

October 3, 2012

Donning the Cap and Gown: A Needs Assessment of KU's Graduation Rates

Defining the Problem

America's colleges and universities are in the business of the intangible. Although they produce educators, citizens, and leaders, the process and effect of education often depends upon who is setting the terms. Over the past several years, the administration of the University of Kansas has instigated a push to "graduate in four [years]." Producing class t-shirts, banners, and paraphernalia, KU has subtly encouraged its undergraduates to head for the proverbial door in a timely manner. Overall, this institution currently posts a 32.4% four-year graduation rate and a 60.7% six-year graduation rate (Office of Institutional Research and Planning, 2012). Nationally, about 58% of first-time, full-time students at four-year institutions complete a bachelor's degree at that same institution within six years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Considering KU's six-year, overall graduation rate is roughly 1.3% higher than the national average, it would seem that there is reason for celebration. Upon further investigation however, there are notable differences in completion rates amongst specific groups of students.

From ACT score to gender, from residency status to ethnicity, students at the University of Kansas can be sorted and classified into a variety of clusters. In order to form a clear definition of the problem, statistics following the freshman class of 2005 will be used. For this group, 26% of males completed their degrees within four years, compared to 38.5% of females. By the time year six rolled around, 58% of males and 63.3% of females graduated. With respect to residency, full-time students, whether in-state or out-of-state, tend to graduate at nearly

identical rates. For minority undergraduates, those students identifying as American Indian/Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Black, Hispanic, or Biracial, both four-year and six-year graduation rates fall far below the institutional average. For the freshman class of 2005, 18.5% graduated in four years and 45.3% in six years (OIRP, 2012).

Academically, students with different ACT (or SAT converted) scores graduate at varying rates. For KU attendees reporting above a 30, 50.4% of students graduated in four years, 77.4% in six. Of the 28 to 30 bracket, 42.5% of the freshmen class of 2005 graduated at year four, and 62.7% by year six. Consistent with the downward trend, students with an ACT score of 24 to 27, graduated at 33.6% and 62.7% respectively. The 21 to 23 bracket graduates at a rate of 26.3% in four years and 55.9% in six years. The largest dip in graduation numbers comes between the 21 to 23 and 17 to 20 categories. Only 17.8% of those reporting a score between 17 and 20 finish their degrees in four years, 42.6% in six. Lastly, those students scoring less than 16 finish in four years at a rate of 11% and in six years at a rate of 34.2%. Interestingly enough, this six-year graduation rate mirrors KU's overall four-year graduation rate (OIRP, 2012).

Estimating the Size and the Nature of the Problem

Although there are inequalities amongst many of the demographic groups, a few types of students seem to be more at-risk than others. Most notably, the graduation rates of minority students are roughly 13.9% (for four years) and 15.4% (for six years) less than the corresponding rates of the KU student body as a whole (OIRP, 2012). As stated by the Office of Diversity and Equity (2011), the University of Kansas "is committed to an open, diverse and inclusive learning and working environment that nurtures the growth and development of all. KU holds steadfast in the belief that an array of values, interests, experiences, and intellectual and cultural viewpoints

enrich learning and our workplace.” Additionally, according to KU’s Enrollment Management Department (2012), the institution must reach a six-year graduation rate of 70%. If, however, minority students are completing their degrees at such a low rate, how will KU live up to both of these commitments?

With respect to ACT scores, students clearly graduate in lesser numbers as their respective scores decrease. This positive correlation should cause KU faculty and staff to reassess admissions policies, developmental courses, and support services. In fact, the only group close to meeting Enrollment Management’s six-year graduation rate goal was students who scored over a 30. Of the incoming class of 2005, only students with scores above 24 were on-point with current graduation trends (OIRP, 2012). Based on the assumption that the University of Kansas values diversity and wants to be competitive with peer institutions, it would behoove KU to consider both direct and indirect targets to more fully understand this problem. (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004).

Describing the Target Population

As referenced above, students with ACT scores less than 24 and/or of minority status are less likely to graduate in four years from the University of Kansas. Academically, students who report lower standardized test scores are asked to jump through a variety of hoops, like developmental courses and conditional admit restrictions. These students are often less prepared for the rigor and workload of collegiate-level classes. Smaller in number, minority undergraduates do not have the same opportunity as non-minority undergraduates to build camaraderie with students of their same race and culture. Schlossberg (1989) unpacked the concepts of mattering and marginality, connecting these factors to a college student’s feeling of

What was
240 of
the class
was scores
over
30?
about 10%

belonging. "Often, feeling marginal leads us to conclude that we do not matter or confuses us about the group to which we do" (p. 3).

Indirectly linked to the graduation quandary, staff, faculty, and institutional leaders also play a part in the problem and, ideally, the solution. Professors teach the classes these students attend. Staff members advise, recruit, and assist these students. Institutional leaders craft the policies that dictate whether or not these students receive aid, get admitted, or earn a diploma. Key representatives from these indirect targets would provide indispensable insight into the problem at hand--one which significantly affects institutional prestige and job security.

Understanding How Targets Experience the Problem

In order to turn the tide and increase graduation rates, the University of Kansas can take a few practical steps before implementing changes. First, it would benefit KU to dive into the educational literature base devoted to college impact and graduation. The purpose of this step is two fold: both to identify ways to frame assessment questions and also to explore potential solutions to the problem. By discovering barriers to student involvement and achievement, the institution could build an informed basis for further investigation. Key stakeholders could then survey the current campus climate, especially targeting students with low ACT scores and/or of minority status. For example, students in developmental courses could be given surveys, assessing their experience with the class and KU in general. If specific questions are modeled after national assessments, like the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), results could be aggregated with national and institutional averages.

While minority students could also be surveyed for fit and satisfaction, it would be interesting to work with the Office of Multicultural Affairs to arrange focus groups of students,

What
Additional
data
would you
collect on
this group

Great

comprised of individuals who are both doing well academically and struggling academically, to better understand the barriers to student success and graduation. Also, staff and faculty from key areas could be tapped for their impressions of admission policies, graduation requirements, and institutional curriculum. This process could either take place in a focus group setting or in interpersonal, one-on-one interviews. For a more concrete analysis, KU could work with the Registrar's Office and the Undergraduate Advising Center to identify what courses tend to produce low grades or "slow down" the graduation process.

By collecting both quantitative and qualitative data, the University of Kansas could build a solid case to warrant purposeful action. Based on the information collected, a variety of "flags" could be identified: the nature of student motivation, courses students struggle in, gaps in admission policies, or other factors. Whether the proof comes in the form of statistical correlations or personal testimonials, the more focused KU is on how targets experience the problem, the more effective the corresponding solution will be.

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