Introduction

This IR Clip introduces the main concepts behind two commonly measured statistics in the higher education setting: retention and graduation rates.

Retention rate is the rate, expressed in percentage, of which first-time, full-time freshmen persist at the institution. The freshmen are tracked by incoming year (cohorts), until they graduate, or up to ten years. A commonly reported rate is those freshmen who begin in the fall and continue to the next year’s fall semester.

Graduation rate is the rate, expressed in percentage, of which first-time, full-time freshmen graduate (Bachelor’s degree) at the institution. The freshmen are tracked by incoming year (cohorts), until they graduate, or up to ten years. The most commonly reported rate is at 150% of completion toward a Bachelor’s degree, or six years.

Retention and graduation rates are a measurement where institutions can identify strengths and weaknesses in the manner of which students are progressing in their academic careers. Since these two rates are commonly defined, collected, and reported, comparisons can be made to peer institutions, as well as to regional and national institutions. University researchers not only look at differences across gender, race, and ethnicity, other influences affecting retention are investigated such as academic skills and preparation, student enrollment status (full-time vs. part-time), academic performance, financial status, social activities, work trends, and student satisfaction. Influences of faculty, student support services, academic advising, and family support systems all have a huge affect on student retention as well. Through these comparisons, as well as research into other dimensions of student life, we can identify key variables that may affect, in positive or negative ways, retention and graduation rates.

A number of retention measurements are posted to the UND-OIR website as well as documented in other IR Briefs or IR Clips. Survey findings also reveal much on student satisfaction and can be found on the UND-OIR website as well. For purposes of this IR Clip, we will only be reporting general overall trends.

Trends

A five-year average of 1,926 first-time, full-time (FTFT) freshmen enroll at UND in the fall semester. Since 2000, their retention rate to the second year has averaged from 75% to 79% as shown in Figure 1. In 2010, UND saw the highest retention rate when 79% of the 2009 FTFT freshmen returned to fall 2010.

Women tend to return at a slightly higher rate than men, as shown in Figure 2.

As reported above, women have had an equal or higher retention rate every year over the past decade.
What makes a difference?
As mentioned in the introduction, numerous factors may influence whether a student stays or leaves an institution. One strong predictor of long-term academic achievement is student success in the first semester. Figure 3 shows retention rates for the last three FTFT cohort groups by gpa range. The higher the student’s gpa in the first semester, the more likely he/she returns. This trend is similar for degree completion. Achieving academic success in the first semester matters!

Graduation rates
Figure 4 displays four-, five-, and six-year graduation rates. As reported, an average of 22% of students graduate within four years, 24% in their fifth year, and 8% in their sixth year.

Table 1 breaks down the overall graduation rates for men and women. Similar to retention rates, four-, five-, and six-year graduation rates of women are higher than those of men for all years 2000 to 2006. This is especially true for the four-year graduation rates where the difference is as high as 11% (2001). Men do close the gap in the six-year graduation rate, but seemingly women at UND are more likely to stay on track and graduate at higher rates and in less time than men at UND do.

After six years, where is the cohort class of 2004?
Figure 5 illustrates a look at the 2,182 FTFT freshmen who began six years ago and reports percentages of graduates, still enrolled, and those who left without graduating. Overall, 69% of the 2004 students have graduated within six years (51% from UND, 18% from another institution), 14% are still enrolled (5% at UND, 9% elsewhere), and 17% of the students have left UND without completing a four-year degree.

For more detailed information about any of our surveys, please refer to http://und.edu/research/institutional-research/survey-timelines.cfm