What Graduation Rates Mean
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At this time of year, when commencement ceremonies are in the news, someone invariably comments about low graduation rates at some public institutions. A recent newspaper article noted that only four out of ten students who began their education at Central Connecticut State University had graduated within six years. We at CCSU share the reporter’s concern about this statistic.

While graduation rates are certainly an important measure of an institution’s effectiveness, the public should understand that this rate answers only one question: How many students who enrolled at their first university as full-time students graduated from that same institution within six years?

Not included in the graduation rate are students who transfer from another institution and then graduate, yet many transfer students complete their degrees each year at CCSU. Last year, transfer students comprised 41% of our graduating class.

Likewise, students who began their studies as part-time students are excluded from the graduation rate, even if they become full-time students and graduate. At CCSU, one third of the students attend part time. Also excluded are full-time students who take longer than six years to complete their degrees, yet we know that 30% of the students who started at CCSU as full-time students six years ago have either graduated from another institution or are still enrolled at CCSU or another college. The graduation rate tells only part of the story, and it overlooks some of the students that our state universities are designed to serve.

Institutions with large numbers of commuters and employed students tend to have lower graduation rates. Nearly 80% of CCSU’s students are commuters, and over 50% of our seniors work over 20 hours per week. Many of our students simply cannot afford to make an exclusive commitment to college, but many students who started out at CCSU persist to complete their degrees at their own pace, in as many years as it takes. A speaker at this year’s CCSU commencement asked the students who had completed their degrees in four years to stand; only about one third stood up.

Still, CCSU remains deeply committed to improving its six-year graduation rate. Comparable institutions typically have graduation rates closer to 50%. To address the issue, we have made increasing our graduation rate one of our top strategic priorities, and we have established a Retention and Graduation Council to learn why students fail to complete their degrees at CCSU and to recommend ways to help our students succeed. Several new initiatives are underway, including a program to help first-semester students overcome academic difficulties and a comprehensive plan to improve academic advising.

Although it is too soon to gauge the impact of these new programs, we are encouraged. Our graduation rate increased from 40% in 2006 to 44% in 2007. We have more work to do, but we are on our way to increasing that number to 50% within four years.