How do student characteristics predict university graduation odds?

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In his January 2009 State of the Union address, President Obama announced his goal for the U.S. to lead the world in college graduates by 2020. While policymakers often blame university systems for low graduation among college students, according to new research, characteristics known about a student before he or she even enters a college classroom can accurately predict graduation rates. This new study, published in *SAGE Open*, finds that characteristics such as fulltime enrollment status, race, transfer credits, and expected family contribution predict successful graduation from college.

Researcher Tim Gramling, LP.D., conducted research on characteristics of more than 2,500 students from the full population of one large, for-profit university and found that higher GPA, fulltime enrollment status, black race (over whites), a higher number of transfer credits when enrolling, and higher expected family contribution weighed most heavily in accurately predicting higher graduation odds.

Taken together, these five characteristics predict graduation rates with 86.9% accuracy, despite the fact that federal policy has worked under the assumption that tax status of an institution is the primary determinant of student graduation (i.e., non-profit v. for-profit). Additionally, when GPA is removed as one of the predicting factors, the remaining four characteristics (determined before a student even begins his or her studies), still predict graduation rates with 74.3% accuracy.

"The findings of this study challenge the traditional assumptions for

improving university graduation rates. Because student characteristics have such a dramatic impact on graduation odds, changing federal tax status of a university would have little positive impact on graduation," Gramling stated.

Gramling offered different ways to improve graduation rates based on his findings, "Policymakers could increase funding for lower income students which would mitigate the need for expected family contribution and provide incentives for them to attend school full time – both factors that have shown accurately predict higher graduation odds."

The findings of the study also had implications for traditional methods for rewarding higher GPAs. Since the study found that black students were more likely than white students to graduate, especially if they had a GPA between a 2.0 and a 2.5, public policy that rewards high GPAs and punishes low GPAs would disproportionately impact black students.

Gramling continued, "As blacks exhibited higher odds of graduating than whites at this campus, the U.S. Department of Education should explore how for-profit institutions can benefit black students, especially as other research does not suggest that blacks have higher (or even equal) odds of graduating than whites at traditional institutions."

More information: "How five student characteristics accurately predict for-profit university graduation odds" *SAGE Open*, 2013,

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