

Highlights of [GAO-03-568](#), a report to the Ranking Minority Members, Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, United States Senate, and Committee on Education and the Workforce, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Because of concerns that not enough students who start college are completing a bachelor's degree, we examined (1) the extent to which students who enroll in a 4-year college complete a bachelor's degree and identify the factors that affect completion; (2) what states and 4-year colleges and universities are doing to foster bachelor's degree completion; and (3) what the Department of Education (Education) is doing to foster degree completion.

What GAO Recommends

As Education moves forward with its plan to hold colleges and universities accountable for their performance in graduating their students, GAO recommends that the Secretary of Education

- consider multiple measures that would help account for the other goals of higher education and differences among colleges and
- take steps to identify and disseminate information about promising practices in the areas of retention and graduation.

Education agreed with GAO's recommendations, but expressed concerns with some aspects of the report. Among other things, Education was concerned with the scope of GAO's review and said that, for example, GAO should have included information on graduation rate trends; however, its suggested data would not be comparable for these purposes.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-568.

To view the full report, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Cornelia M. Ashby at (202) 512-8403 or ashbyc@gao.gov.

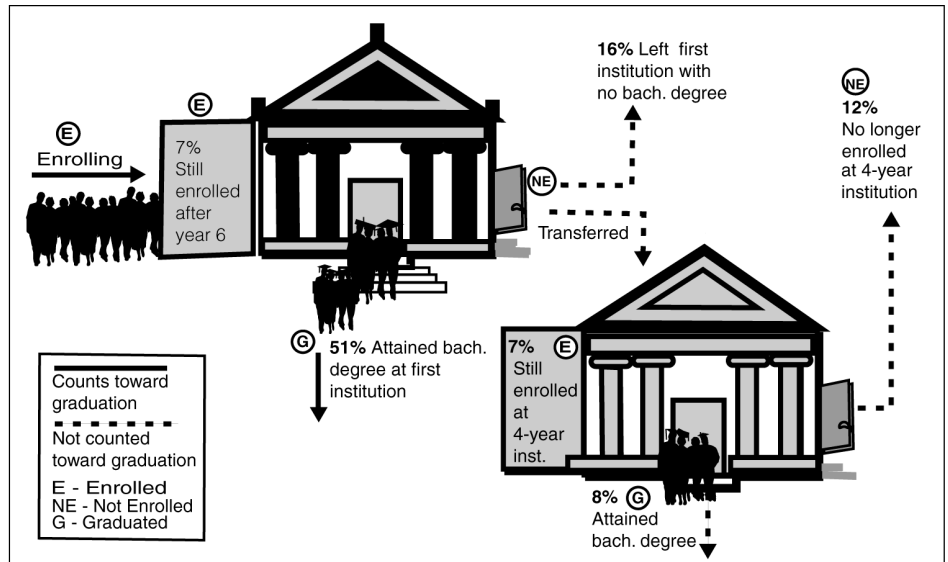
COLLEGE COMPLETION

Additional Efforts Could Help Education With Its Completion Goals

What GAO Found

More than half of all students who enrolled in a 4-year college completed a bachelor's degree within 6 years. Students were less likely to complete if neither parent had completed a degree, they were black, they worked 20 or more hours per week, or they transferred to another college. Students had a greater likelihood of completing if they were continuously enrolled, attended full-time, or had more rigorous high school curriculum. After controlling for other factors, GAO found that disadvantaged students were no less likely to complete a degree than other students. However, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to attend college in the first place.

Status of Students 6 Years after Beginning in 1995-96 at a 4-Year Institution



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Education data.

States are beginning to hold colleges accountable for retaining and graduating their students, and Education has been discussing this with the higher education community. Many states are publishing retention and graduation rates for their colleges, and some have tied performance in these areas to funding. According to Education, providing information on colleges' retention and graduation performance can help prospective students make informed decisions. However, the measure used by Education may not fully reflect an institution's performance because institutional goals and missions are not captured in the measure. In its strategic plan, Education has identified goals to reduce gaps in college completion and increase overall completion. It also has some evaluation and dissemination efforts related to retention and completion, however, these efforts do not systematically identify and disseminate promising retention and graduation practices to help states and institutions.