

New Data Brings Daylight To The Graduation Gap In Higher Education

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It's no secret that college graduation rates in this country aren't what they should be, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds. But until recently, we had limited information about how colleges rank in terms of graduating students from limited economic means. Thanks to a push for greater data transparency, colleges' graduation rates for students from low and moderate-income families are now out in the open.

This data comes from new reporting requirements for colleges and universities that enroll students who qualify for Federal Pell Grants. [The Pell Grant program](#) awards funding to more than five million students a year with demonstrated financial need to help pay for undergraduate tuition at more than 5,400 colleges and universities across the country. More than three-quarters of Pell Grant recipients come from families that earn \$40,000 or less a year.

The Pell Grant program began in 1972, *but colleges and universities did not have to publicly report the graduation rates for their students who receive this federal tuition assistance until 2017.*

Using Pell Grant data, [The Third Way](#) published a [recent report](#) that offers insights about colleges where students from low-income backgrounds are succeeding and where they are most often exiting without a degree.

As head of a network of schools that has partnered with over 90 colleges and universities committed to increasing graduation rates for first-generation students, I wanted to offer three key observations from this Pell Grant data.

1. For Pell Grant recipients, where you go to college matters. A lot. Nationally, Pell Grant recipients have lower graduation rates than non-Pell Grant recipients. After six years, just 49 percent of all first-time, full-time Pell Grant recipients had earned a bachelor's degree at the college where they began, compared to 67 percent for non-Pell Grant recipients.

But there are some success stories. Of the schools listed in the Third Way report, 246 were identified as "high-quality Pell-Serving Institutions (PSIs)," where Pell Grant recipients make up 37 percent or more of the student population **and** have a graduation rate that is over 50 percent. Some stand out in particular: 48 schools graduate two-thirds or more of their Pell Grant recipients, which is well above the national average.

For example, at [Howard University](#), an HBCU (Historically Black College and University), 91 percent of its students receive Pell Grants and 79 percent graduate within six years. According to Howard University President Wayne Frederick, Howard achieved this result [because of an institutional commitment to need-based financial aid and focused tutoring programs.](#)

Rowan University, a KIPP College Partner in New Jersey, enrolls 37 percent Pell Grant recipients, and 66 percent graduate on time. As part of an institutional commitment to supporting students from low-income families, Rowan [created an on-campus food bank in response to student surveys that identified food insecurity as a problem among the student body.](#)

2. Some states have few colleges where Pell Grant-eligible students thrive. According to the data, some regions of the country are essentially "deserts" when it comes to finding a college that graduates a high percentage of Pell Grant recipients. Seven states (Louisiana, Alabama, Colorado, Wyoming, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Connecticut) have **no** "high-quality PSIs" and Texas has only four in the entire state of 28 million people. This is important because the majority of students end up attending college in the state where they grow up.

KIPP operates public high schools in Louisiana, Colorado, and Texas, where we see first-hand the impact of this state geographic disadvantage. Fortunately, there are public schools in these states that are defying the odds. For

example, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, with a Pell Grant graduation rate of 62 percent, provides both financial and logistical support to help low-income students persevere. CSU covers all tuition and fees for students who are eligible for Pell Grants. CSU students receive academic, socio-emotional, and housing support from a “Scholar Contact,” who helps provide interventions when students seem to be falling behind.

In Louisiana, the University of Louisiana at Lafayette (UL Lafayette) is piloting some new approaches to increase graduation rates. In partnership with the new nonprofit Belltower New Orleans, UL Lafayette provides students from low-income backgrounds with an academic advisor, financial advisor, coordinated residential experience, work study, study hall, and a success coach on campus through their Louisiana Promise Program. Critically, UL Lafayette and Belltower also provide a scholarship for these students to cover the gap in cost after their federal financial aid, Pell Grant, and [TOPS scholarships](#). As it is just a semester old, the program is still too new to see results, but the approach is very promising.

3. California public universities are setting the standard. On the other end of the spectrum, California has particularly strong public university options for students receiving Pell Grants.

Seven of the top-ten high-quality public PSIs in the country are in the Golden State. At the [University of California, Irvine](#) (UCI), a KIPP [College Partner](#), 38 percent of its students receive Pell Grants, and they graduate Pell Grant-eligible students at a rate of 85 percent. The [University of California, Los Angeles](#) (UCLA) is the number one public, high-quality PSI in the country, with 39 percent of students receiving Pell Grants, and 88 percent of Pell Grant-eligible students graduating on time. This is not far from UCLA’s graduation rate for students overall, which is over 90 percent.

What are these UC schools doing to help students from low-income families increase their chance of earning a degree? Through ideas generated by its first-generation students, UCLA has developed a dedicated dorm floor, shared dinners and social gatherings for young people so they feel support from others who understand their unique challenges and struggles.

The sense of belonging is tangible for students like Angel Aguilar, a KIPP LA Public Schools alumnus, and current UCLA sophomore, who explains, “The Community Programs Office has been my home here at UCLA. I intern there and it is my favorite place to be on campus. The office has connected me with upperclassmen and university staff who grew up in neighborhoods similar to mine, and they serve as mentors to me. This support helped to ease my transition to college.”

Starting a Conversation

As the saying goes: What gets measured gets done. With that thought in mind, I hope to start a conversation about the implications of measuring and reporting degree outcomes for students who receive Pell Grants.

To start: This new Pell Grant data is a critical resource for KIPP’s college advising program, as it will help us better guide students to apply to colleges and universities where they are likely to succeed. It will also allow us to look for ways to build stronger cohesion between KIPP’s work in K-12 and higher education, so KIPP alumni can enter college prepared.

Now to you...If you are a college professor or administrator, how has this data sparked ideas about how to support all students to graduate?

If you are a high school student, what does this information on graduation rates make you think about what college you want to attend?

And if you are an interested citizen, how can we use data like this to help increase the efficacy of important federal programs like Pell Grants?

I encourage you to weigh in with your ideas and continue the conversation on [Twitter](#)!