterson, Stan Henderson, and Brad Myers, to name a few.

von Munkwitz-Smith: Tell me about your time on the AACRAO board, including your term as president. What were the main challenges? What were your proudest accomplishments while you served as president?

Havens Gerardo: I first served on the board as the VP for access and equity from 2011 to 2014. In 2014, I ran for president in the first competitive slate in the history of the organization but did not win. When I accepted the nomination and ran again in 2018, I was not necessarily expecting to win! Serving on the board has been one of the most rewarding professional experiences of my career. It has allowed me to not only contribute to the profession but to ensure that others have that opportunity for many years to come by supporting many important initiatives during my tenure: the hiring of a new executive director in 2012, the amendment of the bylaws that establish a competitive slate for board positions, the attainment of long-established financial goals, the
embracing of advocacy as a core function of the organization, the acquiring of a new building, and the addition of the first external board member. As president, being able to continue to support the pursuit of strategic goals that keep the organization financially stable and relevant as a key thought leader in the higher education arena in D.C., the nation, and the world has been my focus.

von Munkwitz-Smith: What do you see yourself doing with AACRAO after your term as past president?

Havens Gerardo: I see myself still involved in any way the organization may need me to be. Personally, I would love to increase my involvement in the Leaders in Enrollment Advancing Diversity (LEAD) initiatives; the Hispanic, LGBTQ, and women caucuses; and the Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) conference. Our professions are in need of new, courageous, creative young professionals to fill the void created by retiring folks, which will accelerate in the next few years.

von Munkwitz-Smith: How has your work with AACRAO connected with your daily work at institutions over the years?

Havens Gerardo: My work with AACRAO has given me access to a network of practitioners who are able to provide perspective, resources, and wisdom about almost everything I could possibly face in my day to day work. Those connections and that access has been invaluable in my ability to contribute in a positive way at the institutions I have served. Other resources in the form of training, publications, webinars, etc., have also proven invaluable in many occasions and have contributed to my effectiveness as a professional throughout my career.

von Munkwitz-Smith: What do you see as the biggest changes in the admissions/registrar/enrollment management field during your career?

Havens Gerardo: One of the biggest, and most exciting, change has been how the roles of data, analytics, and technology have changed the running of our operations and our ability to support our institutions. Gone are the days when the effectiveness of an admissions team is measured by a personality quiz! Predictive modeling, CRM’s, and chatbots are now essential tools in many admissions offices readying themselves to meet the challenges ahead. Our students and families come to us with a set of expectations about service levels, personalization, and access to technology, which, if not met, can prove detrimental to an institution’s ability to meet enrollment and student success expectations.

von Munkwitz-Smith: Thank you so much for agreeing to the interview! I’ve known you for at least fifteen years, but I’ve learned a lot from your interview.

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**About the Author**

Jeff von Munkwitz-Smith retired from Boston University in 2015 where he was Assistant Vice President and University Registrar. He is a past president of AACRAO, served as editor-in-chief of College and University from 2014–2020, and is currently a senior consultant with AACRAO Consulting. He earned a Ph.D. in South Asian Languages from the University of Minnesota.
Commencement Matters

By Jackie Schluchter, Jerri Weston, and Sara Sullivan

Leave “one size fits most” to the gowns. Plan the ceremony that is right for your institution.

Many people view commencement from the outside: a wonderful celebration of academic achievement and a time to celebrate graduates’ accomplishments. By contrast, the commencement coordinator analyzes and implements each of the smaller parts that culminate in graduates crossing the stage and throwing their caps.

The perfect commencement is contingent on many variables. These should be considered no matter the institution—public, private, large, or small. Commencement planners with a total of more than 30 years of experience at three institutions offer the following tips for planning or enhancing your institution’s celebration.

Venue: Ask What Your Venue Can Do for You

Consider the venue from the visitors’ perspective and identify the questions they might ask. Is signage appropriately placed and clear? Simple signage branded with institutional colors is a great way to get the attention of participants and guests. Utilize signage available at the venue, and do not hesitate to order extra directional signage for added clarity. The University of Iowa recently added banners outside the venue to direct guests to designated entrances. Additional signage regarding prohibited items is placed in parking lots to ensure that guests leave such items in their vehicles. Sidewalk stick-
ers direct graduates to their entrance and communicate a congratulatory message.

Venues are typically chosen for the planner not by the planner and can be difficult to navigate. Remember that each venue is different; use its unique features to provide graduates with a distinctive ceremony. Direct students’ and guests’ attention to special features. Bolster your graduates’ pride in their alma mater—and your own in the critical role you play in providing the experience of a lifetime.

Safety First: Respect the Unexpected

Large crowds can generate unexpected results. Analyze your event from varying perspectives; use foresight to prevent mishaps. Most institutional policies outline screening and security measures for large events. Are these policies followed at the commencement ceremony? Should they be? Understand the protocol for your event, and provide it in writing to any who request it. Severe weather and emergency evacuation procedures should be reviewed and updated regularly. Include emergency announcements as appendixes with easy tabbed access in the podium script.

The diverse demographics of commencement participants and guests require strategic safety and security measures. Request EMS and police presence at commencement ceremonies. Train screening staff to be alert to risky contraband. Most important, never sec-
ound guess erring on the side of caution. It is preferable to deal with irritated guests rather than tragedy.

**Staffing and Volunteers: Engage and Leverage Campus Talent**

Commencement is a time for the entire campus community to celebrate; everyone who is interested should have the opportunity to be involved. Create a commencement committee that includes representatives from the registrar’s office, the president’s office, the event office, campus police, parking, and colleges and faculty. If the ceremony would benefit from something new, then look to campus partners for ideas and resources. At Montana State University, PBS is part of the campus. The university utilizes this resource by contracting with PBS to create a “shout-out” video of graduating seniors for each ceremony. Reciprocate volunteer efforts at other university events. Knowing you have helped at other events may inspire reluctant volunteers to assist with commencement.

Remind staff that helping with commencement is good student service. Commencement is the culmination of students’ academic career at your institution. The “bookend” to welcome week events when students first arrived on campus, commencement constitutes their “goodbye and good luck with future endeavors.” At the culmination of their college experience, students want to see the individuals who helped them throughout their journey; your staff are the perfect people to fill that role.

**Communication: Connect Experience With Information**

Communication is key to a successful commencement ceremony. It is also important to share details with all volunteers, staff, and members of the platform party. Empower them by sharing as much information as possible. Provide each platform party member with a script; this will aid them in knowing when it is their turn to approach the podium. It is also helpful to mark

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AACRAO Guide to Graduation Ceremonies
the stage so platform members know where they should stand for handshakes and pictures. Also provide staff and volunteers with the script so they will know when to cue students to enter the arena and cross the stage.

Communicating with students is key. The University of Iowa e-mails all commencement-eligible students with pertinent information. The Iowa Graduation App and newly designed website clearly describe what graduates and their families need to do to prepare for the ceremony. As with signage, messages should be clear and concise. Utilize analytics to determine the best time to send e-mail messages, and always utilize social media to communicate helpful information about commencement.

Evolution: Embrace Change; Preserve Tradition

As budgets evolve, technology advances, and administration changes, evaluate whether aspects of the ceremony can be modified. Vendors who specialize in commencement ceremonies can help implement change. North Dakota State University transitioned to custom regalia to enhance the ceremony’s formality and decorum. Determine whether a print program could be replaced with an electronic version.

In 2017, the University of Iowa began reducing the number of commencement programs it distributes. Programs are given only to graduates on the day of the ceremony; guests who wish to order a program may do so free of charge via an online order form. The institution has saved more than $10,000 since it adopted this practice. It pays homage to the time-honored tradition of a print program while modernizing to reduce paper and conserve monetary and physical resources. A PDF of the program is available on the website and via the app, so guests can choose the format they prefer.

Change is hard. Communicating all of the benefits of a particular change may not earn universal buy-in, but not trying will not result in any change. Identify exemplars among peer institutions of the changes you would like to implement. Contact them, ask about their processes, and solicit their suggestions. Inquire about barriers and how they overcame them. Collect as much information as possible to bolster the rationale for the proposed change. Be sure to address how tradition will be preserved even as change is embraced.

No matter the special characteristics of your institution, commencement is a milestone to be honored and celebrated. By keeping the details in check, academic achievements can be celebrated by all. Best wishes planning and implementing a commencement to remember!

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**About the Authors**

Jackie Schluchter is Associate Registrar at North Dakota State University. She has more than 20 years of event planning experience, including five coordinating commencement.

Jerri Weston is University Registrar at Louisiana State University of Alexandria and former Commencement Coordinator at Montana State University. She has more than eighteen years of experience planning commencement ceremonies.

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At-Risk Assessments: A New Twist on Midterm Grading Policies

By Rodney Parks and Alexander Taylor

Many colleges and universities nationwide use midterm grades to provide feedback to students about their academic performance at the midpoint of a course. These grades also help institutions identify students who may need additional academic support or who may be experiencing hardship that affects their class performance. In addition, midterm grades may alert students to withdrawal policies and upcoming deadlines should they decide that continuing in a course is not their best option.

In recent years, registrars have been challenged to collect accurate midterm grades. Often, the same midterm grade is reported for every student in a class, something that statistically should occur only rarely. Numerous factors contribute to the challenge of collecting accurate assessments. The use of modern learning management systems (LMS) that allow students to see their progress at any point is one of the main contributors, as faculty may believe it’s no longer necessary to bother calculating midterm grades when students already have extensive information about their progress in the course. In addition, faculty who return graded papers often say that midterm grading is unnecessary because the students enrolled should already know how they are performing. Moreover, academic calendar deadlines may require faculty to submit midterm grades before students have completed any substantive work for the course.

This constellation of factors raises the question of the value of midterm grades and whether grades should be the sole factor used to evaluate student success at midterm. After many years of struggling to get accurate midterm grades, Elon University developed a new system that broadens the definition of satisfactory midterm performance. The new policy, called “mid-semester assessments,” launched during the fall 2018 academic term.

Similar to midterm grades, mid-semester assessments serve as progress reports and are not entered on students’ permanent records. The intent of the mid-semester assessment is to provide early, accurate, and significant feedback regarding a student’s progress in the course, making it useful for students and their advisors. Under the new policy, students are assigned either “S,” indicating satisfactory progress in the course, or “AR,” indicating “at risk for non-success in this course.”

The challenge Elon faced was defining “non-success.” A committee comprising faculty, student affairs personnel, and the registrar determined that students may be “at risk for non-success” if they meet either of the following criteria: (1) the student is currently earning a course grade of C- or lower or (2) the student has exhibited behavior that may impede the likelihood of success in the course, including but not limited to excessive absences, late assignments, lack of class preparation, or unproductive or disruptive classroom behavior.

As a result of the new policy, the number of students “at risk” at Elon has increased. Comparing midterm grades from fall 2017, when students who received midterm grades of C-, D+, D, and D- were considered...
at risk, to AR grades for fall 2018, the percentage of students at risk increased from 4.35 to 6.14 percent. In addition, under the new policy, the overall percentage of grades entered by faculty increased from 96 to 99 percent (i.e. grades were no longer left blank during the designated midterm grading period).

Faculty feedback on the new policy was overwhelmingly positive, with many indicating that expressing their concern in this way prompted one-on-one follow-up conversations with students. Similarly, academic advisors reported having more discussions with students about receiving an at-risk grade. The institution also saw an increase in the number of students applying for medical hardship withdrawals as well as using tutoring and learning assistance resources.

One downside to the new policy was an increase in the number of parents wanting to know what “at risk” means and demanding to speak with faculty about student performance. Elon is exploring the possibility of using direct connections to institutional LMS to empower students to give their parents access to more details about their course performance. Another idea under consideration is to upload midterm assessments that include a course average directly from the LMS, making it easier to identify which students are at risk on the basis of their grades versus those at risk for other reasons.

While the available data don’t provide sufficient information to determine the overall success rate of the new policy, early feedback has been predominantly positive. Early data suggest that faculty are alerting students of their concern, prompting students to engage in conversations about how to improve their performance. The data also provide student wellness offices the opportunity to reach out to at-risk students and offer resources that may help improve their success. Institutionally, it will be important to know whether identifying at-risk students early yields higher rates of student success and retention. Future studies will assess the true impact of Elon’s new grading system.

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**About the Authors**

*Rodney Parks* is Registrar, Assistant Vice President, and Assistant Professor of Human Service Studies at Elon University, where he has served since 2013. He has published numerous studies on unique student populations and is perhaps best known for his work on the AACRAO/NASPA Expanding the Academic Record project.

*Alexander Taylor* is Assistant Registrar of Communications at Elon University, where he has served since 2017. He has published articles on numerous topics, including dual enrollment and strategic enrollment management initiatives.
Is the Grad Fair Dead? An Op-Ed

By Ariana Balayan and Emily Kormann

It’s that time again: Pack brochures into a heavy roller bag, heave it into a rented Hyundai, and drive several hours from home base to a gym on a generic college campus. Eat boxed lunches buoyed by chocolate chip cookies, drink unsweetened iced tea, admire swag from fellow college representatives, and look forward to room service later that evening.

And for what? A few students to approach the table? A hopeful collection of inquiry cards? The experience seems to have soured, especially as grad fairs have become less and less fruitful over the past several years.

Yet while the traditional experience may be waning (or diminished altogether), the opportunities to make connections and network beyond the grad fair table can make the trips worthwhile.

The grad fair needs to be reframed into the full experience of the visit and why it is necessary; this may be the key to justifying continued participation. (Spoiler alert: the grad fair is not dead!)

The Grad Fair Defined

It is necessary to define the grad fair in its current context before sharing why it is no longer what it may have been and describing the potential for adding value. For the purposes of this commentary, a grad fair (shortened from graduate fair or graduate school fair) is an event on a college campus at which graduate schools advertise their program offerings. It is often organized by a university career center, and the set-up typically features linen–clothed tables and a neat row of recruiters ready to meet prospective students.

The Current State

When colleagues gather at NAGAP events, a consistent through-line is how limited resources require flexibility in a time of change. The theme of doing more with less is prevalent, with tightened budgets and small teams contributing to the necessity of grad fairs being successful so as to justify the registration fee and staff time away from the office.

According to Paul Cincotta, director of graduate admission at Bridgewater State University, “Each year, resources seem to become more and more finite…because of this, relying on human capital [to] boost the ground recruiting becomes even more important.” This corroborates the need to strategically deploy staff to attend and make the most of grad fairs.

Strategy related to grad fair participation varies according to GEM model. A decentralized office, for example, may not have as robust a staff as a centralized one. Office structures may influence the strategy and help create the value of the grad fair. There is also no universal metric for evaluating the success of grad fairs. Until one exists, offices will continue to determine for themselves what they consider an effective fair. While grad fairs often are where many inquiry cards are re-
ceived, it’s the conversion to application and progression through the enrollment funnel that constitute the ultimate measure of success.

The Considerations

The following considerations illustrate how to move beyond thinking of the grad fair as a stand-alone entity to understanding why it is imperative to attend (specific fairs, at least). Otherwise, a grad fair is just a table in a gym. Marcus Hanscom, director of graduate admission at Roger Williams University, posits that “pairing [grad fairs] with highly target[ed] information sessions or student groups on host campuses has made them a valuable secondary tool.” Primary tools may include presenting to student groups or speaking with advisors.

◆ **Feeder Schools.** One reason the grad fair still holds value pertains to feeder school potential. (A feeder school is another college, often local, that consistently provides a significant number of enrolled students to an institution.) Physical presence at a fair increases brand awareness, supports recruitment efforts at that school, and demonstrates commitment to that particular institution. Because feeder schools often are within driving distance, participation in grad fairs they sponsor may decrease time away from the office as well as required monetary investment.

◆ **Geographic Proximity and Distance.** When a fair is held within a few hours’ drive of campus, attend (unless a conflict precludes doing so). Even if only a few inquiry cards are obtained, maintaining awareness of the institution in the region is reason enough to attend. As in the case of the feeder school (and others; see below), resources can best be allocated to traveling locally and providing an attainable opportunity to increase the value of the fair.

Attending fairs beyond the local area provides the opportunity to expand an institution’s geographic market. While this requires the investment of more time, money, and human capital, it provides greater exposure and may result in greater diversity among enrolled students. This may be of particular importance to competitive programs, for which a regional or national presence may bolster interest.

◆ **The Loop.** A strong incentive for attending a grad fair, even if it has not produced many inquiries or conversations in the past, is if the fair is part of a geographic loop. Longer trips may be tied together as “loops” featuring multiple fairs or other ways to engage with nearby campuses; this enables the more efficient expenditure of time and resources. Attending other events in the area constitutes a better use of time and increases the potential for garnering even a few inquiries than does replying to emails in a hotel room or coffee shop.

◆ **Presence of Competitors.** In order to contend with competitor institutions—particularly local competitors—it is essential to attend fairs and thereby maintain an active presence in the field. If a prospective student attends a business school fair in Boston, for example, and notices the absence of an institution that had been under consideration, the student may decide for any number of reasons that it is not a viable choice. (Perhaps the university doesn’t prioritize business students or doesn’t care to make itself accessible.) Other institutions in attendance have the opportunity to connect with the prospective student, perhaps jeopardizing the chance the student will consider any others.

◆ **Program Offerings.** When evaluating which fairs to attend, pay particular attention to the programs the host institution offers. If it offers majors without related graduate programs, it’s possible to offer the solution to that gap. This may foster connections with students and departments as well as develop a student pipeline. Conduct some research before registering for fairs.

◆ **GEM Networking.** Time spent on the road is valuable not only for recruiting new students but also for building and maintaining a professional network. Apart from conferences, the most consistent opportunity for networking with other GEM professionals is at grad fairs. These connections foster the regular exchange of ideas and best practices, and they can be a valuable support to the lonely road warrior.

◆ **Building Relationships.** A graduate fair can offer the opportunity to build and strengthen relationships with any number of constituents; the alumni office and career center are just two examples. If graduate admissions attends a fair across the country, it could also provide an opportunity to hold an alumni reception, serving a dual purpose of recruiting alumni to attend graduate events in the area and encouraging them to donate to the university.

◆ **Enhanced Visit.** Linking other opportunities to the fair can also enhance the visit. Connecting with stu-
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dent groups on campus or speaking with advisors or faculty in related programs can generate additional contacts. Pay particular attention to whether the host school has a grad program that aligns with the interest of the student organization or undergraduate major. If information sessions are provided to specific clubs, for example, personal connections can be made. When other value propositions are added to a visit, the combined value can not only justify attendance but also provide incentive to repeat the visit each year.

In Conclusion
Gone are the days of expecting a grad fair to bring a flood of students, a list of qualified leads, and inevitable conversion to application. Instead, creativity and attention to the considerations above are necessary for the grad fair to continue to be of value.

Review travel opportunities with all of the above in mind, and consider how expanding the basic grad fair model will benefit recruitment. If a new model of return on investment is built to include additional elements such as participating in personalized information sessions, then the experience will be buoyed far beyond chocolate chip cookies.

Finally, it may be useful to identify specialized events to attend in addition to traditional grad fairs. Participating in events such as the California Forum for Diversity in Graduate Education will provide further opportunity to market programs to specific audiences. This will allow for connections with target markets, providing further value.

The grad fair is not dead if it is used as a springboard to make further connections and to continue to build a professional network. Pack your bags.

About the Authors

Ariana Balayan is an Associate Director of Graduate Admission at Suffolk University in downtown Boston. She has more than nine years of experience in graduate enrollment management, in addition to teaching at the master’s level. In the office, she is responsible for the flagship program recruitment, coordinating domestic travel, and reporting on return on investment, managing three staff members, and the budget. Ariana earned her Doctorate of Higher Education Leadership from Nova Southeastern University, is also published in the Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly and The Journal of College Student Retention, Research, Theory & Practice, and has presented at numerous national and regional conferences. She also has a Master of Education from Lesley University and a Bachelor of Arts from Wheaton College (MA).

Emily Kormann is an Assistant Director of Graduate Admission at Suffolk University. She has four years of experience in graduate enrollment management, and she joined Suffolk in March 2018. Her responsibilities include domestic and international recruitment travel, organizing and coordinating on-campus events, and managing the ambassador program. Emily holds a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature and French Language from Simmons University and is currently enrolled in the Master of Education in Administration of Higher Education at Suffolk.
2019 was a bit different from previous years for AACRAO Research. Since we had six larger-scale research projects (of which several were calendared over the summer months), we did not want to overly burden our members with surveys. This resulted in four 60-Second Surveys for the year instead of the typical six.

The 60-Second Survey topics were:
- Registrar staff size—January 2019
- Student success initiatives—March 2019
- Territory management—November 2019
- Transcript formats—September 2019

Additional research topics included:
- Brand management use in recruiting high school seniors
- Applicant to admit: an examination of how institutions admit the freshmen class
- Chief admissions officer career profile
- Prior learning assessment institutional practices and related student PLA experiences survey
- Excess credits at graduation
- Academic records and transcript practice

These initiatives continue to be designed to help meet our research goals, which are:
- Contribute to a better understanding of the factors and conditions that impact higher education academic/enrollment services and ultimately student success;
- Use the Research Advisory Board to engage the membership in determining the focus of the research;
- Develop new insights and information for our members to help them successfully lead their institutions in a continually evolving environment;
- Maintain current partnerships and develop new partnerships with other organizations and associations who share common interests with AACRAO; and
- Disseminate relevant, up-to-date research on student success to practitioners and institutional decision makers.

Included in this article is a brief introduction of the research topics and summary of the key findings, which have been modified slightly from the original reports. The purpose of this article is to provide a single source of research finding takeaways from 2019. With the exception of the full article on brand management and report on prior learning assessment, the related reports can be found in their entirety on AACRAO’s website.\(^1\)

The brand management article\(^2\) was published as an article in *SEMQ*, and the prior learning assessment report is part of the new *AACRAO Academic Records*.

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\(^1\) See [aacrao.org/research-publications/research].

60-Second Surveys

Registrar Staffing

The registrar staffing surveys have been of particular interest to our members over the years. There were 1,101 unduplicated institutional responses to this survey, which is a refinement of the April 2015 survey and report on the same topic. Similar to the 2015 survey, there was an attempt to differentiate staffing numbers by the scope of the work undertaken by the registrar’s office, or institutional equivalent, and whether or not the registrar’s office served only undergraduate or graduate students, or both populations.

The survey was designed to highlight staffing numbers by institutional size, population served, and whether or not the office is responsible for processes normally considered outside the traditional registrar’s office role (e.g. admissions, recruitment, etc.). However, the data presented in this report was not intended to serve as a metric for staff right-sizing; additional data is needed for a direct comparison among institutions. There were too many permutations of the breadth and depth of unit responsibilities, degree of business process complexities, and use of technology to make direct comparisons based simply on the data gathered in this survey. Comments provided by respondents also supported the assertion that registrar’s offices are not identical in the services they provide, and, as such, the size and configuration of staff vary considerably.

Table 1 includes the count of institutions by population served and functions supported. The full report differentiates data by these categories plus institutional size if/when the data supported a meaningful difference in results.

As illustrated in Figure 1 (on page 41), most institutions have an office called either “Office of the Registrar” or “Registrar’s Office.”

The data summarized in Figure 2 (on page 41) is what prompted the need for a follow-up one-question survey about the number of full-time employees at, or more than, ten.

Table 1. Population Served and Functions Supported by the Registrar’s Office or Institutional Equivalent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Both Undergraduate and Graduate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registration and Records-Related Functions Only</td>
<td>648</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both Registration and Records-Related Functions and Admissions Functions</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>731</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate Only</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registration and Records-Related Functions Only</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both Registration and Records-Related Functions and Admissions Functions</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>296</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate and/or Professional Only</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registration and Records-Related Functions Only</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both Registration and Records-Related Functions and Admissions Functions</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The subsequent data on ten or more full-time employees highlights the degree of variability in staffing from institution to institution. For example, for the 93 institutions with 20,000 or more students, the standard deviation in staffing size is 29, which limits the value of the average. (See Table 2, on page 42.)

With the understanding that the U.S. model for a registrar’s office is different from the Canadian model and those in other countries, Table 3 (on page 42) highlights the same data for just U.S. institutions with ten or more full-time employees (n=305). The standard deviation is still large enough to warrant a highly conservative interpretation of the data.

Student Success Initiatives

The student success initiatives survey was completed at the behest of the AACRAO working group of the same name. The student success work group was charged by the AACRAO board to investigate, research, and explore student success from the perspective of enrollment management professionals (including admissions, registration, and possibly financial aid). This data established a baseline for AACRAO professional members

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and helped inform work group deliverables. Nearly 500 institutions responded the survey. Of the 482 respondents, nineteen were graduate and/or professional institutions only, and the remainder were lower-division, undergraduate only, or undergraduate comprehensive.
Key Results for All Institutions

- Graduation rate and retention rate are two measurements of student success used by more than 90 percent of all institutions.
- Student satisfaction and course completion rates are used as metrics of success by about half.
- When disaggregated, graduate and/or professional institutions are less likely to use any metric to measure student success.
- Student success is led by the academic affairs/provost unit at 42 percent of institutions and nearly evenly split among student affairs, enrollment management, and student success.
- Among the twelve student success initiatives proffered in the survey, early alerts, first-year student seminars/experience, integrated planning and advising, and proactive advising are used by more than half of the respondents.
- Adaptive learning is used by just 10 percent.
- Three quarters agree that their institution has financial aid options aimed to ensure support is available for students who are in need and likely to succeed when their need is met.
- More than half think technology and data analytics are used effectively to support student success initiatives.
- The largest percentage of respondents (38%) feel the institution’s professional development training is “moderately effective.”
- A little more than a third think students could be asked more about their experience as a means to improve institutional programs and services.
- Most are satisfied with how the institution shares student success data.
- About two-thirds of institutions use two to five different technology solutions to support student success.

Table 2. Registrar’s Offices Having Ten or More Employees, by Institution Size (All Countries)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Avg</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>92</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>93</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Registrar’s Offices Having Ten or More Employees, by Institution Size (U.S. Only)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Avg</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Greatest Challenges

- A cohesive institutional plan/approach to student success
- Buy-in across the institution, including faculty
- Data analytics
- Lack of sufficient financial resources to support initiatives

Official Transcript Formats

AACRAO and the AACRAO SPEEDE Committee partnered to update the data on electronic transcript data use from research completed in 2011, 2014, and 2017. The survey received 672 unduplicated responses.

Definitions

- EDX is an umbrella term referring to Electronic Data eXchange. This could include EDI, XML or any exchange of “data” between two computer systems as opposed to a document such as a paper transcript or PDF transcript.
EDI is the Electronic Data Interchange format and the exchange of data using this format.

XML is the Extensible Markup Language format and the exchange of data using this format.

PDF is the Portable Document Format and the exchange of data using this format.

PDF embedded with XML refers to the exchange of transcript documents using PDF technology with embedded XML data that can also be extracted upon receipt.

Key Results

- Transcript formats in use did not statistically differ by student population served.
- Paper returned to the top of the list as the most reported format in both use and volume for both sending and receiving official transcripts.
  - However, 4 percent report no longer sending and/or receiving paper transcripts.
- After a spike in reported use between 2014 and 2017, the 2019 data on PDF use appears to show a marked decrease for both sending and receiving postsecondary transcripts.
  - Sending:
    - 65 percent in 2019
    - 83 percent in 2017
    - 43 percent in 2014
  - Receiving:
    - 83 percent in 2019
    - 91 percent in 2017
    - 74 percent in 2014
  - In this sample set, only 3 percent who previously used PDF report no longer doing so, which does not explain the percent declines above.
- In 2017, 90 percent reported receiving paper transcripts from high schools; in 2019 that percentage decreased to 81 percent.
- The use of PDF appears to have also have decreased for receiving high school transcripts since 2017 after a spike from 2014.
  - 68 percent in 2019
  - 84 percent in 2017
  - 58 percent in 2014
- Nearly half indicate their institution is likely to implement an EDX solution in the next three years.
  - Among those that are not likely, cost, lack of staff and technology resources, and an unfamiliarity with the benefits of EDX are among the challenges for not adopting EDX.

Territory Management

This survey focused on the use, or not, of territory management for undergraduate and graduate students. For the purpose of this survey, territory management was defined as follows: “Territory management is the assignment of an admissions representative to a population of targeted students. Territory managers employ strategies and tactics for the purpose of facilitating students through the enrollment funnel and, in the end, meeting institutional enrollment goals.” The survey received 451 unduplicated responses.

Key Results

In the aggregate, 79 percent use territory management for undergraduate students, graduate students, or both populations.

Undergraduate Territory Management

- Territory management is more likely to be applied to undergraduate students at undergraduate-only institutions than at other types of institutions.
- Various internal data sources and institutional mission are drivers of territory identification for more than half who use territory management.
- 18 percent, 16 percent, and 12 percent, respectively, look at what their institutional competitors, institutional peers, and aspirational peers are doing to help determine territories.
- Most agree that their territory management efforts are proportional to the likelihood prospects will enroll.
- Use of territory management varies by undergraduate student type and is most likely to be applied to domestic students, followed by transfers, and then international students.
- Six factors are used by more than half to identify which college fairs the institution will participate in, and distance from the institution is ranked as the number one factor by most.
- Six factors are used by more than half to identify which high schools the institution will visit at least once per year, and number of previous applicants and number who subsequently enroll rank the highest as influencers.
Average distance traveled for off-campus events varies considerably

**GRADUATE AND/OR PROFESSIONAL TERRITORY MANAGEMENT**

- Institutions are less likely to apply territory management to graduate students as compared to undergraduate students
- Various internal data sources are a driver of territory identification for more than half who use territory management
- In contrast to undergraduate territory identification, 24 percent, 20 percent, and 17 percent, respectively, look at what their institutional competitors, institutional peers, and aspirational peers are doing to help determine territories
- Similar to the undergraduate level, most agree that their territory management efforts are proportional to the likelihood prospects will enroll
- Use of territory management varies by graduate student type and is most likely to be applied to domestic students, followed by international, and then transfer students (which differs from undergraduate practice)

**Additional Research Initiatives**

**Brand Management Use In Recruiting High School Seniors**

This is a summary of an article published in Volume 7, Issue 4 (January 2020) of *SEM Quarterly*. In late 2018 and early 2019, AACRAO partnered with two marketing faculty members to identify how higher education institutions are marketing themselves to high school seniors and to assess whether a brand management approach is being utilized. The research also sought to identify the practices that some institutions use (if any) to achieve enrollment results that are more successful than others.

The research suggests that institutions that tie their recruitment goals to their mission experience a greater yield between admitted and enrolled students. Those that rate themselves high on their use of social media and multichannel communications have similar yield...
rates. Institutions that can, at a minimum, use these two aspects to manage their brands are likely to meet their recruiting goals. The research clarified that higher education, in general, appears to lag behind U.S. corporations (e.g., Nike, Apple, Procter & Gamble) in the use of brand management to market to prospective customers (i.e., students).

The following nine findings were derived from an analysis of the data and interviews:

- Meeting enrollment goals is a challenge.
- Institutions have missions, but recruitment goals are not always tied to them.
- Institutions are not analyzing their markets to inform their marketing approaches.
- The degree to which recruiting leads marketing to high school seniors is important, but many institutions fail to address this fact.
- Sometimes one and sometimes many are responsible for meeting enrollment goals.
- There is room for improvement compared to institutional peers’ use of multi-channel marketing.
- Institutions are comfortable with their level of brand cohesiveness.
- Institutions could improve their use of omni-channel marketing.
- Institutions are extending marketing and recruitment efforts beyond areas supported by enrollment data.

**Key Findings**

- Despite the availability of technology solutions designed to automate certain aspects of admissions operations, admissions processes are highly complex for most institutions.
- The use of technology, or lack thereof, is the most referenced challenge to admissions operations.
- At 62 percent of institutions, prospects can only apply for admission online.
- Most freshmen are admitted to the institution and their program/major through a central office of admissions, in contrast to a specific academic department.
- Paper is still a prevalent method for the submission of required application materials.
- Nearly one-fifth of admissions offices measure and consider a prospect’s demonstrated interest as part of the admissions process.

**Chief Admissions Officer Career Profile**

This is the second AACRAO chief admissions officer career profile report; the first was completed in 2016. The AACRAO career profile series consists of reports on chief admissions officers (CAO), chief enrollment management officers (CEMO), and registrars. The two primary purposes of this series of reports are: 1) to build a longitudinal understanding of the career profile and position responsibilities for these three positions; and 2) to provide those seeking an equivalent position an understanding of the typical career path for doing so.

In 2019, 435 individuals participated, and from them, we concluded that a typical CAO:

- is nearly equally likely to identify as man or woman
- identifies as non-Hispanic, white
- is at least 30 years old with a median age of 40 to 44 years old
- holds a master’s degree

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*See <nces.ed.gov/ipeds/use-the-data/survey-components/6/admissions>.

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**Applicant to Admit: An Examination of How Institutions Admit the Freshmen Class**

AACRAO and the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) partnered on this first-of-its-kind comprehensive report on admissions operations at U.S. institutions that admit freshmen. Throughout the report, we offer admissions professionals a window into the range of practices that guide their work and provide a means of comparing practices with other institutions. The survey results gave us an opportunity to gain an understanding of the extent to which certain practices such as priority admissions are used.

Responses were received from a statistically representative sample of U.S., Title IV eligible, degree-granting institutions that admit freshman (n=318, CI 90%, SE 5%) of varying size, types, and institutional control.

The survey design is based on the collective understanding of admissions operations between NACAC and AACRAO admissions professionals. In addition, it expands on and adds nuance to the admissions practices captured in the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) admissions content⁴, and NACAC’s annual State of College Admission (SOCA) report.⁵ As such, this report is meant to compliment both IPEDS and SOCA data.
has been in higher education his/her entire career to-date
has been in their current CAO position less than five years
reports to a vice president or equivalent position
came to their current CAO position from another admissions-related position in the same institution
travels for work more than 20 business days a year
has an average work week equal to, or more than, 50 hours
serves on a wide variety of committees
has more than five direct reports

From the words of wisdom, personal stories and data, it is clear that the CAO position is complex, often relationship-centered, enrollment goal driven, ever changing and, ultimately, personally rewarding. Further, it appears that it is highly unlikely that someone starts young or even in college thinking, “I want to be a CAO!” Finally, we can anticipate, based on this data, that there will 2,097 CAO vacancies in the United States over the next three years.

Prior Learning Assessment Practice and Student Experience

AACRAO has a longstanding interest in (a) understanding if and how institutions evaluate and award academic credit for prior learning and (b) using that understanding to serve as a professional development resource to help individuals and institutions adopt leading, student-success-driven practices and policies for prior learning assessment (PLA). In fact, the effective application and understanding of PLA is one of AACRAO’s stated core professional proficiencies for academic records professionals.

Our membership also maintains an ongoing interest in understanding PLA practices and policies because the registrar’s office, or institutional equivalent, is typically the unit in charge of enforcing the policy, awarding the credit, and transcripting the credit to a student’s official transcript. The transcript is the official source of record for course and credit content used by other units in the institution, such as financial aid and advising, and as such it is imperative that those responsible for its content are engaged in PLA at the institution. So in 2019, AACRAO, in partnership with the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, undertook research to better understand the current landscape around PLA within the registrar’s purview.

Key Findings

Institutional Practices

8 out of 10 U.S. institutions offer one or more PLA options to students.
Of those, more than one-third have increased their PLA offerings in the last three years.
More than one-half charge a fee for one or more types of PLA, and few offer financial aid to offset the fee.
A majority will not accept PLA in transfer.
The more selective an institution is, the less likely it is to offer PLA; small and rural-distant institutions are also less likely to offer PLA.
Less than one-third of institutions track PLA data over time, and it is rarely tracked at the student level (making it difficult to identify any potential issues with equity).
About one-third of survey respondents agree that there are institutional policies and/or practices that make it more difficult for some students to have their prior learning recognized.

Student Data

Students’ experiences with PLA at their campuses demonstrate that there are many pathways for earning credit for non-classroom experiences, and that most who try are successful in doing so.
A quarter who earned PLA credit indicated that PLA credit “made it possible for them to complete a degree/program they otherwise would not have.”
Students also save time and money when they are given credit for prior learning.

Academic Records and Transcript Practice

2019 marks the fourth iteration of the AACRAO records and official transcript practices survey; others were deployed in 2002, 2009, and 2015. This recurring survey serves two functions:
as a stand-alone report, it quantifies academic records and transcript practices at U.S. institutions, and
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LIKING us at facebook.com/AACRAO

Follow us on LinkedIn
Take advantage of your network and FOLLOW
us at linkedin.com/company/AACRAO

Share with us on Twitter
Follow @AACRAO on Twitter to get meeting
updates and receive invitation-only information.
it serves as a basis for practice recommendations for the AACRAO publication, the *AACRAO Academic Record and Transcript Guide*. A new version of the book will be released in early 2020.

This year, 728 U.S. institutions responded to all or part of the survey, which is a representative sample of U.S. degree granting institutions and enables us to confidently generalize the results of the survey. Several different official transcripts at the undergraduate and graduate levels were reviewed and served as a basis for revising this year’s survey. The survey design was also reviewed by several registrars and other higher education practitioners. As a result of these efforts, the content of this survey was expanded to include questions about course-level content, term-level content, curricular-level content, undergraduate professional certifications, and transcript-key content.

Limitations in the design of some of the questions in 2015 resulted in an inability to draw conclusions about certain practices, including the minimum documentation required for name and gender changes and the communication of academic decisions. These limitations were corrected for this iteration.

In addition, in previous versions of the survey, the response choice for most of the questions was yes or no. As such, there was no way to differentiate “no, we don’t include it on the official transcript but we do have the data and/or a practice related to it” from “this data and/or practice does not exist at this institution.” The new “N/A at this institution” response choice has added to our understanding of official transcript practices.

Unlike previous versions of the survey, prior learning assessment (PLA) practices questions are not part of this report but were a separate project.

**Key Findings**

- Only 5 percent of respondents to the survey record a student’s full social security number on the transcript, down from 13 percent in 2015 and 26 percent in 2002.
- Fewer than one in five institutions include information about a student’s eligibility to re-enroll on the transcript, while more than half include probationary information.
- 13 percent of institutions record both the degree conferred/awarded data and degree completed date.
- 98 percent of respondents reported that their official transcripts include the signature of the registrar.
- 72 percent of institutions do not collect a student’s preferred pronoun.

**Closing**

As always, I would like to offer a big thank you to all of our members who regularly participate in our research projects. The information collected and reported back to you would not be possible without your participation. If you have any research ideas or any questions about the reports highlighted here and on the AACRAO Research website, please contact me at wendyk@aacrao.org.

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**About the Author**

Wendy Kilgore, Ph.D., is Director of Research and Managing Consultant for AACRAO with more than 20 years of experience as a higher education administrator and consultant in the United States and Canada. Prior to her full-time work with AACRAO, Kilgore served as State Dean of Enrollment Services for the Colorado Community College System and Director of Admissions and Registrar for the Pima County Community College District.
The University of Minnesota is a large public research university with five campuses that provide undergraduate, graduate, and professional education to 67,000 students. Given the university’s diverse community, a dedicated campus climate effort helps ensure that the campus is welcoming of all persons. (See <campus-climate.umn.edu/about>.)

Because the student information system (SIS) is the foundation of student records and affects how staff interact with students, making it inclusive of multiple gender identities was necessary to support the campus climate and mission.

A PeopleSoft institution, the university has provided the opportunity for students to provide a “preferred name” since 2014. (Note that the field name in PeopleSoft is “preferred name.” Because this terminology can be dismissive, the university is drafting a policy using “specified name” instead.) A project was underway in 2017 to expand the use of preferred name when PeopleSoft released a new function to add fields for gender identity, pronouns, and other items. Given limited existing options in the system for tracking biological sex (i.e., male, female, unknown), the scope of the project was expanded to add gender identity and pronouns.

A key part of the project was determining the list of gender identities and pronouns to include in the SIS. Researching what other education institutions had done made it clear that there was no definitive list of either gender identities or pronouns. A prototype list was developed and shared with staff, faculty, and students. A request for information from the Gender & Sexuality Center for Queer & Trans Life (GSC) led to development of a survey for students affiliated with the center. Valuable feedback from students in the trans and non-binary community helped ensure that the functionality would support those who were least represented in the current system and informed the list that ultimately was added to the system.

Consultations with the community affirmed the importance of including an open text field for people who do not identify with any of the gender identity or pronoun options provided. The open text field met many needs. Several individuals mentioned that they wanted to add multiple identities but that the list limited them to only one. The open text field provided a flexible option to enter their own terms. Most important, an open text field allowed individuals to indicate what was meaningful to them rather than having to choose from a finite list that may change over time.

The following gender identity options were input into the system: agender, enter your own, gender non-conforming, genderqueer, man, non-binary, prefer not to specify, two spirit, and woman. The final list of
personal pronouns included: enter your own, he/him/his, none (name only), prefer not to specify, she/her/hers, they/them/their, and ze/zir/zirs.

The new functionality, which included gender identity and pronoun options as well as an open text field, was launched for students, staff, and faculty in June 2018. Individuals can self-identify using the self-service portal or may choose to not enter any information at all. In the first year, almost 46,000 individuals entered their gender identity and almost 45,000 entered their personal pronouns. The number of people who used the open text field was much lower, at about 450 during the first year. Feedback about this functionality was positive—for example, that it helps people feel welcomed and included in the community. At this time, gender identity is not shared with other systems or reports, but the pronouns of students who have provided that information is shared—for example, on class rosters, advisee lists, and in the home-grown system for academic advisers.

Updating the student information system has improved the student experience, particularly for students of a non-conforming gender identity. Yet there is more work to be done. The university is working on several governance efforts that will address questions related to when gender identity and pronoun data should be shared for reporting, system integrations, or research.

The work of educating the community about gender identity and pronouns is ongoing. As prototypes of the functionality in the SiS for this project were shared, a wide range of understanding and knowledge of terminology and the need for such functionality became evident. The university’s GSC was—and remains—a great partner in educating the community. The project team and the GSC created resources together so that relevant content is provided to individuals when they update their gender identity or pronouns. They can read about how their information is and is not shared, about terminology and definitions, and about campus resources such as the GSC, Trans Advisory & Action Team, and the Transgender Health Clinic.

The university recently approved a policy to establish institution-wide expectations that our community members use people’s pronouns and specified name when interacting with one another, that gender identity and sex are private information, and that expectations will be reinforced with regard to creating an inclusive and welcoming environment for all.

In addition to efforts such as these, there are easy and low-cost improvements any institution can make to support an inclusive culture. For example, remove subtle and actual barriers for students in website content and forms. Use search tools to find gendered terminology—for example, language like “he/she”—in web content and academic policies. Replace it with “the student” or “college staff” or other role-based language. Sometimes gendered terminology is more subtle. For example, a form asked students to list the names of their mother and father; these were updated to “parent.” Several university forms asked for “name” without specifying a name type. Rather than making such forms more difficult, they were left as is; they are accepted with either a student’s specified or primary name. (In some cases related to financial aid or for other regulatory reasons, primary name is required.) Several forms included a field to indicate sex, but because that information was not relevant to the business process, it was removed.

Name types used on transcripts and diplomas have been reviewed, but more work needs to be done. While many documents (e.g., tax and financial aid documents) require legal names, the university has provided a flexible name field for diplomas for some time. The SiS has a separate name type for “diploma” that students submit. Whether the diploma name type could also be used on transcripts is being considered. Flexible name types for students on diplomas and transcripts introduce some potential for fraud but can dramatically improve the experience of a trans student. For example, a student whose employer knows them by one name may encounter difficulty if they are required to produce a transcript that only displays their legal name.

Almost four years ago, our organization at the university formed a Diversity, Equity & Inclusion committee. The vision was to create a climate where everyone feels included, valued, and respected and is knowledgeable about topics and resources related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The committee created a pathway for others to identify issues and opportunities deserving of analysis and exploration. It has focused some of its work on improving recruitment and hiring practices as well as providing educational opportunities to staff. Other efforts include improving the culture and climate for internal staff and processes, interactions, and working directly with students.

Recently, the committee received a request to review the process by which students may change their
Build your agenda & complete session evaluations
Personalize your daily agenda and don’t miss out on important topics you are interested in.
1. In the drop down menu on the left hand side, tap on the AGENDA/SESSION EVALS tab.
2. Bookmark a session by tapping on the calendar icon to the right of the session. Once selected, the icon will change colors and a check mark will appear in the middle of the calendar icon.
   a. iOS: At the top of the list of sessions, tap on the “My Agenda” tab to view the sessions you have bookmarked.
   b. Android: At the bottom left corner of your screen, tap on the “My Agenda” tab to view the sessions you have bookmarked.

Post a status update in the Activity Feed
The Activity Feed is a place to share relevant in-the-moment insights throughout the event and stay up to date! In the menu section, tap on the ACTIVITY FEED.
   • For iOS: Click on the pencil and paper icon located in the TOP RIGHT corner of your screen.
   • For Android: Click on the pencil and paper icon located at the BOTTOM RIGHT corner of your screen.

Send a message to other attendees
Direct messaging allows you to contact specific individuals that you would like to get in touch with. Now, you’ll never miss an opportunity to connect with someone at a conference!
1. Access the ATTENDEES tab in the menu section.
   a. iOS: At the top of your screen, tap the search bar and type in your contact’s name.
   b. Android: Tap the MAGNIFYING GLASS icon in the top right corner of your screen and type in your contact’s name in the search bar.
2. Tap your contact’s name.
3. Tap the SEND MESSAGE button.
4. At the bottom of your screen, type your message and tap the DIALOGUE BUBBLE icon to send it.

Choose a topic to discuss in the Channels
Channels are a great way to find like-minded individuals and discuss specific topics!
1. In the drop down menu, tap on CHANNELS. Tap on the topic channel that you would like to join.
2. Tap on JOIN CHANNEL at the bottom right of your screen to join the topic channel.
3. Start exchanging messages with others in the channel.
legal name and/or legal sex in the SIS. Students indicated that both the request form and the process were confusing and that it was difficult to understand what documentation was required. Students need to know what the acceptable types of documentation are (e.g., driver’s license, court order, social security card, passport/visa, etc.) and that the office will accept whatever documentation is easiest for them to produce. An exception process was created for cases in which students may not be able to supply certain documentation. The team streamlined the overall process, removed barriers, and clarified documentation needs and requirements.

We have searched intentionally for opportunities to improve inclusivity and create a welcoming environment in student services areas. One opportunity was identified in the queuing system in which students check in for service. The system was displaying students’ legal first names on the lobby LCD panels when they were called up for service. With a minimal amount of coding, students’ preferred names were displayed instead (if entered into the system). Students have commented that they appreciate this change.

Several years ago, the university’s Campus Climate initiative started a micro-grant program. Our office submitted a proposal and received funding for a staff book club. Staff voted on various books related to diversity, equity, and inclusion and ultimately chose Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me*. The author writes in letter form to his teenaged son about being black in the United States. The book club generated engagement with an important topic, and additional book clubs were formed with a focus on diversity. Other featured books included Kao Kalia Yang’s *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir* and Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. The success of the book clubs prompted submission of a subsequent grant proposal entitled “Hello, My Pronouns Are…” It was approved and allowed for the purchase of name tags that display staff members’ personal pronouns. While the name tags were optional, many staff—particularly those who work directly with students—opted in. The name tags inspired other changes, including updating office and cubicle name plates and e-mail signatures to include personal pronouns.

The University of Minnesota community benefits from a range of educational opportunities related to topics of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Staff are encouraged to attend workshops offered by the Office for Equity and Diversity and the International Student and Scholar Services office. Workshop topics range from bridging cultural differences to religious and spiritual identities; from race, racism, and privilege to understanding and advancing gender equity; and from ableism to disability justice. University staff are engaged and passionate about these topics. They have been empowered to create their own training and workshop sessions on personal pronouns/gender identity, microaggressions, and reducing unconscious bias. This has been a great professional development opportunity for staff to become more expert in these topics and to share what they have learned. While many institutions offer learning opportunities, it is critical for leadership to promote these opportunities and dedicate time for staff to participate.

There are a variety of ways to create and support a trans and non-binary inclusive student experience; these range from system changes to staff training and education. Even seemingly small changes to forms and language can have meaningful impacts for the diverse campus community. Listening to students and experts at our institution informed the work and inspires us to improve continuously.

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**About the Authors**

Julie Selander (pronouns: she/her) is the Director of One Stop Student Services & University Veterans Services at the University of Minnesota. She has worked in higher education administration for more than 30 years. Her current role includes leading an integrated student services organization to provide professional advice, counseling, and problem solving to students in the areas of registration, financial aid, billing, academic records, and veteran services. She earned her bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees from the University of Minnesota.

Stacey Tidball (pronouns: she/her) is the Director of Continuity & Compliance for Academic Support Resources (ASR) at the University of Minnesota. This role includes FERPA compliance, academic policy, and overseeing the ASR communications team, degree audit teams, and staff who provide training on student records systems. Previously, she worked at law schools and was a practicing lawyer. She earned a J.D. from the University of Minnesota Law School.
As the technology landscape is continually evolving, transitions to newer software are commonplace in higher education. Change is often difficult to navigate, especially when the change that is implemented fundamentally impacts entrenched business processes. In no place is this more evident than when implementing a new system, whether the implementation involves the entire student information system or a new integration with a third-party vendor. This article describes lessons learned through the implementation of a new degree audit and student success application at Carnegie Mellon University and offers best practices for future software implementations.

Managing Expectations

It is immensely important to manage the expectations of users and stakeholders—as well as the vendor—early and often. Doing so helps develop trust and cultivate mutual satisfaction among those responsible for the implementation, stakeholders, and partners. Projects can be derailed by frustration when expectations are not met. If campus partners become frustrated prior to the implementation, success may be derailed by resistance to the change being implemented. Thus, managing the expectations of users, stakeholders, and vendors is paramount to the success of an implementation project.

Clear Communication

Clear communication during the implementation is also essential. When communication with campus partners, vendors, and stakeholders is clear, the project can progress successfully as everyone understands the expectations, the process, and their roles in the project. Clear communication also helps mitigate frustration. One can never over-communicate: adding an extra communication can help ensure that all stakeholders receive the message.

Document Agreements

Clear communication includes documenting agreements with vendors and other partners in the implementation project. This also clarifies the expectations and roles of those involved. Timelines should also be established and documented to ensure the project’s progress. By documenting agreements, those involved in the implementation can be held accountable for meeting important project milestones.

Building Trust

Trust is crucial in building the relationship and partnership needed for the project’s success. Building trust
takes time and requires deliberate attention. For the implementation to be successful, trust must define the relationships among internal and external partners and the implementation team. To build trust, responsibilities must be discharged by established deadlines, and rapport must be built with campus partners and the vendor. Campus partners need to be able to trust that deliverables will be available as documented. In addition, if an issue arises as part of the implementation, the campus community will need to trust in the project manager to resolve the issue.

Organization and Time Management

Organization and time management are also key as various aspects of the project—from testing to conversion information—need to be tracked. It is also important to track issues in order to ensure that they are resolved as well as to maintain feedback received from the campus community. The implementation project manager should monitor feedback received and assess needs and/or remaining gaps. Prioritizing feedback along with needs and gaps can prove challenging. The key is to find a way to organize all of this information in a way that works best for the implementation project manager and for sharing with the campus community. Various applications, such as Asana, Trello, Evernote, and Slack, can help organize the project and facilitate communication with project partners.

Time management is essential as well. Schedule time wisely so the project manager can respond to feedback, research and troubleshoot any issues that arise and still permit flexibility in the project schedule. Most important, time should be managed throughout the project’s duration to ensure that the project and project components are completed according to the documented agreements.

Preparation and Flexibility

During integration, something unexpected will inevitably happen. A campus partner may not get back to the project manager in the timeframe anticipated or may not be available during the scheduled time. Contingency plans should be put into place to ensure that enough time is incorporated into the implementation schedule to make any needed adjustments. Project managers should be as prepared and flexible as possible during the implementation.

Celebrate Successes

It is important to congratulate the team for a job well done. Often, those taking part in the implementation focus on what remains to be completed and forget to celebrate the team’s accomplishments. This includes celebrating small victories, not just those at the end of the project. Celebrate the success of the implementation: this relays the value of the partnerships, relationships, and contributions to the implementation project. This, in turn, can unleash positive energy concerning the further progress of the implementation project.

These lessons are supported by various authors. Recent studies affirm the lessons learned as components of a successful implementation. In a mixed methods study of student information systems implementation at ten higher education institutions, Cramer, Tetewsky, and Marczynski (2010) found that the top ten most important values during systems implementation are communication, quality, hard work and commitment, openness, problem solving, efficient work habits, honesty and integrity, vision, resolution of work-related issues, and team membership. The study also identified the top three behaviors in a successful implementation: collaboration, problem solving, and open-mindedness (470). Communication was also rated important in the survey used in this study. These values are evident in the lessons learned at Carnegie Mellon. For example, honesty and integrity are integral to building trust. In turn, managing expectations, communicating clearly, documenting agreements, and building trust create openness and transparency. Agreements that are documented help create vision for the project.

Dasborough, Lamb, and Suseno (2015) interviewed twelve staff and faculty members undergoing a merger of two departments at a higher education institution. The authors argue that higher education leaders should recognize that change is viewed differently by each individual who is affected (587), and each individual’s emotions change throughout the project (588). During a software implementation, processes and departments will change. Dependent upon the system being implemented, changes may be significant. The project manager will want to ensure that affected individuals maintain positive emotions throughout the implementation. By man-
OVER 1/3 OF STUDENTS TRANSFER at least once before earning their bachelor’s degree, many also crossing state lines in the process.*

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aging expectations, building trust, and communicating clearly, change can be viewed in a more positive light as negative emotion and anxiety are eliminated.

It is important to note the organizational changes that will occur as a result of the implementation. Project managers should continue to manage expectations, communicate, build trust, and document agreements post-implementation. Sullivan and Bozeman (2010) contend “that the post-implementation experience could not be considered in a vacuum, separate from the project activities that occurred during pre-implementation and ‘go live’” (27). Markus, et al. (2000) assert that the focus on software implementation should not be solely on pre-implementation but should include post-implementation (259) as implementation will alter business processes (255). The practices derived from the lessons learned can help during this phase of the implementation to ensure overall success and satisfaction with the new software.

As part of a software implementation project, the project manager must manage expectations, communicate clearly, document agreements, build trust, schedule and utilize time management, be prepared and flexible, and celebrate project successes. Recent research studies confirm these lessons and remind implementation project managers to understand the emotions of the individuals affected by the change that can result from software implementation. Post-implementation, the practices instituted from the lessons learned should be continued in order to facilitate implementation success as business processes are modified. For future software implementation projects, these lessons learned can be turned into best practices to ensure that the perceived change is positive.

References


About the Authors

Jamie Brandon is a Senior Systems Analyst at Carnegie Mellon University where she led the implementation of the Stellic student success platform. She is actively involved with University Registrar projects including Student Services Suite development as well as support for the Stellic student success platform and the Student Data Warehouse. Brandon previously presented at the AACRAO Technology and Transfer Conference. She recently earned a Doctor of Education in Administration and Leadership Studies at Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

John Papinchak has served as University Registrar for Carnegie Mellon University for 25 years. He has since been closely involved in Carnegie Mellon’s homegrown Student Services Suite, Student Information Online student portal, parent portal My Plaid Student, Stellic student success platform and the Student Data Warehouse. John has been active with AACRAO, previously serving on several committees, presently on the AACRAO Technology and Transfer Conference program advisory team. He is also active with the American Association of University Registrars.
AACRAO’s Strategic Enrollment Management Endorsement Program, or SEM-EP, is a well-defined, self-paced professional development program and career advancement track for in-service enrollment service professionals. Designed to promote industry competency and readiness, the program helps learners develop expertise in strategic enrollment management through an approved curriculum from leading enrollment professionals that leads to a formal endorsement from AACRAO.

SEM-EP was first discussed from 1997 until 1999, when AACRAO studied the idea of a credentialing program in enrollment management. However, the plan was subsequently postponed. In 2010, Joe Head reintroduced the idea to AACRAO and served as the program’s initial director. Bob Bontrager served as consultant for one year as the program was launched in 2012. The program had its inaugural graduate in 2014.

Since the inception of SEM-EP, more than 100 learners have begun the program. To date, more than 30 have completed it. Select graduates offered to share how they have applied the knowledge and skill gained from the SEM-EP in their everyday work. These are their stories.

Stacy Maestas
Registrar, Laramie County Community College

My journey as a result of completing the SEM-EP is still evolving. I discovered the SEM-EP in 2014 while doing research during my graduate program. I am fortunate to work for an institution that values professional development and “growing their own” and was excited when the president’s cabinet approved my request for professional development funding for the SEM-EP.

My institution has experienced declining enrollment, similar to the national trend and of concern to the college and our board. Our board and president determined that we would start researching strategic enrollment management. At the same time, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) approved our application to be a Guided Pathways 2.0 school. The timing of both decisions—SEM and Guided Pathways—aligned when I started the SEM-EP. Not long after the planning started, it was determined that I would co-chair the SEM focus as part of our Guided Pathways work.

I share this timeline and history because while I had barely started the SEM-EP, I was already benefiting from it. Among the most valuable lessons I learned was the importance of transparent and cross-functional collaboration and of working closely with all areas of campus. Since completing the program in November 2018, I have presented about the SEM-EP at the AACRAO Annual Meeting in Los Angeles and participated in an AACRAO Readiness Assessment on our campus to help determine the best time to embark on our official SEM planning. I’ve also served as a peer reviewer.
Content shared during the program was immediately applicable to my current role and to efforts with Guided Pathways and other initiatives on campus. While I am far from being an expert, my comfort level and knowledge of SEM continues to grow. The SEM-EP overview is accurate: Completing the program has prepared me for new leadership opportunities that I may not have had prior to completing the program. It was a win-win for my institution and for me. I look forward to continuing to learn and contribute in the ever-changing world of strategic enrollment management.

Nick Heisserer
Director of Admissions & Registration, Central Lakes College (CLC)

Prior to enrolling in the SEM-EP, I had completed a few AACRAO webinars and trainings when I first started my role in student services. While these trainings provided me with tools for navigating day-to-day operations in that role, I chose the SEM-EP to help prepare me to navigate my next role—whenever that opportunity might present itself.

Among the skills I gained from the SEM-EP was improving enrollment data analytics. SEM-EP has four required components: webinar, field visit, SEM Essentials course, and a capstone project. My SEM-EP capstone project was research based. I conducted a review of enrollment data at my institution and discovered a student population that was under-engaged in the enrollment pipeline: students who had applied but never registered for courses. Upon reviewing the data, we determined that for the previous fall semester, 855 students were never engaged to enroll after failing to enroll in their intended semester. As a result of the SEM-EP, I created a re-engagement plan with the following goals:

1. to better understand the barriers that caused students to not enroll in their intended semester, and
2. to encourage students to re-enroll in a future semester.

During the spring 2019 semester and with support from administration, the college launched Project Reconnect, a plan to survey all 855 students. Survey questions included:

- Why did you initially apply to CLC?
- Why were you unable to complete the enrollment process?
- In what month did you become interested in applying?

Would you like to restart the enrollment process?

The CLC Foundation awarded an institutional mini-grant to provide incentives (prizes) for students to respond to the survey. Students who wished to restart the enrollment process were contacted by CLC’s admissions department. Survey data made it clear that students chose not to enroll for many academic and non-academic reasons, including:

- Student’s personal schedule conflicted with the class schedule
- Undecided as to a program of study
- Unable to place into college-level courses
- Personal non-academic factors prevented them from enrolling

In addition, we learned that students are interested in restarting the enrollment process. For example, 24 students re-enrolled in fall 2019 courses as a result of this program. Without SEM-EP, these students would never have been identified. Their futures are now brighter and the college’s enrollment is greater as a result of SEM-EP.

Steven McDowell
Director of Financial Aid Services, Connecticut State Colleges & Universities

The Connecticut State Colleges & Universities system comprises twelve community colleges, four state universities, and one online college. These institutions, governed by the Board of Regents for Higher Education, provide affordable, innovative, and rigorous programs for more than 85,000 credit and non-credit students to achieve their personal and career goals and contribute to the economic growth of Connecticut.

Financial aid administrators tend to focus on the nuances of the profession, federal regulation, and a host of acronyms. The SEM-EP gave me an opportunity to step out of my comfort zone to learn more about how financial aid fits into the bigger picture at institutions of all shapes and sizes.

Once my training in SEM-EP was complete, I was recognized for having expanded subject knowledge of SEM-related activities, practices, and policies. One policy that leveraged my SEM-EP learning is our community college Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) policy, which provides for greater emphasis on student success.
AACRAO’s Strategic Enrollment Management Endorsement Program (SEM-EP) is designed to provide a well-defined professional development program and career advancement track for enrollment service professionals. For the individual, completion of the program is a valuable addition to a resume and a formal recognition by AACRAO regarding professional readiness to conquer current and future challenges in the field. For the institution, the program will offer a better way to evaluate the preparedness of prospective employees for SEM positions.

**How long is the program?**
The SEM-EP is tied to the most recent SEM material and trends in the field. The program is designed to be completed in 12 to 18 months.

**What do I receive when I complete the program?**
AACRAO will provide you with official documentation to verify your successful completion of the SEM-EP professional development curriculum. Graduates will be listed on the AACRAO SEM-EP national web registry.

**Program Eligibility**
- Five years experience in the field of SEM (Registrar, Admissions, Recruitment, Financial Aid or related fields as determined by the SEM-EP program committee).
- Individual must be employed (full or part time) by an “accredited” post-secondary institution.
- Provide a one page vita or resume reflecting career experience, professional accomplishments and education.
- Hold a minimum of an earned baccalaureate degree from an accredited institution.

Curriculum
The SEM-EP faculty are drawn from highly experienced professionals in the field of enrollment service.

1. **SEM 101 Online Course**
   A four week course to develop a baseline understanding of SEM.

2. **Webinars**
   Three pre-recorded webinars on topics focused on key components of SEM.

3. **Field Visits**
   Visits to three approved institutions of distinct types followed by a written report guided by prescribed questions. In addition, attendance at the AACRAO Annual Meeting or AACRAO SEM Conference will fulfill one of the field visit requirements.

4. **Capstone Research Experience**
   All SEM-EP candidates are expected to conduct a brief research capstone project during the course of the curriculum. The assignment focuses on tracking and analyzing a local population of students from the candidate’s institution and concludes by reporting conversion outcomes or conducting an annotated literature research project.

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and early academic intervention in conjunction with financial aid. In the first semester of implementation, this policy accounted for an increase in headcount of 1,369 and FTE of 821, equivalent to $1.8M in tuition and fee revenue. In addition, 71 percent of the students who sought advising during the first semester of implementation enrolled; 50 percent of those persisted into the next semester. Presentations on this policy, uniformly applied across all twelve of Connecticut’s community colleges, have since been given at three national conferences.

I was also offered an opportunity to serve as a co-manager for the Recruitment Architecture group under our community colleges’ Guided Pathways initiative. This endeavor is focused on designing policies and practices to streamline enrollment and strengthen connections to pre-K–12, transfer institutions, and employers by using all four Guided Pathways principles: developing coherent academic paths, creating meaningful learning experiences, helping students select an academic/career path, and helping students stay on their chosen academic/career path. To date, a major milestone achieved by this group has been elimination of the application fee for new community college students. This change provides for increased access and opportunity and breaks down a financial barrier for students throughout Connecticut.

Upon completing the program, I was selected to be part of the SEM-EP evaluation team, serving in 2017–2018 as well as 2018–2019. This gave me an expanded opportunity to provide feedback on current learner assignments, support colleagues by providing an internal perspective for each assignment, and help further develop the enrollment management profession. I also co-presented a poster session on the program’s benefits at the 2018 AACRAO SEM Conference.

By working through the SEM-EP, our community colleges have been able to take meaningful steps toward promoting student success initiatives that are contributing to enrollment efforts statewide.

Jennifer McClure, Ph.D.
Managing Director Enrollment Services, Elgin Community College

Elgin Community College (ECC) is one of 48 comprehensive community colleges in Illinois serving 9,000 students in District 509. ECC is a Aspen Top 150 College, an Achieving the Dream Leader College, as well as a military-friendly institution providing 138 degree and certificate programs, dozens of continuing-education classes, as well as high school equivalency and English language classes.

As a former registrar, I have sat at the crossroads between academic and student affairs. SEM-EP allowed me to learn more about how financial aid and other areas in the college can work together to build enrollment and champion student success.

With knowledge gained through the SEM-EP, I was able to help form our Strategic Enrollment Planning Committee, which brings together 20 faculty and administrators representing areas across the college to discuss goals related to outreach, recruitment, onboarding, classroom, and completion. We review enrollment data, discuss areas for improvement, and prioritize initiatives toward the specific areas that have been identified.

Currently, our efforts have focused on retention of our current students. Initiatives have included mandatory advising, continuing student registration, and near-completer campaigns. We worked with our president to create a message for our near-completers that encouraged them to complete their credentials. The e-mail included academic advisor information to facilitate students’ scheduling of advising appointments. Partnering with Student Financial Services, we institutionalized calls to students in jeopardy of being dropped for non-payment. As a result, we continue to see the total number of students being dropped decrease semester over semester. Using the call-center knowledge from our new executive director of institutional advancement and the foundation, we created a pilot that focused on 1,100 students who had earned 60 credit hours but who had not yet earned a degree. In addition, we looked at our environmental survey, which showed the aging of our district residents, and implemented the AL360 from the Council for Adult & Experiential Learning (CAEL) to help identify areas in which we are doing well and those in which we can improve our service of adult students.

Overall, the SEM-EP provided ways for our college to have conversations about enrollment—to include all its aspects, not just the recruitment of new students.

Kristen Taylor
Senior Director of Enrollment and Partner Operations, Helix Education

Our profession is interesting for many reasons. Many assume that enrollment professionals do not discuss
their institutions’ strategies or challenges with one another. As a rising administrator at open-access institutions, I relied on professional associations, articles, books, and an occasional drive-by conversation with enrollment colleagues as means of learning more about the profession. I quickly understood enrollment management to be a novelty at open-access institutions and embraced the challenge to shepherd a coordinated and comprehensive approach to recruitment and retention at two community colleges and in regional systems of two universities in Ohio.

A mid-career administrator, I served as the Senior Regional Director of Enrollment Management for the regional open-access system of Miami University in Ohio, a highly regarded and nationally recognized public university. The university’s main campus and two regional campuses are in the same county between Cincinnati and Dayton. Competition is fierce, and the local economy is strong. To meet these challenges, Miami University Regionals has transformed considerably since 2015 by creating a new academic division, doubling its number of bachelor’s degree programs, and creating an enrollment management unit. Because this was a pivotal time for the Regionals, I sought AACRAO’s Strategic Enrollment Management Endorsement Program to best position the Regionals to achieve sustainable success.

While I had years of administrative experience, I entered this program joyfully pursuing knowledge from colleagues—newer and more experienced. I was glad not only to learn from the best in the industry but also to have the opportunity to exchange experiences, lessons, and strategies with colleagues. I was most appreciative of the site visit requirement as this enabled me to meet with enrollment managers and their teams at various institutions. I was intentional in my selections: a public four-year, a two-year, and a private online institution. I was humbled by and appreciative of my site visit coordinators’ welcome and willingness to arrange a full day of meetings and share their institutions’ strengths, weaknesses (areas for improvement), opportunities, and threats. While reflecting and writing, I learned many lessons from these meaningful conversations and realized more fully that we are a community willing and wanting to support one another.

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From 2015 until 2017, I led the Miami University Regionals in creating their first Strategic Enrollment Management Council and SEM Plan. While I had created SEM structures and plans at previous institutions, this process was enriched by my SEM-EP engagement. Through the program, I learned and embraced the need to center SEM on the institution’s academic context. Stan Henderson’s wisdom, communicated through multiple reading assignments, focused on building community and a SEM ethos through the academic mission of the institution and was transformative. As a result of greater understanding of our craft, I was able to successfully connect with academic leadership and faculty and incorporate their participation and planning within our SEM structure. Although the challenge of integrating faculty and academic planning within SEM was not easily overcome, it was possible for the first time in my career. Articles by Henderson, Bontrager, Dolence, Green, and Ingersoll were useful in establishing credibility and research-based recommendations throughout this academic-enrollment collaborative project. This process and capstone project culminated in a comprehensive strategic enrollment management plan integrating our academic, recruitment/marketing, and retention/success plans.

Since 2017, the Miami University Regionals have continued to improve our SEM ethos. This academic year, we are launching a faculty learning community for recruitment and retention. Several articles and resources obtained through SEM-EP serve as foundational texts for this learning community. SEM is a continuous improvement industry. Welcoming our academic partners (a community often perceived as change-averse) is critical to positioning our institutions for sustainable academic and fiscal health. As enrollment managers, regardless of our years in the industry, we have a responsibility to improve ourselves, our institutions, and, most important, opportunities for the students and communities we serve.

Concluding thoughts by SEM-EP Program Director, Dr. Christopher W. Tremblay

These five enrollment management professionals are but a select few of the current learners and graduates in AACRAO’s Strategic Enrollment Management Endorsement Program. Their stories offer insight about their experiences in the program, their institutional and professional contexts, and what they gained from their participation. These individuals are examples of how this professional development “endorsement” can help you upskill for your own future roles.

For more information about AACRAO’s SEM-EP, contact Christopher Tremblay at sem-ep@aacrao.org or visit aacrao.org/semep.

About the Authors

Nick Heisserer is currently serving as a Business and Computer Technology faculty member for Central Lakes College in Minnesota. Prior to his current position, he served as the director of enrollment services at Central Lakes College overseeing the day-to-day operations of student services and enrollment management.

Stacy Maestas is the Registrar at Laramie County Community College (LCCC) in Cheyenne, Wyoming. She oversees day-to-day operations within the Office of the Registrar, serves on multiple cross-functional committees on campus and within the state, and is integrally involved in curriculum and program development, technology implementations, and process improvement initiatives. In addition to serving as the Registrar, she is also an adjunct instructor at LCCC.

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The College Dropout Scandal

KIRP, D. 2019. NEW YORK: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS. 175 PP.

Reviewed by Susan Weisman

The College Dropout Scandal by David Kirp is more a primer on how to address problems that many students face in graduating from college than the scathing indictment of higher education the title suggests. This easy-to-read analysis is well-notated and includes copious footnotes to help college administrative professionals find additional information about tactics and statistics. As the book focuses primarily on large public community colleges and universities, it brushes in broad strokes when it comes to strategies that institutions can implement to improve completion rates.

Introduction:
The Scandal and the Solutions

Kirp, a public policy professor at the University of California, Berkeley, a contributing writer to The New York Times, and an advisor on education policy, introduces the dropout scandal by providing several micro examples of talented students who dropped out of college just when they should have been successful. He describes these students as “new-gen”: poor, minority, or first-generation college students. These students often encounter problems because they do not understand college culture or the resources available to them, and they often internalize a single failure as a signal to give up.

Kirp also discusses how 34 million Americans over the age of 25 have earned some college credits but no diploma. They have debt and often are worse off economically than if they hadn’t attended college at all. While college completers benefit economically from having earned college credentials, dropouts are twice as likely to be unemployed and four times as likely to default on student loans. This is one example of a broad stroke: Kirp focuses on what strategies colleges can implement rather than on the more complicated matter of changes in the higher education landscape—e.g., what impact for-profit colleges have had on the dropout population or the seductive and pervasive myth that higher education completion isn’t necessary because college dropouts can be successful.

Fortunately, there are proven strategies for getting students to graduate. Kirp examines the methods using a case-study format. Enrollment management professionals should be familiar with the six strategies summarized in the introduction:

- New-gen families need access to better information to improve their decision making when initially selecting a college.
- Nudges in text-message format help applicants and students stay on track.
Colleges need to proactively use strategic data (already captured in their databases) to anticipate student problems early so that issues can be addressed prior to an actual crisis.

Applicants and students need brief experiences that promote a feeling of belonging and engage the growth mindset as proven in psychological studies.

Curricula, especially in remedial math and writing, need to be updated in terms of content and delivery format.

Pathways from community college to university should be developed proactively.

Kirp says these strategies work because they promote students’ feeling that they are a legitimate part of their colleges’ community. The inverse is also true: lack of engagement can lead to social loneliness, which often leads to withdrawal from college. Kirp spends the remainder of the book recounting the stories of colleges that have been successful in using these methods.

Moving the Needle on Student Success: Strategies All Colleges Can Use

In Chapter 1, Kirp expands on each of the six strategies summarized in the introduction. He promotes the idea that applicants and parents should use the economic model of decision making when selecting colleges. Information about a college’s academic offerings, graduation rates, and the actual price of attendance helps applicants and their families with the decision process. Once students commit to a school, it’s important to keep them engaged. (As many as 40 percent of students who commit to a college never show up.)

Too many new-gen students are unclear about what to do next or feel intimidated by requests to file for financial aid, submit documents, and follow up with college administrators. Effective onboarding practices that include text nudges (at a cost of $7 per student at one college) not only help remind students of deadlines but also help connect students to additional information, especially if they are unclear about next steps (as the University of Virginia found). AI chatbots are also a useful tool as students do not feel judged when they ask questions.

Georgia State University: High Tech, High Touch

In his first case study, Kirp explores the actions that Georgia State took. The story starts with an open admissions university that was mostly a commuter school and that lacked a diverse population but that turned to predictive modeling and embedded support to improve its students’ academic performance. Although many may be familiar with this story, it is important to review the steps the college took. One related to the timing of academic intervention. Data indicated that students who earned a B in a specific course had a 70 percent chance of graduating whereas students who earned a C only had a 25 percent chance. These data pointed Georgia State to update its intervention strategy for students earning a C (previously, interventions were not initiated until lower grades had been earned).

The college also changed its early math instruction by shifting from a lecture model to a lab model. Students could work through the math class in a computer lab and receive immediate feedback. Tutors circulated among students to answer questions or offer help. Tim Renick (vice president of enrollment management and professor of religion) and Mark Becker (president) had to change the culture at Georgia State to introduce these changes. This was not easy, but it was necessary.

Against the Odds: City University of New York and Rutgers University-Newark

The City University of New York (CUNY), like other inner-city community colleges, faces significant issues in educating and graduating its students (only about one in six will do so). Many of the students work full time and are also parents and caretakers. CUNY implemented CUNY Start to engage students and overcome the issue of remedial learning. Approximately two-
thirds of community college students must take these remedial classes, but only one in six ultimately earns a credential of any kind. CUNY combines Socratic teaching, small classes, academic advising, and “emotional backstopping” to invert the statistics: 75 percent of students in the program complete successfully. Professor Erica Fells says, “My job as a teacher is to figure out what students are good at [in order to] allow them to shine. That’s how they find their confidence” (53).

The program sets high standards and then rewards effort. Students are encouraged to explore and believe in their own potential and to seek campus tutors and push ahead. Advisors support students’ academic efforts and have complementary responsibilities.

This chapter also offers insight into CUNY’s Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP). This program seeks to remove some barriers and enhance students’ ability to focus on their academic work. For example, the program pays for transit passes and books. Students follow specific pathways to their associate degrees; carefully tailored schedules ensure they have time to work and manage their personal responsibilities. Kirp says this model is worthy of attention because more than half of students earn their associate degree in three years—double the percentage of a matched group that did not participate.

Across the Hudson River, Rutgers University–Newark took a different approach by creating the Honors Living Learning Community, which launched in September 2016 and provides scholarships that cover tuition and living expenses to students who meet certain socioeconomic and other criteria. While students admitted into this program may have lower high school grades than other students at Rutgers, they are selected on the basis of their resiliency, drive to learn, passion for social justice, and potential for leadership. Students in the program are required to enroll full time. The program engages students prior to orientation with the aim of fostering inclusion and building community. The curriculum serves as an interdisciplinary concentration. Early predictors point to success. Kirp writes that freshmen in the program have a B+ average—half a grade higher than their Rutgers-Newark counterparts—and no student has dropped out, compared to 15 percent of students not enrolled in the program.

Kirp includes cost estimates of these programs and emphasizes the power of their personal approach.

**University of Central Florida and Valencia College**

In this chapter, Kirp tells the story of Valencia College (a community college) and the University of Central Florida. President Sandy Shugart had a transformational impact on Valencia. The college had to change what Shugart considered a “manufacturing model” to a student-success model, creating conditions for learning. Shugart is aiming for a 60 percent graduation rate. (At the time Kirp’s book was published, Valencia had a 50 percent graduation or transfer-out rate compared to an average of 39 percent for community colleges.)

Wanting to ensure that Valencia students had a pathway to a bachelor’s degree, Shugart worked with the University of Central Florida (UCF) to develop DirectConnect, which guarantees admission to every community college graduate. The program emphasizes advising so that transfer is as seamless as possible. The model has been adopted by other state systems, such as the University of Arizona.

**Focus on Freshmen: University of Texas**

The University of Texas (UT) at Austin increased student success by addressing many of the same issues identified at other colleges. A 2013 tuition increase gave the university funding to improve student success. Bill Powers, then president, pledged to increase graduation rates to 70 percent in four years. While the institution didn’t attain this goal, the rate did improve by 15 percent.

UT achieved this result with its “Focus on Freshmen” strategy. Utilizing data, UT determined what population was least likely to graduate and concentrated efforts on this group. By implementing “mindset” and “belonging” activities (described in prior chapters of the book), students developed connections with professors, advisors, and mentors early in their college experience. UT also addressed the different starting points of its students. Because high school rigor varies tremendously, it was necessary to consider this early in students’ higher education experience. UT created a program called Texas Interdisciplinary Scholars (TiP), which provided a catch-up year for freshmen. Among other initiatives, curricula were updated by moving away from large lecture classes to the “flipped classroom.”
To further success and innovation, UT joined Georgia State and Arizona State in forming the University Innovation Alliance.

The Promise and the Mindset: Long Beach State

In Long Beach, California, the city’s education institutions developed an education program known as “The Promise” that coordinates some of the messaging from preschool through higher education. The program offers a free year of community college to any Long Beach high school graduate and guarantees admission to Long Beach State to any high school or community college graduate who qualifies. Functional relationships exist between the public systems. Starting in elementary school, students participate in college visits.

High school graduation rates have increased, with three-quarters of graduates now enrolling in college—10 percent above the national rate. The provost at Long Beach told Kirp that he is determined to educate the students it enrols. The college has been ranked among the best at moving students from poverty into the middle class.

“Belonging” at an Elite Institution: Amherst College

Kirp also addresses the issues that Amherst College, a private institution, faced as it had not included community-building activities. During a sit-in at the campus library, an event that started as an act of solidarity with marginalized students worldwide turned inward, Amherst students shared feelings of isolation and loneliness. President Biddy Martin called the protests a gift so that all could see that efforts to be genuinely inclusive will always be a work in progress.

Ending the Dropout Scandal: Where Are the Leaders?

In the final chapter, Kirp reviews what administrators have to do to improve graduation rates and student success. He questions whether it is possible to move toward a system that stresses students’ performance, inclusion, and equity. Strategies that have proven results are studied and supported by The Lumina Foundation and The Gates Foundation, among others.

The College Dropout Scandal reinforces the idea that colleges have an obligation to prevent students from dropping out by taking a proactive role in studying their populations and adjusting programs accordingly. Kirp’s book is reminiscent of the calls for free college and recently implemented programs. Will the programs successfully graduate students within the requirements stipulated by each state? Are institutions mandated to create conditions for student success along with increased tuition benefit?

To learn more about the author and his works, visit <davidkirp.com/author>.

The College Dropout Scandal

KIRP, D. 2019. NEW YORK: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS. 175 PP.

Reviewed by Stephen J. Handel

In his first speech to Congress in 2009, President Obama challenged the nation to be the worldwide leader in college attainment by 2020. Given the recession that was reshaping America at the time, President Obama believed that one strategy for resuscitating the economy was for more individuals to earn postsecondary degrees and credentials. The information economy would demand more from its workers—skills that could be learned only in postsecondary education.

A decade later, the outcome of the president’s initiative was clear. The Chronicle of Higher Education noted on January 17, 2020, with an accurate but unintentionally droll headline (made all the more amusing given its placement on page 20): “Higher Ed Misses Its 2020 College-Completion Goal.”

This outcome had been predicted by skeptical policy wonks on both sides of the aisle whose number-crunching never balanced. Still, many of us in
higher education admired the youthful president’s vi-
sion for—and confidence in—the transformative poten-
tial of colleges and universities to advance the nation’s
future in a brutal and global marketplace. In retrospect,
however, President Obama’s “completion moonshot”
was less an authentic target than a galvanizing ethos
designed to reorder the U.S. higher education universe
in ways that would sharpen its commitment to student
completion and success. Even if we did not reach his
goal, we would be on our way to doing so eventually.
My hope was that the president’s rhetoric might ignite
revolutionary undertakings at colleges and universities
across the country. Some institutions did make signifi-
cant changes (see, for example, outcomes associated
with the University Innovation Alliance). But a good
deal of the president’s rhetoric only generated more
rhetoric. Completion rates remain stagnant to this day;
too many students start college only to leave with noth-
ing but debt and disappointment.

This bitter remembrance colored my first, almost
visceral, reaction to David Kirp’s book, The College
Dropout Scandal. On a naked, white background, the ti-
tle of the book is branded in blue and red, with “Drop-
out” highlighted in crimson as if to signal the outrage
within. The siren clarity of minimalist front matter en-
couraged me to believe that Kirp’s editors had acquired
a manuscript embracing a muckraking ethos that would
blow the lid off higher education’s ineffectual support
of students who leave college without a degree. I or-
dered the book with visions, I admit, of a publication
that would do to higher education what Upton Sinclair
did to meat packing (The Jungle), Jessica Mitford to
funeral homes (The American Way of Death), and John
Gregory Dunne to Hollywood movies (The Studio).

Kirp’s book is earnest and, at less than 200 pages,
compact. Kirp begins by supplying the statistic that
is the basis for everything that follows: “Fewer than
60 percent of college freshmen graduate in six years,
two years beyond the norm, and that rate has barely
changed during the past decade” (4). Kirp then pres-
cents case studies of six colleges and universities—from
different segments, tackling different challenges—that
are doing right by students when it comes to helping
them earn certificates and degrees. For example, he
highlights how “big data” are used to increase student
success at Georgia State University; describes a suc-
cessful student transfer process between Valencia Com-

munity College and the University of Central Florida;
reveals how UT Austin is using learning communities
and other academic advising strategies to boost com-
pletion rates; and shows how Amherst College is rewrit-
ing its elitist history by creating and supporting a more
diverse and inclusive academic community for students.

Kirp’s case-study design aligns with popular journal-
istic approaches to accomplished academics’ analysis of
social issues (Our Kids by Robert Putnam comes im-
mEDIATELY to mind). Except among the best professional
writers, however, such a strategy is risky. It is easy to sim-
plify complex topics. Worse, it can result in easy-to-read,
unencumbered narratives, usually triumphant, of peo-
ple overcoming the odds, seeing the forest for the trees,
or finding truth among the dishonest. Of course, good
nonfiction writing can dramatize through a single story
a more generalizable truth, but the odds are against it.

On this score, Kirp is partially successful. His cel-
boration of professionals at colleges and universities
around the country is well-deserved, and he rightfully
champions their efforts. (Kirp assures us that improve-
ment is possible even if a mere handful of colleges are
boosting completion rates.) But he is unable to tran-
slate these stories into something more substantial. Kirp
believes that if we honor the commitment of the people
he highlights in his book—those marching to a differ-
ent completion drummer—the dropout problem will
not only improve but will be solved. Flattering Nike,
Kirp asks higher education to “just do it”:

[E]very college administrator with a pulse knows the
tools that have been proven to remedy the dropout
problem. They don’t cost a fortune and they don’t re-
quire a genius to make them work (7).

Understandably, such a statement would rankle
anyone who was taught to be suspicious of the easy and
the glib. Still, we must make allowances for the muck-
raker and overlook this kind of throat-clearing. Like
Howard Beale in Network, the important thing is to
get your audience mad—very mad—before diving into
the hard work of reassembling whatever’s broken. Kirp
does not disappoint:

College presidents aren’t generally known for their brav-
ery. In fact, they wax eloquent about the imperative of
student success; or invoke buzzwords like “data ana-
lytics,” as if rhetoric could substitute for action… (8–9).
He goes on to implicate these leaders by asserting that they are only interested in “getting freshmen in the door and tuition dollars in the bank” (5) and are “driven by the desire to enhance their institution’s prestige, as defined by its standing in the US News pecking order” (9).

Kirp’s rhetorical momentum is gaining speed, but his early enthusiasm generates only questions. For example, wouldn’t presidents be motivated to retain those students so their institutions could bank more tuition dollars? Also, as much as we might criticize the pernicious effects of US News and World’s Report’s ranking scheme, that publication grants retention and graduation rates nearly one-third of the total weight in calculating its institutional hierarchy. Perhaps those cowardly presidents know something that Kirp does not?

Kirp’s words for his faculty colleagues are choice: “Ask most professors about how many students depart their institution, and you’re likely to get puzzled looks and an off-the-mark guesstimate” (5). And then more generally: “Unless university leaders...regard student success not as risky business but as a moral imperative—the dropout problem will not be solved” (10).

Kirp’s plan to address this moral imperative is built on six-points:

- Provide more information to poor families about top-flight universities that are within their reach.
- Send text messages to remind students to start and stay in college.
- Use analytics to anticipate which freshmen are likely to need help.
- Promote a sense of belonging among students on campus.
- Revamp remedial classes that restrict students from advancing academically.
- Build stronger transfer connections between two- and four-year institutions.

Throughout the balance of the book, Kirp highlights practices at specific institutions that are employing one or more of these strategies. Recapping his plan for boosting college completion, Kirp advises that “the more students believe that they belong, the better they do academically” (8).

It is hard to disagree with this statement—or with Kirp’s suggestions for improvement. But Kirp believes he’s home free, and it is his self-assurance that undercuts the utility of the book for higher education leaders. His approach to the completion problem is neither irrelevant nor inauthentic. It’s just insufficient. Mocking distracted presidents, oblivious faculty, and careerist administrators is not without some justification, but it is a tad obligatory and vaguely opportunistic, since these constituencies are unknown to rise up in the face of scattershot criticism. Moreover, that many students don’t graduate is a worthy story; why they don’t finish, however, is a far more difficult one to articulate, let alone solve. Kirp admits that his strategies have nothing new to tell us (recall those administrators with a pulse) other than a series of platitudes that suggest solutions without benefit of a predicate. I had hoped the book would deliver an incisive treatment of the issue that identifies not only the usual suspects but that also burrows deeply into the reasons higher education is happy to live with a completion rate that has not budged for several decades, despite efforts by good people (some of them presidents).

One unexamined assumption in The College Dropout Scandal is whether higher education is on the hook for graduating every student who enrolls in college. There was a time in U.S. history—perhaps not longer than two generations ago—when students’ leaving high school was a perfectly acceptable outcome given the economics of (mostly agrarian) family life and the availability of good jobs requiring at most a high school diploma. Since that time, however, the rapid and interconnected global marketplace has altered our national mindset about college: Apparently everyone needs a postsecondary degree of some sort if they wish to enter—at least—the middle class. And anyone who does not possess such a credential, as statistics show, is at much greater risk of economic isolation.

So we have become a nation in which “college for all” sets the stage for a great degree of disappointment in the land. In insisting that all eighteen-year-olds go to college, can we be surprised that many of them do not resonate with the language and demands of traditional higher education? Not this author, who—in ardently summarizing one of his case-study institutions—insists that colleges and universities must “do whatever it takes to meet students’ needs” (106). Such a powerfully imprecise expression implicates all colleges and universities in a stubborn ignorance of the needs of the students who enroll in postsecondary education but leave prior to graduating. His unstated assumption is that higher
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AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGIATE REGISTRARS AND ADMISSIONS OFFICERS
education’s elitist roots absolve leaders from taking responsibility for the success of their students. Yet America’s most elite institutions graduate virtually all of the students they enroll, even though, as Kirp accurately notes, these institutions rarely enroll the diverse student body they hail as essential to a top-flight education. Community colleges, on the other hand, which have no entrance requirements, have among the worst completion rates of all postsecondary institutions. Is it possible that different students have different needs and that sending text messages might be insufficient for some to persist to degree completion?

This lack of cause and effect, coupled with a series of solutions that hardly break the surface analytically, plagues the book’s applicability to a wider audience of advocates who wish to close the completion gap. I doubt that I am going out on a limb by asserting that the dropout problem may be a function of something other than—or in addition to—higher education’s (presumed) general disregard for the instructional and academic needs of individual students. Would it be equally reasonable to argue that a student’s completion of a college degree is a complex trajectory, with many roadblocks along the way, that might prevent many otherwise talented students from earning a credential independent of the institution attended? Could it also be a function of the widening wealth gap in the United States—such that many college-ready individuals lack the financial means to go to college or are otherwise deterred by the high cost and need to take on debt to finance it? Perhaps, and most distressing, has higher education itself exhausted its ability to serve a population that is—and will become—increasingly diverse, less well-resourced, and perhaps even hostile to traditional forms of instruction, pedagogy, and curricula and who are increasingly affected by housing and food insecurity?

You will say, of course, that my expectations of The College Dropout Scandal got the better of me; that I was expecting The Empire Strikes Back but had to settle for The Phantom Menace. Kirp sent up a flare when I was expecting a conflagration. You would be correct. Professor Kirp had a particular book in mind, wrote it, and failed spectacularly to meet my expectations. Given the rave reviews that populate the back of the dust cover from some of higher education’s most notable leaders, my thoughts here are a minority view. My single defense is that while I agree with Kirp’s thesis—too many students leave college without a degree—the higher education landscape he paints is too simplistic.

Last year, this journal ran a review of Nathan Grawe’s Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education. In that book (at 175 pages, the same length as Kirp’s), Grawe concludes, amid a mountain of empirical data, that a sizeable number of colleges and universities have virtually no future. Presenting the withering and inescapable arithmetic of U.S. demography—in a nutshell, we aren’t making enough babies—Grawe forecasts brutal competition for students in the current decade. One of the most obvious implications is for institutions to double down on the success of the students they do enroll. Grawe’s compelling analysis makes no use of journalistic narrative to sustain his arguments; and his data do not suggest a failure of moral imperative. His implied message to higher education leaders everywhere is simple: Improve or die.

The disappointing aspect of The College Dropout Scandal is not Kirp’s authentic outrage about higher education’s complacency in helping students earn degrees. He raises an important issue for which higher education must be regularly accountable; and those new to this topic will find value in Kirp’s treatment. In contrast to Grawe’s book, however, Professor Kirp’s overbroad censure of likely culprits and lack of credible redress leaves us wanting more. Slowing down to watch a car wreck, while a time-tested attraction, rarely leads to safer cars.

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