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U.S.

College Graduation Rate Shrinks, Study Finds

Research shows just 52.9% of students who began two- and four-year institutions in fall 2009 had graduated



The overall graduation rate for students who entered college in 2009 is 52.9%, down from 55% for those who began in 2008. The complete rate was 61.2% for students who started at four-year public schools. Here, the University of Colorado in Boulder on a recent day. *PHOTO: ANDREW BURTON/GETTY IMAGES*

By **MELISSA KORN**

Updated Nov. 17, 2015 3:15 p.m. ET

A shrinking share of college students made it through to graduation this year, reflecting an optimism among older students about the job market and underscoring concerns over college costs and return on investment.

Just 52.9% of students who began at two- and four-year institutions in fall 2009 had graduated within six years, according to a report released Tuesday by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, compared with 55% for the class that started in 2008 and 56.1% the year before that.

The results could have widespread implications as more states consider funding colleges and universities based on student outcomes, including graduation rates. The report was supported by a grant from the Lumina Foundation, a nonprofit group focused on increasing graduation rates.

Completion rates dropped sharply among students who began school when they were over 20 years old; the decline in that population may reflect improving labor markets, said Doug Shapiro, executive research director of the center, a nonprofit higher-education research organization. Out-of-work adults flocked to colleges during the recession, and some may have found new job opportunities in recent years, even without degrees.

But students of all ages, and at all types of institutions, completed school at a lower rate than those who started down the college path the prior year.

The across-the-board decline is “very troubling,” Mr. Shapiro said. “It’s not just about the job market. It’s about affordability. It’s about ability to stay in and continue to have the confidence that when you graduate, if you graduate, you’ll be able to pay back that debt.”

Also disconcerting to Mr. Shapiro was that 33% of students who started in fall 2009 had left school without a degree six years on, up from 30.3% in the prior cohort, he said. That means more students are dropping out entirely, rather than just switching between full- and part-time enrollment status.

Completion rates in the cohort of students who started in 2009 were also dragged down by declines among students who attended four-year, for-profit institutions, which tend to cater to older learners. These schools have faced heightened scrutiny in recent years for high costs and low graduation rates. Fewer than one-third of students who began at for-profit colleges in 2009 had graduated within six years.

In comparison, the completion rate fell 1.7 points to 61.2% for students who started at four-year public schools, and fell 2.1 points to 71.5% for those who began their college careers at four-year private, nonprofit schools.

Though a smaller percentage of students made it to the finish line this year, the total number of graduates increased by about 71,000 for the latest class, since more students—2.9 million—entered college in 2009 than in the prior year.

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Corrections & Amplifications:

Just 52.9% of students who began at two- and four-year institutions in fall 2009 graduated within six years. An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that was the rate for students who began at four-year schools. (Nov. 20, 2015)

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