

The Tyranny of One Metric

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A recent legislative audit of the Utah System of Higher Education found that “when it comes to college graduation, Utah is falling short when compared to the rest of the country.” Timely completion is an important metric. Ivy League schools, for example, which accept as few as 6.7% of already topnotch student applicants and charge an average of \$60,000 in tuition and fees, should rightly expect completion rates to be at least 90% or higher. But for open-admission, regional universities that emphasize access and affordability, completion can be a narrow metric that fails to capture the story of student success. This is the case for Utah Valley University (UVU), an open-admission, four-year public university.

IPEDS or Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) is part of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and is the source of official measures of timely completion at U.S. higher education institutions. IPEDS uses two measures. The first one is the six-year graduation rate. This measures how many students complete a four-year degree within six-years of initial enrollment. This measure counts only first-time, full-time, bachelor’s degree seeking students who enroll in the fall. This measure ignores transfer students, part-time students, and students who enroll in spring or summer semesters.

The second IPEDS measure is the Outcome Measure. Unlike the graduation rate, this measure includes full- and part-time entering students (new or transfer) pursuing any undergraduate course of study (certificate, associate, or bachelor’s). The measurement period is eight years and reports if a student earned an award or is still enrolled at their initial institution or at another institution.

In addition to these IPEDS measures, the Utah System of Higher Education (USHE) has adopted a third timely completion measure. This measure is a hybrid of the IPEDS graduation rate and Outcome Measure. Like the Outcome Measure, all entering students at an institution are included. Like the graduation rate, success is measured by completion of an award within 150% time (six years for a bachelor’s degree, three years for an associate’s degree).

Based on the above measurements, UVU would have three different completion numbers. The six-year graduation would be 33%, but this measures only 25% of our students (first time, full-time, bachelor’s degree-seeking, who enrolled in the fall). Our eight-year Outcome Measure would be 41%, putting us ahead of ten regional peer institutions with an educational structure similar to ours. Finally, UVU’s completion number using the USHE hybrid formula would be 33.54%.

We have learned critical insights with regards to completion. First, UVU consistently needs to strengthen the support services and curricular offerings we provide our diverse student body so that more can complete a meaningful credential within a reasonable amount of time. We are doing this through better advising, math and English placement, food and housing insecurity remedies, counseling, and more online options to help those who otherwise could not take all their classes face-to-face.

Second, the obsession over a single metric can completely miss the point of higher education. We could raise our completion rate by simply slamming the door of opportunity on those who are “not worthy.” In 2019, we found that if we simply imposed admission requirements of a 19 ACT score and a 2.5 GPA, doing nothing else, our IPEDS six-year graduation would rise to 63%. But this would mean disproportionately excluding students of color, first generation students, and students over the age of 25.

UVU’s mission is inclusion, not exclusion. Multiple studies show that *any* amount of college raises earnings and lowers unemployment rates compared to only a high school education. Graduation is not the only benefit of education. Studies have shown that people who take as few as 12 credits see significant benefits in their lives. Those with at least some college education make more money over their lifetime and are less likely to be unemployed, impoverished, or incarcerated. Third year engineering students often get hired and have brilliant careers without getting their diploma. In other words, getting an *education* can still be meaningfully beneficial even when a student does not complete a *degree*.

Third, UVU is continuing to improve in many other metrics that matter. From 2017 to 21 we produced 2079 more credentialed people for four- and five-star jobs, making UVU second only to the University of Utah. 78% of our alumni still live in Utah ten years after graduation, raising families, building the economy, and paying taxes. 82% of UVU students work while going to school, thus understandably taking longer to graduate. But their college debt burden, averaging \$15,100, is also lower compared to the national average college debt burden of \$34,100.

Timely completion measures provide insight into an institution's efforts but do not adequately capture the full impact on individual student's and graduate's lives or on the region's workforce and communities. Timely completion is just one measure of an institution’s value and impact. All universities and colleges in Utah should continue to improve their timely completion rates balanced with their values of inclusion, accessibility, affordability, and flexibility.

At 34.7%, Utah ranks 14th in the nation for individuals with a bachelor's or higher degree. The Utah Foundation reported in July 2022 that "Utah is in the top third of states when it comes to four-year degree attainment" and second in the Mountain States region for adults over 25 with bachelor’s degrees. Education is a Utah superpower, positively impacting our vibrant economy, quality of life, social capital, and economic mobility of Utahns. It is appropriate to celebrate higher education in Utah, continue to improve what we are already doing, and support *all* individuals who are striving to realize their human potential.

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