

# The Pell Partnership:

## Ensuring a Shared Responsibility for Low-Income Student Success

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### METHODS AND DATA COLLECTION

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The data discussed in this report — and available on The Education Trust’s website ([www.edtrust.org/resource/pellgradrates](http://www.edtrust.org/resource/pellgradrates)) — were gathered through a yearlong data collection effort. Data were collected from four primary sources:

- State higher education systems and coordinating bodies,
- Colleges and universities across the nation,
- *U.S. News and World Report*, and
- The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

Since the federal government doesn’t require institutions to report graduation rates for Pell Grant recipients, there are no federally defined standards that detail how a Pell graduation cohort should be identified. For this report, we asked colleges to report the six-year graduation rates for students that received Pell Grants that were in their first-time, full-time IPEDS graduation rate cohorts. More details on the specific definition can be found in *Appendix A*.

The data collection plan consisted of three distinct strategies. First, data collection templates were sent to the chief executive officers of the National Association of System Heads and various other higher education state systems and coordinating agencies. These collection templates asked for each system to report:

- The number of first-time, full-time bachelor’s degree-seeking students that received a Pell Grant in the 2005, 2006, and 2007 entry cohort for each institution with an IPEDS ID in their system, and
- The number of those students in each cohort that received a bachelor’s degree within six years for each institution in their system.

These respondents were asked to identify Pell Grant recipients and graduates from the same cohort used in their IPEDS submissions. Systems were also provided the option to report similar data for the entire 2005, 2006, and 2007 first-time, full-time bachelor’s degree-seeking cohort. The instructions on the template indicated that this information would be downloaded from IPEDS if it were not provided.

The components (i.e., numerator and denominator) of the Pell graduation rate and the institution’s overall graduation rate were used to construct the graduation rate for the non-Pell Grant

students at those institutions. This calculation enabled us to compare the completion gaps between the Pell and non-Pell recipient groups at each campus.

Second, Pell Grant graduation rate data for many institutions were licensed from *U.S. News and World Report*. The *U.S. News* data set allowed us to acquire Pell graduation rate data for many institutions, specifically private institutions that were not included in the collection from the systems and coordinating agencies. Also included in the *U.S. News* data set were data for institutions whose information we had already collected from the systems and coordinating agencies. As a data quality assurance measure, we compared these figures and made attempts to reconcile any data discrepancies. If we couldn’t reconcile the discrepancies, we relied on the data provided directly to us by the systems or coordinating bodies. Again, we combined the *U.S. News* data with the IPEDS graduation rate data to construct a completion rate for the non-Pell Grant students, which was used to assess gaps in completion at each campus.

Third, an electronic survey was sent directly to college and university presidents and/or the chief data administrators for institutions whose data had not been obtained from systems and coordinating agencies or through *U.S. News*. The survey asked institutions to report the same data that was requested from the systems and coordinating agencies using the collection template previously mentioned. If institutions did not provide data for their overall graduation rate cohort, it was gathered from IPEDS in order to construct the non-Pell graduation rate.

The collection efforts allowed us to acquire Pell Grant graduation rate data for 1,149 of the 1,500 public and private nonprofit colleges and universities that were targeted.<sup>1</sup> The 1,500 institutions in *College Results Online* database that fit the following criteria constituted the target population of institutions for this project:<sup>2</sup>

- Four-year public or private nonprofit,
- Title IV, bachelor’s degree-granting,
- Located in the 50 states or Washington D.C.,
- Active in the 2007-08 and 2012-13 academic terms,
- Reported a 2012-13 graduation rate in IPEDS, and
- Enrolled first-time, full-time undergraduates in fall 2007 and fall 2012.

These 1,500 institutions represent roughly 85 percent of the 2007-08 degree-seeking Pell recipient cohort at all public and private nonprofit Title IV-receiving institutions in the 50 states and Washington D.C. As shown in Table 1, the sample of 1,149 institutions closely represents the 1,500 institutions we hoped to include in the study. We acquired data from 76 percent of the institutions we surveyed, with a higher representation of public institutions in the sample. Private institutions are underrepresented in our sample, and institutions that shared their data with us tended to be slightly larger and more selective than the population of institutions we surveyed. This should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Table 1: Target Population and Sample Descriptors

	Target Population	Sample	Sample as a Percentage of the Population
Total Institutions	1,500	1,149	76%
Public Institutions	561	505	90%
Private Nonprofit Institutions	939	644	68%
Average SAT	1,064	1,078	N/A
Average Undergraduate FTE	4,903	5,714	N/A
Total Pell \$ Received (2007/08)	\$6,078,370,312	\$5,210,978,802	86%
# FTFT Pell Recipients (2007/08)	360,135	301,304	84%
Total FTE Undergrads(2012/13)	7,350,194	6,417,303	87%
# FTFT Students (2012/13)	1,373,509	1,209,620	88%
# FTFT URM Students (2012/13)	332,343	285,671	86%

Note: Full-time equivalent (FTE); first-time, first-time (FTFT); Underrepresented minority (URM)

## Limitations

Although our study is fairly comprehensive, it does not include private for-profit colleges. Data from for-profit institutions were excluded for two reasons. First, we thought it would be difficult to entice for-profits to provide us with their data, given their subpar track record on student success.<sup>3</sup> According to data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) Longitudinal Study, the bachelor's degree completion rates for Pell Grant recipients at four-year, for-profit institutions is roughly 14 percent.<sup>4</sup> Second, for-profit enrollments are declining and they serve much fewer first-time, full-time students than they did several years ago.<sup>5</sup> While for-profit institutions enrolled one-fifth of all first-time, full-time Pell Grant recipients in 2007-08, these institutions only enrolled 11 percent of these students in 2012-13.<sup>6</sup> Much of this decline may be the result of the negative attention and scrutiny bad actors in this sector have received and the expansion of employment opportunities brought on by the nation's economic recovery. If we commit to gathering Pell Grant data again in the future, Ed Trust hopes to incorporate for-profit institutions in the collection.

Another limitation of this study involves the method we used to calculate the completion gap between Pell and non-Pell students at some institutions. For some colleges, we had to use the Pell Grant graduation rate data licensed from *U.S. News and World Report* and the overall graduation rate data downloaded from IPEDS to calculate the completion gap. Using two different data sources is not ideal, but the data definitions used by *U.S. News and World Report* are based on the Common Data Set, which are identical to the IPEDS Graduation Rate Survey definitions. In most cases, the overall graduation rate cohort reported to *U.S. News and World Report* and IPEDS should be very close. However, there could be small discrepancies because the data was submitted at different times, as data are often updated and modified to reflect changes in student records.

To assess the extent of this problem, data quality checks were conducted. For each institution, we were able to calculate a percent of Pell Grant recipients among first-time, full-time students using both sources and compare that data point to the IPEDS data that was submitted by each institution for the percent of Pell Grant recipients among first-time, full-time students in the financial aid cohort. In some cases, this information matched identically or was off a negligible amount. However, in some cases this was off considerably, calling into question the accuracy of self-reported data. Ideally we would have licensed overall graduation rate data that was submitted to *U.S. News and World Report* by the institutions, but our budget limitations eliminated this option.

## NOTES

1. A few higher education systems and coordinating agencies submitted aggregated data that included information for multiple campuses. Although Pell Grant graduation rate data representing 1,149 institutions were collected, only 1,124 separate submissions that could be linked to unique IPEDS identification numbers were received.
2. Carnegie special institutions (2010) — such as medical schools and medical centers; other health profession schools; schools of engineering; schools of art, music, and design; schools of law; other special-focus institutions; and theological schools — were excluded from the study.
3. Mamie Lynch, Jennifer Engle and José L. Cruz, *Subprime Opportunity: The Unfulfilled Promise of For-Profit Colleges and Universities* (Washington, D.C.: The Education Trust, 2010), <http://edtrust.org/resource/subprime-opportunity-the-unfulfilled-promise-of-for-profit-colleges-and-universities/>
4. Ed Trust analysis of U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003-04 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, Second Follow-up (BPS:04/09).
5. Doug Lederman, "The Shrinking Sector," *Inside Higher Ed*, July 24, 2015, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/07/24/number-profit-colleges-declines-enrollments-wither>
6. IPEDS, Student Financial Aid component, 2007-08 and 2012-13