
Doctoral Benchmarking Project Definition and Roadmap

Problem statement

Doctoral granting institutions currently lack a simple method to benchmark retention and graduation rates for doctoral programs. Doctoral graduation rates are a key quality measure and they are increasingly important in the external environment.

Detail

At the doctoral level, there are neither industry-wide graduation rate calculation definitions nor industry-wide published graduation rates. Most institutions do not publish doctoral graduation rates or definitions. Institutions that do publish these do not use a standard definition. At the bachelors' level, IPEDS (Dept of Education) has a standard set of definitions and metrics for calculating retention and graduation rates. These standards are neither applicable for nor reported on by institutions for other degree levels. Voluntary metrics efforts also focus on bachelors' degrees. The Council for Graduate Studies' PhD Completion project of 2004-2008 is the most thorough recent research for doctoral programs, and that effort is limited to PhD only and is now dated, representing cohorts from 1992-2004.

Project Requirements

To benchmark retention and graduation rates for doctoral programs, requirements include:

- Third party vendor, for maximum credibility
- Shared costs among participating institutions
- Shared definitions and calculations of graduation rates among all institutions
- Low burden of data delivery
- Attention to key characteristics, including demographic, program, and financial aid data
- Programs and institutions selected for benchmarking have doctoral programs that serve part-time learners in similar fields as institutions already involved
- Data delivered by third-party will include de-identified benchmarks for retention and graduation rates by program, with custom de-identified analyses available. Institutions will only have access to their own data.

Project Proposal

We are seeking institutions that offer similar doctoral programs serving part-time learners to join in a collaborative effort to formulate shared definitions to benchmark doctoral retention and graduation rates. NORC at the University of Chicago will be the third-party to collect, normalize, and present benchmarked data. Participating institutions will share the costs.

Who is invited?

Any institution of higher education with doctoral programs that serve part-time, adult learners is invited to participate.

Why is Capella University initiating this work?

- Capella University primarily serves graduate students, with about 26% doctoral enrollment (and about 46% masters).
- Capella University also has a long-standing commitment to transparency of outcomes, such as the [Transparency by Design](#) efforts of 2008-2009 as showcased on capellaresults.com.

Why NORC as the third-party?

- NORC has long and deep expertise in data collection, research, and analytics, including expertise in higher education. They currently conduct the Survey of Earned Doctorates (for the NSF, NIH, DoE, NEH, USDA, and NASA) and the NSF Survey of Doctorate Recipients. They have recently launched the [Higher Education Analytics Center](#), with particular interest in career and professional pathways for graduate degree holders.
- The [NORC Data Enclave](#) is an existing tool that can house, archive, curate, and index individual institutions' data in a protected, secure environment. Remote and onsite secure access allows:
- NORC's researchers will normalize and benchmark retention rates and graduation rates, as well as offer custom analyses for interested participating institutions.
- Institutional representatives can run their own analyses, with output that meets agreed-upon disclosure standards. No institution will have direct access to any other institution's microdata.

Timeline and Roadmap

We would like to begin this work by the start of May, 2017, with completion of the first benchmarks by July, 2017. Assuming early success with retention and graduation rates, we plan to initiate a phase two and consider employment outcomes, such as employment in field of study.

Working list of metrics for benchmarking

- Working definitions of retention rates
 - First year retention: Retention from census of first term to end of first calendar year
 - Retention to end of coursework: Retention from census of first term to end of coursework phase of program
 - Retention to comprehensive/qualifying exams pass: Retention from census of first term to successful pass of comprehensive exams
 - Retention to dissertation proposal pass: Retention from census of first term to successful pass of dissertation proposal
- Working definitions of graduation rates
 - 6-year graduation rate: Graduation from census of first term to end of six calendar years
 - 7-year graduation rate: Graduation from census of first term to end of seven calendar years
 - 8-year graduation rate: Graduation from census of first term to end of eight calendar years
 - 10-year graduation rate: Graduation from census of first term to end of ten calendar years
- Covariates for consideration
 - Program
 - Gender, race/ethnicity, age bracket
 - First generation
 - Incoming financial aid debt
 - Primarily online vs. primarily face-to-face

Contact information

Please contact Laura Fingerson, Institutional Effectiveness at Capella University, for more information.

laura.fingerson@capella.edu, 612-977-5384