



# Success-Focused College Counseling

Five Steps to Improve Students' Choice of Postsecondary Institution

## **This Step-by-Step Guide Will Help Users:**

- Better understand the importance of college graduation rates to each student's choice of postsecondary institution
- Collect and analyze data on their student's postsecondary outcomes
- Learn how to leverage college outcomes data to influence student's college choice

# The Overlooked Importance of Graduation Rates

## Institutional Success Rates a Critical Factor for Students to Consider

### The World of Higher Education is Bigger than Ever

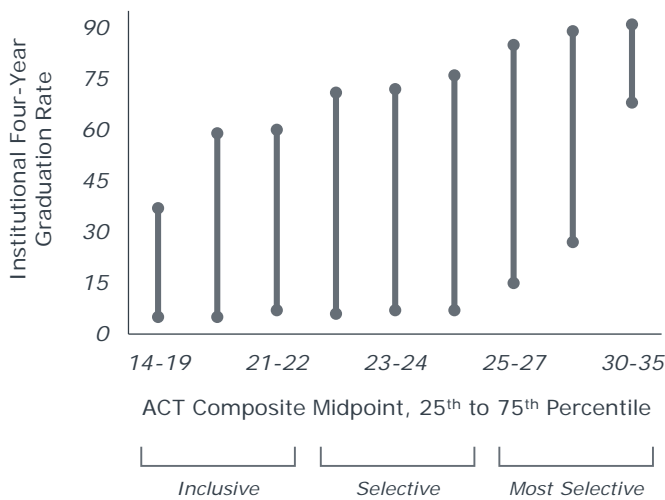
Over the last few decades, the world of higher education has grown to include thousands of institutions and programs. As more students than ever are choosing to pursue higher education, the number of options they have has grown exponentially.

However, this has made the choice of a postsecondary institution a very complex process. Students, families, and college counselors have to filter through multiple data points to find the right school, and have to consider each individual student's abilities, needs, and preferences.



### Data on Outcomes Reveals Dramatic Variation Between Individual Schools

4-yr Graduation Rates by Institutional Selectivity; n=1,105



How should students choose a postsecondary institution? Most students and counselors look at metrics such as cost, location, or selectivity. The latter is indeed a great indicator of school quality: more selective schools are shown to deliver better outcomes for their students.

But selectivity can mask huge variations between schools. This graph depicts the relationship between school selectivity, defined by the average ACT score of its students, and graduation rates. Within a selectivity band, graduation rates can vary from <10% to >75%.

This dramatic variation means that schools with similar applicant and student characteristics can exhibit vastly different outcomes. Students ultimately need to consider more than just selectivity to find a best-fit institution.

### Averages May Mask Critical Group Differences

#### A Tale of Three Colleges

	College A	College B	College C
<b>Selectivity Metrics:</b>			
Acceptance Rate	59%	59%	75%
SAT 25 <sup>th</sup> -75 <sup>th</sup> Percentiles	960-1080	1000-1180	820-1020
HS GPA	3.3	3.2	3.2
<b>Student Success Metrics:</b>			
Six-Year Graduation Rate	53%	43%	52%
URM <sup>1</sup> Six-Year Graduation Rate	56%	42%	40%

#### Devil in the Details

Despite similar overall student success outcomes, URM students experience a **16-point spread in graduation rates**

Finally, looking at overall graduation rates alone may not be sufficient to effectively direct students to schools that will best serve them in the long run.

For example, the three institutions listed here have a similar applicant profile and similar overall graduation rates.

However, when looking specifically at the graduation rate for underrepresented minority students, there is a stark difference between the outcomes for each school.

Similar differences may exist along other demographic characteristics, such as income, gender, or parents' level of education.

This additional and more nuanced level of detail on student outcomes may alter the assessment of which institution is the better choice for any individual student.

# A Critical Way to Improve College Counseling

## Five Steps to Improve Students' Choice of Postsecondary Institution

Schools seeking to develop a more effective college choice support system focused on long-term student success can use this guide to implement a simple, low-resource solution based on publicly available data and easily adoptable high school counseling practices.

The following pages provide a detailed outline of each of the steps described below.

1

### Find Out Where Your Students Are Going to College

- Create a list of the colleges and universities your graduates most frequently attend
- Limit list to most frequently attended 30-40 schools to keep manageable
- Update list annually to adjust to changing student preferences



2

### Gather Data on Each College or University's Graduation Rates

- Utilize the US Department of Education's College Navigator (*free*)
- Use EdTrust's Pell Graduation Rate Data Tool (*free*)
- If financially feasible, use NSC's<sup>1</sup> StudentTracker Tool (*optional, fee associated*)



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### Divide Institutions into Lists Based on "Student Success"

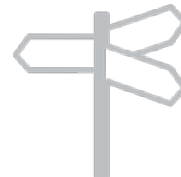
- Pick a cutoff graduation rate and divide universities into a "high-success" and a "low-success" list, according to their graduation rate
- If available, use the most local data you have access to, such as your own students' historical outcomes at each postsecondary institution



4

### Develop Institutional "Nudging" Mechanisms

- Adopt policies to encourage students to attend schools with higher graduation rates and avoid those where students are less likely to succeed



5

### Change the College Choice Conversation

- Educate counselors on appropriately using the lists
- Use lists to guide college choice conversations with students and families





## Step #1: Find Out Where Your Students Are Going to College

### Description

➤ **Create a list of the institutions your graduates most frequently attend**

Use National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) data if your district already partners with the NSC, and/or collect survey data from counselors, accepted seniors, and alumni to create a comprehensive list.

➤ **Keep list manageable and update regularly**

Adjust list size according to the number of students in your district to keep it manageable (we recommend the 30-40 most commonly attended schools to start with). Update and refine list annually to ensure it accurately reflects students' choices.

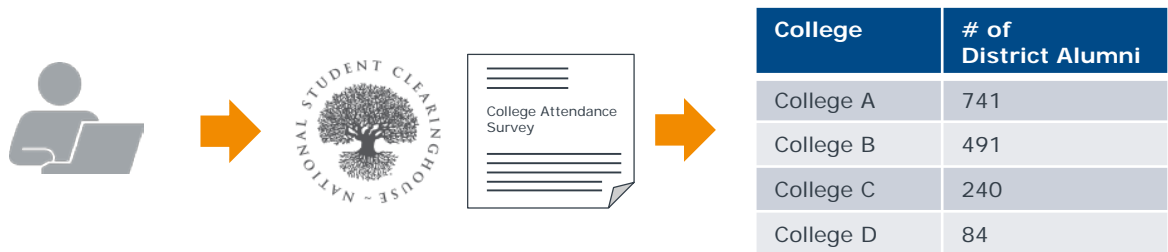
### Time Needed

- Minimal, several hours to compile data

### Required Investment

- Cost of NSC membership (*optional*)
- Minimal costs to distribute survey and collect data

## Simple Process to Develop a Robust Data Set



### Key Points

- ❖ The vast majority of your students attend a limited number of schools, usually local and regional public and private institutions.
- ❖ Districts need a good understanding of where their students are already going before focusing resources on better supporting their choices.
- ❖ The NSC provides an annual breakdown of the most popular postsecondary institutions for each district's alumni. If you have an NSC partnership, you can use that list as a basis to create your own.
- ❖ Having an NSC partnership is helpful, but not necessary. Districts can use exit or alumni surveys, or collect individual lists from college counselors to complement or substitute NSC data.
- ❖ Neither source of information is perfect – NSC data does not capture every student or institution, and surveys tend to have a low response rate. But even imperfect data would capture the main schools your students are attending and help you develop a list.



## Step #2: Gather Data on Each School's Graduation Rates

### Description

- **Use the US Department of Education's College Navigator** (*free*)  
Populate college list with each institution's average graduation rates, as well as graduation rates by race/ethnicity and gender.
- **Use EdTrust's Pell Graduation Rate Data Tool** (*free*)  
Add graduation rates for low-income students.
- **If financially feasible, use NSC's StudentTracker Tool** (*optional, fee associated*)  
Incorporate specific data on the outcomes of your own alumni in postsecondary education.

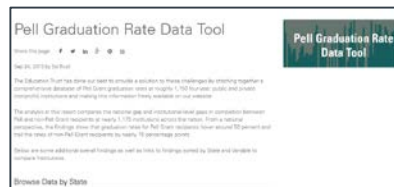
### Time Needed

- Minimal, several hours to compile data

### Required Investment

- Cost of NSC StudentTracker tool (optional)

## Recommended Tools to Use



## Key Points

- ❖ Once districts compile the list of most attended schools, they can then begin obtaining graduation rate information for each school. We recommend using three tools to do so.
- ❖ **College Navigator (US Department of Education)**  
While the interface is not always intuitive, it allows districts to use federal data to check graduation rates for students by their race/ethnicity, gender, and time to obtain a degree.
  - **How to use:** Type an institution name in the search bar, then scroll down to "Retention and Graduation Rates" and focus on the 3-year Associate's and and 6-year Bachelor's degree attainment rates: aggregate, by gender, and by race/ethnicity.
- ❖ **Pell Graduation Rate Data Tool (EdTrust)**  
Allows districts to check the graduation rates for Pell vs. Non-Pell grant recipient students. Districts can assess the support systems of each college by focusing on both the Pell graduation rate and the gap between Pell and Non-Pell student graduation rates.
  - **How to use:** Choose a state, then select each institution and note both its Pell graduation rate and the completion gap between Pell and Non-Pell students.
- ❖ **StudentTracker Tool (NSC)**  
Allows districts to obtain information on the specific outcomes of their alumni in post-secondary education. It can provide an excellent supplement to publicly available sources, but is not necessary for a district to begin helping students make smarter choices.



## Step #3: Divide Institutions into Lists Based on “Student Success”

### Description

- **Pick a cutoff graduation rate and divide universities into a “high-success” and a “low-success” list, according to their graduation rate**

Good benchmarks to use are the national average 3-year completion rate at 2-year institutions (29%) and 6-year completion rate at 4-year institutions (59%). However, you may want to pick a higher or lower cutoff, depending on your own student population.

- **If available, use the most local data you have access to, such as your own students’ historical outcomes at each postsecondary institution**

Use NSC StudentTracker data as your main indicator. However, make sure the number of students in your sample is large enough to draw meaningful conclusions ( $n > 20$  over the last 2 years). If  $n$  is lower or if no NSC data is available, then use national data.


### Time Needed

- Minimal, several hours to divide and organize lists.


### Required Investment

- None.

## Sample Ways to Organize Your Lists

“High Success” List 			
College	Avg. Grad Rate	Minority Grad Rate	District Grad Rate
College A	81%	79%	84%
College B	74%	70%	76%
College C	69%	64%	72%

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“Low Success” List 			
College	Avg. Grad Rate	Minority Grad Rate	District Grad Rate
College D	46%	43%	49%
College E	39%	33%	39%
College F	30%	27%	31%

Cutoff Rate

### Key Points

- ❖ Start by targeting a graduation rate benchmark—a rate that divides schools where students are more likely to succeed from ones where they aren’t. Schools above that rate should be put on a “High Success” list, while schools below the rate should be grouped into a “Low Success” list.
  - The average national 3-year graduation rate at community colleges is 29% (2015).
  - The average national 6-year graduation rate at 4-year institutions is 59% (2015).
  - Most districts are likely to prefer higher or lower cutoff graduation rates than the national averages, depending on the specifics of their own student body.
- ❖ Lists should also highlight graduation rates for low-income and underrepresented minority students, since those rates could differ significantly from the average graduation rate at each school. Furthermore, they can also reveal wide variations between schools. Use EdTrust and College Navigator to guide your choice of data.



## Step #4: Develop Institutional “Nudging” Mechanisms

### Description

- **Adopt policies to encourage students to attend schools with higher graduation rates and avoid those where students are less likely to succeed**

Create institutional incentives and disincentives for counselors and students to interact with institutions on each list. Direct funds, attention, time, and resources to provide more exposure for high-success schools and less exposure for low-success ones. This includes funding/de-funding field trips, visits, promoting interactions, seeking partnerships, etc.

### Time Needed

- Minimal time to devise institutional strategy.
- Continuous effort to ensure schools are adhering to the adopted message.

### Required Investment

- No additional investment, but may require some diversion of resources towards more interactions with high-success schools.

## Sample Tactics to Adopt for Schools on Each List

### “High Success” List

- Proactively encourage students to consider schools
- Fund field trips, admission nights, and counselor visits
- Contact colleges to gain detailed information on application process and financial aid options

### “Low Success” List

- Discourage (but do not prevent) students from applying to schools
- Withhold funding for trips, visits, college events
- Do not invite schools to district-organized information and recruitment sessions

## Key Points

- ❖ Adopting institution-wide tactics that guide interaction with different schools is critical. These tactics send a message to both students and counselors that the district is committed to supporting students in making smarter college choices.
- ❖ There are two types of tactics to employ, relating to the schools on each list. The goal is to increase or limit both student and counselor exposure to a certain school, without prohibiting interactions or forcing choices.
  - Encouraging and sponsoring field trips and college visits, as well as welcoming representatives from high-success schools underscores the message that students should strive to attend these schools.
  - Conversely, **not** funding organized interactions with low-success schools limits student and counselor exposure to those schools and ensures fewer students are likely to apply to and attend them.



## Step #5: Change the College Choice Conversation

### Description

#### ➤ Educate counselors on appropriately using the lists

Make sure the lists are used regularly and consistently as a tool to focus conversations with students and families on students' long-term success, and on the likelihood that various institutions would support each student in achieving their goals.

#### ➤ Use lists to guide college choice conversations with students and families

Ultimately, the lists are just another tool to provide students and families with all the information they need. While districts should have a consistent, unified message, reinforced through both conversations and actions, the lists should not be used as a controlling mechanism, but as a guide to more informed conversations.

### Time Needed

- Minimal time to educate counselors on using the lists appropriately.

### Required Investment

- None.

## Shifting from College-Centered to Student-Centered Focus

### Changing the Conversation



#### Focusing on the College

*"Which school is most likely to accept me?"*



#### Focusing on the Student

*"Which school am I most likely to graduate from?"*

### Key Points

- ❖ Parents and students are often unaware of the significant variation in graduation rates between different post-secondary institutions. When presented with data about outcomes, they often change their initial choices towards institutions with higher likelihood of student success.
- ❖ Thus, counselors should make sure to provide students and families with the best possible information and refocus the college-choice conversation from "where could the student be admitted" to "what schools would best help them graduate."
- ❖ This conversation is **not** meant to aggressively push students towards an "approved" institution. Nor is it meant to scold, control, or punish students who choose to attend a school on the low-success list. The lists simply arm counselors and families with a critically important piece of data that they need to consider in order to make an informed postsecondary choice.