

# Economic issues are key to predicting whether students will graduate college, study shows

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Economic issues play a significant role in determining whether first-time students enrolling in a four-year college will complete their degree and

graduate within six years, a new study from Oregon State University has found.

The socioeconomic status of the student body and the college or university's revenue and expenditures serve as predictors of a student's chances of success at four-year broad access colleges and universities, said Gloria Crisp, an associate professor in OSU's College of Education.

Four-year broad access institutions are colleges and universities that accept 80 percent or more of their applicants. The majority of students enrolled in four-year public and private colleges in the U.S. are enrolled in these types of institutions.

"There are a lot of variables that factor into whether a student will graduate, but many of them are economic," Crisp said. "That tells us that the way to raise [graduation rates](#) is through support, both of the student and to the [institution](#)."

The findings were published recently in the journal *Research in Higher Education*. Co-authors are Erin Doran of Iowa State University and Nicole Alia Salis Reyes of the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

The study is believed to be the first to model [graduation](#) rates specifically at four-year broad access institutions. The researchers began studying graduation rate predictors at these colleges and universities in part because they are widely overlooked in research and discussion about college success.

Much of the focus on college student populations, their needs, their graduation rates and their overall success is centered on elite colleges and universities. Elite colleges are those that are very difficult to gain entry to, draw high achieving students, tend to have large fundraising endowments to support scholarships and other services and may also

serve fewer students overall.

"The elite universities are considered the best even though they predominately serve the most academically prepared students who are likely to be successful wherever they enroll," Crisp said. "There's a disconnect between the expectations of those top tier schools, which garner much of the attention, and the broad access institutions, which are serving students who may not be academically prepared for college work upon entering college and are underserved throughout the K-20 educational system including low-income, African American and Latina/o students. Holding them to the same standard doesn't work."

Researchers reviewed publicly available [student](#) data for more than 400 broad access institutions for the 2008-09 school year and the 2014-15 school year, using Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, or IPEDS.

The findings also indicated that universities with a religious affiliation, a higher percentage of full-time students and large enrollments were likely to have higher graduation rates.

However, when the researchers examined underserved populations, including African American and Latino students, on their own, they found that it was predominately socioeconomic factors that affected graduation rates among those groups.

"For those students, resources really matter, in a way that is different from the population as a whole," Crisp said. "That finding is consistent with the persistent inequities in college completion rates for these underserved populations."

The new insights about broad access institutions and their students can help education leaders and policymakers better understand how the

needs of those institutions may differ from those of elite schools.

"It's about understanding these institutions, making them part of the conversation, and in some ways, changing the conversation to better reflect the experience of most college students and their universities," she said. "What are their experiences? What can we do to support them?"

That issue is of particular importance right now as policymakers across the U.S. are being asked to increase college graduation rates, and are also considering in some cases, implementing policies that tie funding for public colleges and universities to performance measures, such as six-year graduation rates, Crisp said.

"This research indicates that approach may be counter-productive if the goal is to see more students complete college," she said. "More research is needed to better understand how resources should be allocated effectively and efficiently while working toward the goal of higher and more equitable [college](#) graduation rates."

**More information:** Gloria Crisp et al, Predicting Graduation Rates at 4-year Broad Access Institutions Using a Bayesian Modeling Approach, *Research in Higher Education* (2017). [DOI: 10.1007/s11162-017-9459-x](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-017-9459-x)

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