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## Race, gender play role in college graduations

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# Regional

# Race, gender play role in college graduations

*Note: Dr. Romero's column is running today because of the widespread Internet outage that was the result of last weekend's storm.*

One of the best ways to measure the accomplishment of colleges and universities is by assessing the percentage of their undergraduate students who graduate within six years of enrollment. Although most undergraduate degrees are designed to be completed in four years, the norm is to count graduation rates in six-year intervals because many students have to work (many of them full-time), while others do not have the adequate preparation from high school to succeed and need more time to overcome their academic shortcomings. There are many factors that can delay time to graduation.

Many states tie funding for their public institutions of higher education to improvements in graduation rates. That makes a lot of sense, not only in terms of academic achievements but also for humane reasons. Students who go into college and never graduate end up with student debt and without a degree that can improve their chances for a well-paid job.

Now a new study by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center is showing that graduation (also known as completion) rates affects different groups of students differently based on race and gender.

According to this research, only 54.8 percent of students who started at any type of college or university in the U.S. in Fall 2010 completed a degree or certificate within six years. In other words, barely more than half of students who started college

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six years ago were able to obtain a diploma. And when we look at the demographic details of those failing to graduate the results look even worse.

For example, among students who started at four-year public institutions, black students had the lowest six-year completion rate (45.9 percent), while the completion rate of Hispanic students was almost 10 percentage points higher at 55 percent. On the other hand, more than two-thirds of white and Asian students completed a degree within the same period (67.2 percent and 71.7 percent, respectively).

The study, titled "A National View of Student Attainment Rates by Race and Ethnicity," and was published last April by the Lumina Foundation, a private institution whose mission is to expand student access to education beyond high school. This study was conducted among 2,823,678 students who entered college in the Fall of 2010.

When the study's authors looked at all students – not only the ones that started at four-year college, but also those who began at two-year community colleges and later transferred to four-year schools – Asian and white students had a much higher completion rate (63.2 percent and 62 percent, respectively) than Hispanic and black students (45.8 percent and 38 percent, respectively).

This research also found that among students who started in four-year public institutions, black

men had the lowest completion rate (40 percent) and the highest stop-out rates (41.1 percent). A "stop-out" is when a student temporarily drops out of college but later returns. Asian women had the highest completion rate (75.7 percent) and the lowest stop-out rate (11.2 percent).

In the case of students who started at two-year public institutions (community or technical colleges for the most part), the overall completion rate was higher for white and Asian students (45.1 percent and 43.8 percent, respectively) than for Hispanic and black students (33 percent and 25.8 percent, respectively). Students who enter community or technical colleges are usually first-generation, minority-represented groups that come from low-income families. Therefore, the inability of these two-year institutions to graduate students represents a failure of our higher education system.

As we know, one of the reasons why many students enter community colleges is to later transfer to four-year schools. They think that community colleges offer them a cheaper, and sometimes easier path into higher education. According to this study, the completion rate at four-year institutions for students who started at a community college (with or without receiving an associate's degree first) was dramatically different for students of different racial and ethnic groups. "While almost one in four Asian students and one in five white students had completed this transfer pathway by the end of the six-year study period, just one in 10 Hispanic students and about one in 12 black students did," according to the report.

Another interesting finding from this study was

that the completion gaps between racial groups tend to shrink as students grow older. Among traditional-age students (under 25 years old), there was a 24-percentage point gap in the completion rates of black and white students (42.7 percent and 66.8 percent, respectively) and 17.5-percentage points gap between Hispanic and white students (49.3 percent and 66.8 percent, respectively). Among adult learners (those who started college at 25 or older), the gap was only 12.3 percentage points (42.0 percent and 29.7 percent, respectively) between black and white students and just 9.1 percentage points between Hispanic and white students (42.0 percent and 32.9 percent, respectively). This suggests that emotional maturity can also play a role in graduation rates.

There are several conclusions we can draw from this study. First is that many high schools do not seem to be preparing many students well for college, especially those with a large proportion of minorities. The other is that many colleges and universities are not taking good care of their own students when it comes to mentoring. And finally, that colleges and universities need to take particular care in aiding African-Americans and Hispanics to complete their degrees. To that end, they need to hire more faculty of color who are more sensitive to the needs of these students and who can also serve as role models.

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