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24 January,
2019

Column on Graduation Rates by SWOSU President Randy Beutler

As we are starting to hear more about college graduation rates, I think it is important to understand how these numbers are calculated, what they include, and what they do not include.

The college graduation rate is probably one of the most misunderstood and poorly developed statistics in all of higher education!

Here is some important information regarding this issue.

Where did the current methodology for calculating graduation rates come from?

Reporting college graduation rates is a relatively new requirement. In 1985, the NCAA began requiring its member institutions to report this data in order to track the success of student-athletes in relationship to the student body as a whole.

In 1990, Congress passed the Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act. The legislation's intent was that this information be available as it would be more useful to students making decisions about college. It took five years of rule-making to construct the current formula.

What is the current methodology for calculating graduation rates?

The most important thing to understand is that not every graduate is counted in this method. Graduation rates include only students who are first-time, full-time, freshmen entering in the fall semester. That is a very specific group. The root of this goes back to a time when most of our students were traditional students. That is not the case anymore, especially at regional and two-year institutions. The graduation rate measurement has not kept up with the changing times. This number depends too much on the type of student an institution admits.

What does the current graduation rate get wrong?

At SWOSU, and many other regional universities across the country, non-traditional students are becoming a greater part of our campuses. For example, those who may not be counted in the graduation rate group can be students who first enroll in the spring semester; students who go to school for a period of time and then take off to work for a period of time to pay off any debt; and, most importantly, students who transfer to SWOSU from another institution.

What are the real numbers?

For many regional universities, the average graduation rate, calculated using the above method, is somewhere around 30 to 40% over a six-year period. That may sound low. However, at SWOSU, our statistics show that nearly 60% of students who receive a degree are not included in that number.

This particular method of calculating the graduation rate of an institution, and, in turn, determining the “success” of a university, should not be based on such a small cohort of students, but should include ALL students.

Why is this an issue now?

Public education throughout our state and country is under more scrutiny. And, as with any public institution, it should be. However, do not mistake scrutiny for political attacks that intend to cripple an important foundational principle of our state – affordable access to a quality higher education, the very function of the regional university.

Interpreting graduation rates are far more complex and challenging than some assert. Because of this, these numbers can be manipulated and, despite their simplicity, provide a misleading indication of the success of a university. There are those who relish the chance to take advantage of this.

We at SWOSU believe that it is important that our students succeed. We strive for that every day. However, unlike research universities, our students come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Many of our enrollees are first generation college students. Some are struggling to improve their lives, though they may have issues that hinder their academic progress. Regional and two-year institutions are here to give these students a chance; no matter their background, no matter their station in life. It is a noble endeavor that we have, but it is also a challenge and responsibility that we as educators do not take lightly.

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