Graduation Rates

The different metrics we use in measuring college graduation rates have appropriately drawn increasing public scrutiny. The various metrics used (total degrees granted, number of degrees in specific fields, percent of students who earn their degrees, average time to degree) provide a somewhat different perspective on a university’s return on investment: How successful are UNF students in obtaining their undergraduate degrees? Are UNF graduates prepared to enter high-need and high-paid positions in the workforce? How is UNF doing in adding to the general education level in the community at large?

In Figure 1.f., we can see that over the last five years, UNF has continued to grow the numbers of college graduates who are entering the local work force. Data have shown that UNF accounts for more college graduates in the northeast Florida region than UF and FSU combined. The current increase in numbers of graduates is particularly noteworthy when you consider that we reduced enrollments in response to state budget cuts, yet the total number of degrees continued to climb. So while the number of students we admit have held steady or fallen, the overall numbers of degrees we have awarded has grown. This is particularly true at the undergraduate level. Unfortunately, our numbers in graduate degree production have followed current national trends where graduate degrees are on the decline – an issue America must address. (Figure 1.g.)

In looking at the numbers of degrees awarded, we also track the disciplines in which these degrees are awarded. At the undergraduate level, 32 percent of the degrees awarded have been in areas of strategic importance to the local economy over the past two years. This category includes health sciences and STEM degrees. At the graduate level in 2011-2012, 27 percent of the degrees were in these strategic areas. In 2012-2013, this number climbed to 34 percent. When we focus on just STEM degrees, we find that STEM degrees only accounted for 12 percent of undergraduate and 9 percent of graduate degrees. Our greatest gains in strategic areas were found in health professions. When looking at the distribution of the economic growth in northeast Florida, this makes sense. Interestingly, many of the STEM positions opened in this region require associates degrees or lower, as opposed to the bachelor’s degree or higher.

Even with that being true, in listening to conversations about the visions for the region that are proposed in different public forums, we may need to make a concerted effort to target the STEM fields of study in our recruitment and academic programming processes. Recognizing this, we began a special initiative this summer – The STEM Jumpstart Experience. This is a program for new students who want to major in engineering. In the intensive sessions, these students become immersed in the necessary prerequisites for engineering, helping them for the rigor of the curriculum.
In addition to looking at graduation rates in these terms, number of graduates, and their particular contributions to regional growth, there is another set of numbers that the state has been looking at more closely: FETPIP data on the numbers of graduates who are employed in Florida after graduation and their average salaries. (Figure 1.h.)

As I have mentioned in the past, there are limitations with FETPIP numbers, because they are unable to track data from other states or for employees of the U.S. military, in or out of Florida.

But when the data are used to determine which universities have a greater percentage of their first-year alums employed in Florida, one year after graduation, the University of North Florida has been among the leading schools for the last several years. With 73 percent of recent graduates working in Florida, we had the highest percentage in the state. UNF graduates are also among the three highest wage earners in their first year after graduation. This fact is validated by (a) the fact that 58 percent of our alumni continue to live in northeast Florida and an additional 20 percent live in other parts of the state, (see Figure 1.h.) and by (b) an award we recently won as a “Best Return on Investment” college. This is an award that calculates cost of education and salary earned at time of graduation (Affordable CollegesOnLine).

Building a Culture of Completion

The most commonly reported assessment of graduation rates is calculated by following a cohort of students from admission to an expected graduation date (four years, five years, or six years after entering the institution) to determine what percent of a university’s students graduate within the allotted period of time. Because so many students are nontraditional and hold down jobs requiring 20 or more hours of work per week, the six-year rate has become the most often reported rate and the most commonly used for comparisons. For students who are transferring into a four-year university from a school that awards associate of arts degrees, there is an ancillary graduation rate in which students are tracked for four years after they enter the university with the AA degree in hand. Again, because many of these transfer students work fulltime, it isn’t expected that they will graduate within four years of entering a university with their AA degrees in hand.

In using these methods, many institutions that serve the needs of nontraditional students have suggested that these students, who often enter one university in their freshman year and then transfer to graduate from another institution, shouldn’t be excluded from the first institution’s count. The student didn’t fail to graduate, the student elected to graduate from another school for many reasons, which may have nothing to do with the first admitting institution: family moves, seeking a major not offered at the first institution. People who raise this issue state clearly that the ultimate measure is that the student graduates, not that she or he graduates from the first institution they entered.

Responding to these discussions, an increasing number of universities provide a set of graduation rate percentages. In Florida, many of the state universities are tracking the percent of students who entered as freshmen and graduate from their institution within six years. In addition, they will report a second figure: the percent of students who entered their university and then went on to graduate from any
Florida public university. Those Florida schools that participate in the Voluntary System of Accountability also report the number of students who enter as freshmen and graduate within the six-year time frame from any collaborating school in the United States. These data are being used in presenting the College Portrait developed by VSA universities. Figure 1.i. provides these data for UNF over the past five years.

As you can see in Figure 1.i., UNF’s six-year graduation rates have been fairly consistent over the last five-year span. We have a mid-to-upper 40 percent graduation rate when we count those students who entered and graduated from UNF. When we expand our final count to include students who graduated from any Florida public university, the results jump to 54 percent or better. If we include students who left UNF and went on to graduate from any university across the country, the percentage of UNF FTICs six-year graduation rate climbs, ranging from 61 to 65 percent.

**Figure 1.i. University of North Florida FTIC Graduation Rates**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graduated from UNF</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>47%</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNF’s Rank Among SUS</td>
<td>6th</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>6th (tied)</td>
<td>6th</td>
<td>6th (tied)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduated from an SUS Institution</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNF’s Rank Among SUS</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>6th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduated from a U.S. Institution*</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>65%</td>
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When you compare UNF’s rate of graduation for students who enter and graduate from UNF to students entering and graduating from their admitting school throughout the system, over the past five years, UNF ranks in fifth or sixth place. (Figure 1.i.) When you look at students entering UNF who later graduate from any school in the Florida system, we rank in fifth place.

Examining the graduation rate for students who transfer to UNF with their AA degrees, we find a 69 percent four-year graduation rate. This puts UNF in third place among Florida’s public universities on this particular metric. While each of these figures helps to provide a more complete portrait of UNF, they fall short of the picture we hold for ourselves.

We can point to pride in many areas. Our students come in brighter each year. We are helping them make significant gains in their core skills and in their professional preparation. And upon graduation, these alums are being employed and paid reasonable wages. But now is not the time to stop taking bold moves in changing the trajectory of the institution. We have no desire to become another research-want-to-be. We want to fulfill our own destiny – that of a strong and well-recognized comprehensive university which attracts greater numbers of bright freshmen and sophomores who will add to the economic and cultural growth of this region upon graduation. We also have a goal of becoming a university that offers graduate degrees that address the real issues of local industries and their employees.