

UK Institutional Research Brief:

Lost Members of UK's First-Year Cohorts: Who Are They and Where Did They Go

April 2013

Roughly two of five first-time, full-time freshmen do not earn a bachelor's degree within six years of their entry into the University of Kentucky. UK's graduation rates ranged from 57.7% to 61.4% over the past decade (see Figure 1 below). Some policy makers in higher education view the six-year graduation rate as a flawed measure of institutional quality. Critics argue that graduation rates are highly correlated with students' academic preparation and a cluster of demographic characteristics, ranging from gender and race/ethnicity to a family's socioeconomic status. The standard graduation rate does not include students who transfer credits to another institution where they ultimately earn a degree. Moreover, the percentage of students who graduate within six years does not provide any evidence of how much students have learned from their university experiences. Despite its shortcomings, the six-year graduation rate is regarded by many as an important indicator of institutional effectiveness.

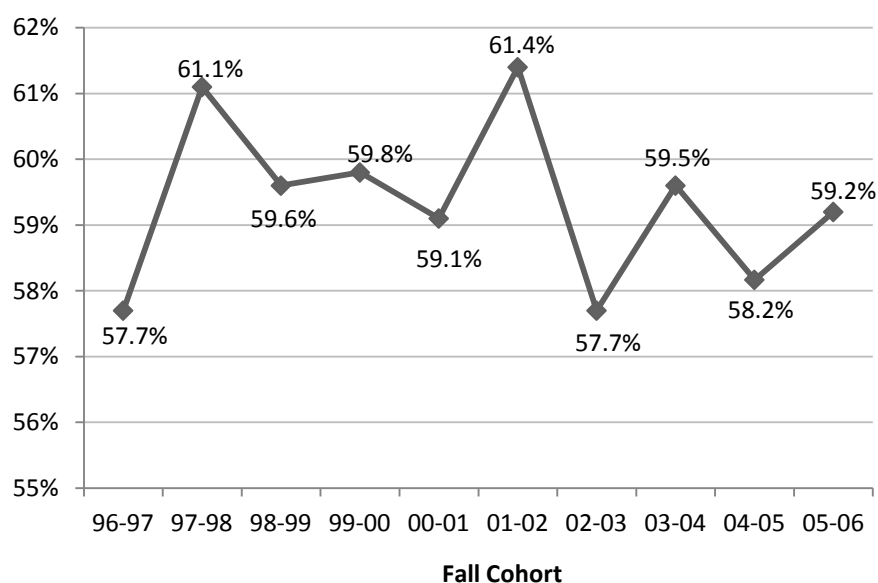


Figure 1 – A Decade of Six-Year Graduation Rates at UK

This IR Brief focuses on students who enrolled at UK with the intention of earning an undergraduate degree, but ultimately graduated from another university within six years. Table 1 presents the six most recent cohorts for which six-year graduation rates can be calculated. Over the past six years, 59.1% of first-time, full-time students earned bachelor's degrees within the six year tracking window. Using data from the National Student Clearinghouse's system for tracking students, the IR office discovered that typically an additional 10 to 11 percent of the first-year cohort earns a bachelor's degree from another college or university within six years. Table 1 shows the additional number and percent of first-time students in the freshman cohort year who graduated from another university within the six-year window.

Table 1: Six-Year Graduation Rates Plus Graduations from Other Universities

| Year | First Fall Enrollment | Final Cohort Size* | Graduated from UK in 6 years | Six-Year Graduation Rate | Graduated from another university in six years | Six-Year Graduation Rate including Graduations from Other Universities |
|------|-----------------------|--------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|--|--|
| 2000 | 2,971 | 2,944 | 1,740 | 59.1 | 287 | 68.9 |
| 2001 | 3,129 | 3,093 | 1,899 | 61.4 | 263 | 69.9 |
| 2002 | 3,704 | 3,662 | 2,113 | 57.7 | 349 | 67.2 |
| 2003 | 3,683 | 3,624 | 2,158 | 59.5 | 424 | 71.2 |
| 2004 | 3,935 | 3,873 | 2,254 | 58.2 | 440 | 69.6 |
| 2005 | 3,824 | 3,798 | 2,247 | 59.2 | 462 | 71.3 |

*Exclusions include deceased students and students enrolling in the Professional Pharmacy program without earning a bachelor's degree.

Who are they?

Table 2 compares first-time, full-time students who graduated from UK with others from the same cohort who graduated from another college or university within six years. The six most recent cohorts (fall 2000 to fall 2005) were combined for this analysis. Compared to students who graduated from UK, the pool of students who graduated from another university was disproportionately comprised of out-of-state students (34.2% vs. 19.7%). Likewise, students who transferred and received a degree elsewhere were, on average, less academically talented than students who stayed at UK until they graduated. Transfers were more likely to have earned high school GPAs less than 3.0

(13.8% vs. 9.2%) and completed fewer than 30 credit hours during their first academic year at UK (49.6% vs. 32.1%). Finally, students who transferred and graduated from another college or university were more likely to be female (61.6% vs. 55.9%) than students who earned their bachelor's degrees at UK.

Table 2: Comparison of Students Who Graduated from UK and Other Universities within Six Years (Combined Cohorts)

| Characteristic | Students Graduating from UK in 6 Years | | Transfers Graduating from Another University in 6 Years | | P-value |
|---|--|--------------|---|--------------|---------|
| | N | % | N | % | |
| Overall | 12,409 | 100.0 | 2,225 | 100.0 | |
| In-state | 9,965 | 80.3 | 1,464 | 65.8 | <.0001 |
| Out-of-State | 2,444 | 19.7 | 761 | 34.2 | |
| Female | 6,940 | 55.9 | 1,371 | 61.6 | <.0001 |
| Male | 5,469 | 44.1 | 854 | 38.4 | |
| Under-represented race* | 11,537 | 95.0 | 2,101 | 96.1 | <0.0348 |
| Over-represented race* | 605 | 5.0 | 86 | 3.9 | |
| High School GPA 3.0+ | 11,270 | 90.8 | 1,919 | 86.2 | <.0001 |
| High School GPA <3.0 | 1,139 | 9.2 | 306 | 13.8 | |
| Earned 30+ hours in 1 st Year** | 8,354 | 67.9 | 892 | 50.4 | <.0001 |
| Earned < 30 hours in 1 st Year** | 3,953 | 32.1 | 878 | 49.6 | |

*Refers to classification of US residents of known race/ethnicity. Under-represented race/ethnicity refers to Black, Hispanic, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; over-represented race includes Whites and Asians.

**Includes only students who returned for their first Spring term.

Where did they go?

Table 3 provides a list of universities from which the 2,225 students graduated after leaving UK. Of the 2,225 students in the Fall 2000 through Fall 2005 cohorts who left UK and ultimately graduated from another university, 397 (17.8%) graduated from the University of Louisville, 265 (11.9%) graduated from Eastern Kentucky University, and 212 (9.5%) graduated from Northern Kentucky University. Out-of-state universities who awarded the greatest number of bachelor's degrees to UK transfer students were Ohio State University (94, 4.2%), the University of Cincinnati (39, 1.8%), and Middle Tennessee State University (33, 1.5%).

**Table 3: Universities from which
UK Transfer Students Graduate**

| | N | % |
|-----------------------------------|--------------|--------------|
| University Of Louisville | 397 | 17.8 |
| Eastern Kentucky University | 265 | 11.9 |
| Northern Kentucky University | 212 | 9.5 |
| Western Kentucky University | 149 | 6.7 |
| The Ohio State University | 94 | 4.2 |
| Murray State University | 74 | 3.3 |
| Morehead State University | 64 | 2.9 |
| University Of Cincinnati | 39 | 1.8 |
| Middle Tennessee State University | 33 | 1.5 |
| Wright State University | 26 | 1.2 |
| Indiana University Bloomington | 25 | 1.1 |
| Marshall University, Huntington | 25 | 1.1 |
| West Virginia University | 23 | 1.0 |
| University Of Tennessee | 22 | 1.0 |
| Miami University | 21 | 0.9 |
| Other College or University | 756 | 34.0 |
| Total | 2,225 | 100.0 |

Conclusions and Questions

This study has found that students who initially started at UK, but who graduated from another institution, tended to be less academically prepared than those who graduated from UK. This research also has showed that out-of-state students were disproportionately among those who graduated from another university. The results of the Attrition Survey (see October 2010 IR Brief on the Results of UK's New Student Attrition Survey) add some important details to this study's findings. Analysis of the Attrition Survey found that the great majority of students (84%) who left UK planned to attend another institution. In-state students' most frequently selected reason for leaving UK was "My academic performance" (53% vs. 33% for out-of-state students). Out-of-state students' single most important reason was the desire "to be closer to home, family, or friends" (59% vs. 38% of in-state students).

In recent years, UK has devoted much effort and resources to help students who struggle academically. In addition, programs have been developed to reach out to

students who feel disconnected from the social fabric of the University. Further research can play an important role in keeping students on a trajectory toward degree completion. Institutional researchers can uncover better ways to identify students at risk of dropping out. And we can step up our efforts to assess the effectiveness of programs to enhance the undergraduate experience.

Finally, it is interesting to speculate whether the results of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) can partially explain the loss of students to other universities during the sophomore or junior year. There is a stark contrast between the levels of engagement displayed by first-year students and seniors at UK. First-year students exceed the performance of their Carnegie peers on four of five NSSE benchmarks, while seniors perform more poorly than their counterparts at research universities on three of the benchmarks. Initiatives to produce greater engagement of students after their freshman year may serve to reduce the number of students who leave UK for a university where they can feel challenged academically or connected socially.