



Graduation not adequate measure of student success

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“The Obama administration is planning new executive action on higher education accreditation in the coming weeks,” notes Michael Stratford in an article posted October 20 at Inside Higher Education. The goal of this mandate will be to “make accreditors focus more heavily on student outcomes when judging colleges and universities.”

The enhanced criteria to assess higher education will undoubtedly include graduation rates. While the number of students a college or university is able to get to commencement is obviously important, it is not the best – or even the most desirable – measure of an institution’s inherent value.

The number of students retained to graduation does not signify whether colleges and universities are productively meeting their obligation to society. Whether those students are able to acquire and succeed in jobs related to their majors once they graduate is the only real measure of effectiveness.

There are only two ways to ultimately gauge the efficacy of higher education. First, institutions must be able to demonstrate conclusively that those who earn a degree in a given field are capable of performing the duties and responsibilities associated with jobs requiring that credential.

Second, employers who hire an institution’s graduates must appreciate the knowledge and skills they have acquired and be willing to compensate them in a way that is commensurate with the investment they made to acquire those competencies. Most lenders expect their loans to be repaid.

To reiterate, if you want to hold higher education truly accountable, tie financial support to placement rates in addition to graduation rates.

Accreditation would be irrelevant if institutions would simply restore the integrity of the grading process; i.e., if employers saw grades (and diplomas) as an accurate and realistic representation of the extent to which knowledge and skills had been mastered.

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