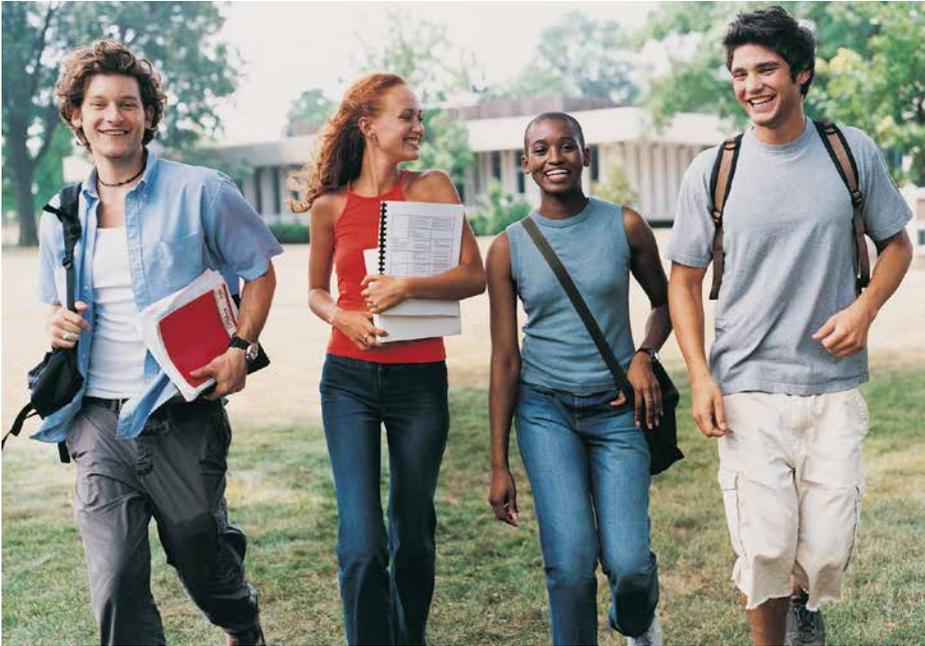


**CHAPTER 2:**

# Cross-Cutting Criteria: Students and Institutions



This chapter details the cross-cutting definitions and cohort specifications that impact many of the performance metrics included in the framework. Parameters include the following:

<u>Twelve-month enrollment population</u> .....	2.2
<u>Enrollment status</u> .....	2.2
<u>Attendance intensity</u> .....	2.2
<u>Credential-seeking status</u> .....	2.2
<u>Key institutional characteristics</u> .....	2.4

## Cohort Specifications

Many metrics in this framework measure performance for a specific group, or cohort, of students. In an attempt to build consistency across metrics, the framework defines cohorts as similarly as possible for each metric, and this chapter discusses the *core cohort recommendations that apply to multiple metrics*. For each decision point, we summarize the recommendation, evidence from the field that led us to that recommendation, and possible ways that the data can be used.

These definitional decisions are centered on the principle of counting all students. In many cases, this framework expands on the students included in the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) graduation-rate cohort to be more inclusive of all students and reflect the demographics, attendance, and mobility patterns of 21st-century students. Grounded in the work and innovation of numerous voluntary initiatives, the framework offers guidance on how to define the cohort population and create separate cohorts based on enrollment status, attendance intensity, and credential-level sought.

### Cohort Population: 12-Month Enrollment

The framework recommends defining the *population* for most progression and completion metrics as all students who enter an institution during a 12-month period (12-month cohort, also known as a full-year cohort), instead of only students who enter the institution in the fall (fall cohort). This specification enables the metrics to capture the one in four students who start college outside the fall term, a particular issue in the community college and for-profit sectors, where about 35 percent and 45 percent of students begin at times other than the fall, respectively.<sup>1</sup>

#### Field Usage and Convergence

While many voluntary initiatives—including the Voluntary Framework of Accountability (VFA) and Achieving the Dream (ATD)—use fall-enrollment cohorts, moving toward 12-month cohorts aligns with the goal of counting all students. Further, IPEDS and Complete College America (CCA) have set a precedent for 12-month cohorts by allowing some institutions to use full-year instead of fall cohorts, depending on their academic calendar system.<sup>2</sup> Also, 32 members of the Postsecondary Data Collaborative have supported this switch to 12-month cohort reporting in order to capture more nontraditional students.<sup>3</sup>

#### Use Cases

Expanding cohorts to capture students beginning at any point during the year will provide institutions with a more comprehensive picture of student progression and completion, capturing outcomes for the 6 million students who enter institutions each year at times other than the traditional fall semester. While the late-year entrants will have slightly less

time to count as completers during a specified period (e.g., 150 percent of time), the benefit of adding these students into the calculation outweighs this downside. Because these students already are included in the 12-month enrollment counts for IPEDS, incorporating them into progression and success cohorts should not unduly increase burden.

### Enrollment Status and Attendance Intensity

The framework recommends separating each cohort by *enrollment status* (first-time or transfer-in) and *attendance intensity* (full-time or part-time). This approach creates the following four distinctive cohorts: first-time full-time (FTFT), first-time part-time (FTPT), transfer full-time (TFT), and transfer part-time (TPT), as determined by students' status at entry. All four of these cohorts should be defined in each credential-seeking category (see next section for more details on defining credential-seeking status).

#### Field Usage and Convergence

Current IPEDS graduation rates track only FTFT students, thus excluding about 45 percent of today's degree- and certificate-seeking college entrants.<sup>4</sup> The rates often are criticized for their narrow scope, so 13 voluntary initiatives—including CCA and VFA—include transfer or part-time students in their completion rates in a variety of ways to be more inclusive of today's students.<sup>5</sup> The 2015 release of College Scorecard data included both the IPEDS graduation rate and rates for all Title IV recipient students, using National Student Loan Data System (NSLDS) data. While these data are imperfect, this release shows a movement toward non-first-time, full-time cohort usage. Also, the new IPEDS Outcome Measures component used the same four cohorts this framework recommends.<sup>6</sup>

#### Use Cases

By including transfer and part-time students in the cohorts, these data present a more complete view of progression and completion for all students enrolled at the institution, compared with the IPEDS FTFT graduation rates, which have long and widely been criticized by the field. The inclusion of these multiple cohorts reinforces the commitment to supporting all students enrolled in higher education through to completion.

### Credential Level Sought

The framework recommends distinguishing cohorts by *credential level sought*—including non-credential-seeking, certificate-seeking, associate's-seeking, and bachelor's-seeking students—because these degree types differ in expected time to completion. Data show that students who complete a degree or certificate tend to complete the credential they initially sought, indicating they can accurately report their degree plans at entry. Among completers at their first institution, nearly 100 percent of certificate-seeking students, 82 percent of associate's-seeking students, and 98 percent of

bachelor's-seeking students received their intended degree, as opposed to a credential of a different level (see Table 2-1 for more details). Also, data show that persistence and completion rates vary substantially among students pursuing different credential types, highlighting the importance of measuring these student groups separately.<sup>7</sup> While some have noted challenges with identifying students' credential level at entry, institutions now are required to report this information to the NSLDS to allow for tracking of student loan eligibility, which is limited to 150 percent of program length. This new compliance requirement should enhance the quality of data on students' credential level to near complete coverage, as reported by the National Student Clearinghouse.

#### Field Usage and Convergence

As a required reporting element in NSLDS and in codebooks for voluntary initiatives such as CCA, Completion by Design, and the Student Achievement Measure, the field has demonstrated that institutions are capable of reporting data separately by the level of credential sought, including for certificates for some initiatives. Some have debated whether institutions can accurately determine student intentions at college entry in order to place them in a cohort. To examine this issue, we evaluated the trends in student degree plans, enrollment activity, and credential completion in a nationally representative survey, the Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) study. In sum, these results—discussed in the bullets below—show that activity by students in their first year tends to match their intent.

**1. Students who earn credentials at their first institution tend to earn the credential they initially sought:** Some have posited that placing students in cohorts based on the level of credential initially sought—and measuring success as completion of that credential—could undercount actual success rates, because students may complete other credentials, such

as stackable credentials, even if they do not ultimately complete their longer, intended degree. However, analysis of BPS data shows that very few students who earn a credential at their first institution earn it at a level other than their initial program of entry. Students are most likely to complete the credential they sought or leave college altogether, but they are unlikely to complete a credential of a different level than the one they initially sought. Further, most students, especially in certificate and bachelor's programs, earn the degree they initially sought at their first institution rather than at a subsequent institution. For example, only 1 percent of students in bachelor's programs earned either a certificate or associate's degree at their first institution, and only 4 percent of them earned a credential other than a bachelor's degree anywhere. Additionally, only 4 percent of students in associate's programs earned a certificate or bachelor's degree in six years at their initial institution (see Table 2-1).<sup>8</sup>

**2. Most students do not seek credentials only to receive financial aid:** There remains some concern in the field that students who are enrolled in degree programs are designated as such only in order to receive financial aid, not because they intend to complete a credential. Here, we examine several trends that seem to at least limit the scope of that problem. Using BPS, we found: (1) 65 percent of degree-seeking federal aid recipients who eventually drop out stay enrolled beyond their first year, suggesting that most of them intended to receive the degree sought, a trend consistent with students who do not receive aid;<sup>9</sup> and (2) degree-seeking students who do not complete are as likely to have borrowed as students who do complete and more than half (52 percent) of noncompleters borrow. While it may be feasible that students would declare false degree intentions in order to receive grant aid, it seems less likely that they would do so to take out loans, especially given that most noncompleters do persist beyond the first year.

**Table 2-1: Cumulative Attainment in Six Years at First Institution and Anywhere**

Degree program	Attained bachelor's degree	Attained associate's degree	Attained certificate	No degree, still enrolled	No degree, transferred	No degree, left without return
<b>Attainment at First Institution</b>						
Certificate	*	*	51%	3%	13%	33%
Associate's degree	1%	9%	3%	8%	31%	38%
Bachelor's degree	56%	1%	0%	5%	24%	14%
Not in a degree program	4%	7%	6%	9%	36%	38%
<b>Attainment Anywhere</b>						
Certificate	*	2%	52%	9%	N/A	36%
Associate's degree	11%	18%	6%	18%	N/A	46%
Bachelor's degree	63%	3%	1%	12%	N/A	21%
Not in a degree program	16%	7%	8%	21%	N/A	49%

Source: IHEP analysis of Beginning Postsecondary Student Survey: 2004–09 data.

Note: Rows may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Asterisks (\*) denote where estimates are unstable because the standard error represents more than 30 or 50 percent of the estimate.

### 3. Behaviorally defined cohorts likely omit many students who are legitimately seeking credits:

Behaviorally defined cohorts base credential-seeking status on students' course-taking behavior, rather than their stated degree intention, due to concerns about the accuracy of student self-reports.<sup>10</sup> However, using BPS, we found that a considerable number of students who fail to meet early behavioral milestones, such as accumulating six to 12 credits in their first one to three years, do display persistence behavior, such as course-taking and completion, beyond the initial enrollment time frame (i.e., one to three years). In brief, students who fail to meet early behavioral milestones at community colleges do go on to complete credentials both at their initial institution (about 14 percent) and at subsequent institutions (about 8 percent) within six years. Additionally, about 10 percent of these students continue enrollment at their initial institution, and about 31 percent transfer to a subsequent institution within six years.<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that including these students in the cohort does lower completion rates because students who do not gain early academic momentum are less likely to complete than those who attain; however, eliminating them from the cohort reduces the chances that institutions can or will intervene to help them on their pathway to success. Because of the goal to count all students and all outcomes, this iteration of the framework uses initial credential-level to maximize the scope of students included in cohorts. Further, as behaviorally defined cohorts can only be developed retrospectively, they are not conducive to improvement efforts, which need to track student cohorts in real-time in order to influence their outcomes.<sup>12</sup> Finally, as discussed in the persistence and outcome rates chapters subchapters, all outcomes will be captured regardless of the credential sought by the student. For example, an associate's-seeking student who earns a certificate will count as persisting in the persistence rate, even though she will not count in the numerator of the outcome rate.

#### Use Cases

Because behaviors and outcomes are distinct, depending on students' initial credential level, the framework recommends tracking each cohort separately based on the type of credential sought. This disaggregation will allow institutions to understand how specific groups of students progress toward credentials and to identify challenges that impact success differently for students in different credential programs. Further, in the framework, students who transfer between credential levels at the initial institution or a subsequent institution would still be counted, so their progress would still be reported.

#### Key Institutional Characteristics

In addition to the commitment to count all students, the framework also seeks to include all institutions. For this reason, it recommends collecting key institutional characteristics that

can help contextualize the student data and the mission of the institutions. Table 2-2 shows the institutional characteristics included in the framework.

**Table 2-2: Key Institutional Characteristics**

• Sector	• Selectivity
• Level	• Diversity
• Credential/Program mix	• Minority-Serving Institution status
• Size	• Post-traditional populations
• Resources	• Modality

Each characteristic has implications for understanding the context of the institution. Sector, level, and degree or program mix are commonly used in research to distinguish institutions at their most basic level: who controls the institution and what degree types are available. The size and resources of the institution establish the fiscal framework of the institution—small, resource-rich schools operate in a very different environment than do larger, underresourced schools. The selectivity of the school reveals important information about the academic preparation of incoming students, while diversity and Minority-Serving Institution status demonstrate the demographics and history of a campus. Finally, modality is becoming increasingly important, as institutions expand their online learning capacities. By understanding the structure of the institutions, student access, progression, completion, cost, and post-college outcomes can be contextualized as appropriate. These data can be obtained from IPEDS and will not cause additional reporting burden for the institutions.

- 1 IHEP analysis of: U.S. Department of Education (2013). Integrated Postsecondary Data System (IPEDS), 2012-13, Enrollment. Retrieved from: <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/>.
- 2 Institutions that use a nontraditional calendar system (e.g., not based on semesters, quarters, trimesters, or 4-1-4) report graduation and retention rates using a full-year, instead of a fall, cohort. IPEDS Data Center, variable definition for "Reporting method for student charges, graduation rates, retention rates and student financial aid." Complete College America notes that for institutions who enroll more students through the year or have nontraditional academic calendars, states may wish to use a 12-month enrollment method to identify graduation rate cohorts.
- 3 Postsecondary Data Collaborative members. (2014, December). *PostsecData Comments on IPEDS Outcome Measures Technical Review Panel*. Retrieved from <http://www.ihep.org/press/opinions-and-statements/postsecdata-comments-ipeds-outcome-measures-technical-review-panel>; Postsecondary Data Collaborative members. (2015, April). *PostsecData Comments to the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee*. Retrieved from [http://www.ihep.org/sites/default/files/uploads/postsecdata/docs/resources/postsecdata\\_collaborative\\_help\\_response.pdf](http://www.ihep.org/sites/default/files/uploads/postsecdata/docs/resources/postsecdata_collaborative_help_response.pdf)
- 4 These results are based on fall entrants only. IHEP analysis of: U.S. Department of Education (2014). Integrated Postsecondary Data System (IPEDS), 2014, Fall Enrollment. Retrieved from: <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/>.
- 5 Also includes: Achieving the Dream, Access to Success, College Scorecard, Completion by Design, Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange, National Community College Benchmark Project, Predictive Analytics Reporting Framework, Student Achievement Measure, Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education Multistate Longitudinal Data Exchange, Voluntary Institutional Metrics Project and Voluntary System of Accountability.
- 6 IPEDS' OM survey addresses the problem of only FTFT cohorts but still has limitations. OM measures outcomes at six and eight years regardless of institution type, collapses credential-seeking statuses, and lacks disaggregation by race/ethnicity and gender. For more information, see the PostsecData Comments on IPEDS Outcome Measures Technical Review Panel. Retrieved from <http://www.ihep.org/press/opinions-and-statements/postsecdata-comments-ipeds-outcome-measures-technical-review-panel>

- 7 Ninety-four percent of bachelor's-seekers and 95 percent of certificate-seekers who attain any credential anywhere earn their intended degree. While only 51 percent of associate's-seeking students who attain any credential anywhere attain the associate's degree, another 32 percent earn a bachelor's degree. Only 17 percent earn a certificate as their highest credential. IHEP analysis of: U.S. Department of Education (2009). Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, 2004-2009. Retrieved from: <http://nces.ed.gov/datalab/index.aspx>.
- 8 It should be acknowledged that about 8.5 percent of students are not in a degree program at entry in BPS, and the survey imputes credential level for students with missing data by using the degree program reported by the institution or the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). This variable is edited further to ensure that the degree program reported was actually offered by the institution. For those reported at a higher level than the institution offered, the variable is reclassified at the highest level offered by the institution.
- 9 Fifty-six percent of nonfederal aid recipients who eventually drop out stay enrolled beyond the first year. IHEP analysis of: U.S. Department of Education (2009). Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, 2004-2009. Retrieved from: <http://nces.ed.gov/datalab/index.aspx>.
- 10 American Association of Community Colleges. *Voluntary framework of accountability metrics manual*. Retrieved from American Association of Community Colleges website: <http://vfa.aacc.nche.edu/Documents/VFAMetricsManual.pdf>
- 11 Failure to reach a behavioral milestone for this analysis is defined as earning fewer than 12 credits in the first year of enrollment. IHEP analysis of: U.S. Department of Education (2009). Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, 2004-2009. Retrieved from: <http://nces.ed.gov/datalab/index.aspx>.
- 12 IHEP analysis of: U.S. Department of Education (2009). Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, 2004-2009. Retrieved from: <http://nces.ed.gov/datalab/index.aspx>.