

University Undergraduate Retention Committee
5/30/19

Common Terms and Definitions

“Retention” and related terms (e.g., persistence, attrition, progression and completion) are rarely used across retention literature in the same and unambiguous ways. Outside the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), maintained by the US Department of Education, the terms are often given stipulated definitions for particular purposes and contexts by different institutions. The terms are often defined in relation to each.

“Retention” and “persistence” generally refer to the measurement of the return of students from one year to the next or from one term to the next, but details vary, and the two terms are sometimes distinguished according to those details. The measurements can be calculated for a host of student subpopulations: first time in college students (FTIC), class levels, part-time, full time, transfer, demographic characteristics, etc.

“Attrition” is generally the flip side of retention—the measurement of students who do not return.

“Progression” usually refers to the measurement of the progress that returning students are making toward goals. Typical metrics include GPA, earned hours, hours attempted/hours completed, and academic standing status.

“Completion” refers to earning a certificate or degree, completing a preparation plan for admission to programs elsewhere, or completing some other clearly identifiable goal. Completion rates are defined in terms of a time factor—e.g., 4-year, 6-year, 8-year, etc.

When reading retention literature or reports from other institutions, the important thing is to be clear about a particular term’s stipulated definition and how it is defined in relation to other terms for the purpose of that article or report.

For our purposes, it will be useful to be familiar with the definitions of these terms as used by our own Office of Institutional Research and Analytics:

Retention: Student returned from term A to term B. Retention usually counts students that return to the university at the same degree level (i.e., started at bachelors and returned to bachelor degree level). Individuals that graduate count *against retention* (because the student *did not return*). Retention is usually calculated for the IPEDS cohorts (full- and part-time, associate and bachelor degree seeking students) but can be calculated for other groups as well by student demographics (gender, race/ethnicity, etc.) $\text{Number of Students Returned in Term B} / \text{Number of Students Enrolled in Term A} = \text{Retention Rate}$

Attrition: Student did not return from term A to term B, nor did the student graduate before term B. Attrition usually counts students that did not return to the university at the same degree level. Attrition is not usually reported to IPEDS but can be derived from retention rates.

Attrition can be calculated for various groups (IPEDS, transfer, etc.) as well by student demographics (gender, race/ethnicity, etc.) $\text{Number Neither Returned in Term B nor Graduated before Term B} / \text{Number Enrolled in Term A} = \text{Attrition Rate}$

Persistence: Student returned from term A to term B or graduated before term B. Persistence usually counts students that returned to or graduated from the university at the same degree level (i.e., started at bachelors and returned to the bachelor degree level or graduated with a bachelors). Persistence is not usually reported to IPEDS but can be derived using retention and graduation data. Persistence can be calculated for various groups (IPEDS, transfer, etc.) as well as by student demographics (gender, race/ethnicity, etc.) $\text{Number Either Returned in Term B or Graduated before Term B} / \text{Number Enrolled in Term A} = \text{Persistence Rate}$

Note that Attrition Rate + Persistence Rate = 100%

Graduation: Students that started at term Y and graduated within X number of years, usually calculated at the 4, 6, and 8-year marks. Graduation rates are published to IPEDS for full- and part-time, first-time college-seeking students for 4-, 6-, and 8-year graduation rates. The student must graduate at the same degree level as they started in order to count (i.e., bachelor-seeking student must graduate with a bachelor's degree to count). $\text{Number Graduated before Term B} / \text{Number Enrolled in Term A} = \text{Graduation Rate}$