A recent op-ed piece in the Herald ("OUR VIEW: Getting the right advice keeps young in school," 9/30/09) lamented the increasing number of students who take six years to complete a “four-year degree.” That same editorial reported six-year graduation rates at Connecticut’s public universities ranging from 38% to 76%. While we should not be satisfied with these graduation rates, these statistics are not nearly as troubling as the Herald suggests.

The “six-year graduation rate,” which is the national benchmark for all postsecondary institutions, records only students who enter as full-time freshmen and graduate from the same institution within six years. If a student transfers to another college and graduates from the second, that individual is not counted in either institution’s graduation rate. Last year, 47% of CCSU’s bachelor’s degrees were awarded to students who transferred from another institution, but none are counted in CCSU’s graduation rate.

The graduation rates at Connecticut’s public universities are similar to those of comparable public institutions in other states, because we share a common mission of providing access to higher education for a broad cross section of our population, many of whom do not meet admission standards and cannot afford tuition at more selective institutions. Many public university students do not fit the stereotype of 18-to-21-year-olds who can immerse themselves in college life for four years. Our student body includes many working adults with external responsibilities, many first-generation students and commuters, many without a declared major, and many who did not graduate in the top half of their high-school class. For some of these students, completing college in four years may not be a reasonable expectation.

Initiatives such as these do help more students complete their degrees. By making graduation a strategic priority, CCSU has increased its six-year graduation rate from 40% in 2005-06 to 49% in 2008-09. Last year, CCSU awarded more bachelor’s degrees than in any previous year. Encouraging increases in the number of continuing students this year suggest that even more students will persist to graduation.