

College Presidents: Pell Grant Students Lag in Degree Completion

COLLEGE PRESIDENTS: PELL GRANT
GRADUATION RATE BELOW HALF

46%

GALLUP COLLEGE PRESIDENTS STUDY

by Valerie J. Calderon and Jeffrey Jones

A Gallup survey of college and university presidents corroborates data that suggest Pell Grant recipients lag behind other students in completing their degrees. Though nine in 10 college and university presidents say that serving low-income students better is a high priority, many indicate that the degree completion rates of Pell-grant eligible students trail reported average completion rates.

Pell Grants are awards that the U.S. federal government gives to primarily low-income students to help them pursue higher education. Unlike traditional student loans, individuals do not need to repay Pell Grant funds.

Under the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, schools have various disclosure and reporting requirements, including disclosure of the graduation rates of students who received Pell Grants, students who received subsidized Stafford loans but not Pell Grants, and students who received neither. About eight in 10 college and university presidents say their institution tracks degree completion rates of Pell Grant-eligible students. Of those who track these data, seven in 10 say they use the data "a fair amount" or a "great deal" to inform institutional policy and practice.

About half of university presidents say the degree completion rate for Pell Grant-eligible students is less than 50%, including 8% of presidents who say the rate is fewer than one in five. Community college presidents report much lower completion rates for Pell Grant students than do four-year college presidents, but that may reflect lower degree completion rates at community colleges in general.

Results from the survey are based on Gallup's Nov. 9-Dec. 1, 2015, Web interviews of more than 400 college and university presidents and represent the views of college presidents nationwide. Gallup conducts this survey to understand their perceptions and opinions on issues facing U.S. colleges and universities.

Pell Grants offer an important avenue for low-income students to access higher education and complete a degree that can put them on track to increased earning potential and a good job. But even with Pell Grants and other forms of financial aid, low-income students may struggle to fund the high cost of a college education. They might not fully understand the value of a degree or believe it is worth the cost it takes to complete, or they may find it difficult to manage competing life demands with school, such as work or family responsibilities. With increased attention in political and media circles on the escalating costs of higher education and student loan debt, colleges and universities should strive to differentiate themselves by creatively prioritizing Pell Grant-eligible individuals. Focusing on Pell Grant-eligible individuals means providing appropriate support and strategies to help these students remain enrolled and, ultimately, see them across the finish line to receive their degree.

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