Colleges Are Tested by Push to Prove Graduates' Career Success; Schools Cite Hurdles in Measuring How Ex-Students Do in the Job Market


Abstract (summary)

In January, the National Association of Colleges and Employers released a new set of standards for the reports that career-services offices compile on graduates' first jobs and graduate-school destinations, including a goal of having verifiable data on 65% of a graduating class.

Full Text

College admissions officers trumpet graduates' success in finding well-paying jobs. But the schools often have a hard time getting solid proof.

Boiling down employment outcomes to a single metric isn't easy, many college officials say, since hurdles stand in the way of gathering meaningful figures and conveying them. Others say they are leery of tying the nuances of educational success to dollar figures.

But with student-loan debt outstanding hitting a record $1.1 trillion, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, the issue of quantifying graduate success has become increasingly important as colleges come under pressure to prove the education they provide is worth the investment.

Bonnie Mann Falk was dismayed at the lack of information on student outcomes that she and her daughter, Mollie, got from admissions officers during the college hunt this past fall. Mollie, a 17-year-old high-school senior from Long Island in New York, plans to study retail management and sought assurance she could find a job in that industry.

Ms. Falk, an accountant, grew tired of hearing admissions officers say they didn't have detailed information on hand. "While true, it doesn't mean you can't track that. It sounded like a canned response to me," she said. Mollie, who had checked out several schools, has been accepted to Syracuse University, where the business and communications schools offered ample job data, including starting salaries broken down by major, Ms. Falk said.

Federal and state governments are taking steps of their own to measure the value of higher education, but the efforts are piecemeal. The Higher Education Opportunity Act bars the federal government from creating a nationwide database of student records, with opponents citing privacy and other concerns.

The U.S. Education Department is weighing options for a new college rating system, which could include graduate employment information. And in January, Sens. Chris Murphy (D., Conn.) and Brian Schatz (D., Hawaii) laid out a plan tying eligibility for federal student aid to, among other things, measures of affordability and value.

Meanwhile, College Measures, a partnership between the American Institutes for Research and Matrix Knowledge, has helped seven states, including Texas, Florida and Virginia, tie workforce and student record information together to create websites showing employment statistics for graduates.

These initiatives face a large obstacle: schools themselves, many of which oppose efforts to use employment data to quantify education.
"There is no proof in it that the school you went to and what you majored in is the cause of your salary," said Sarah Flanagan, vice president for government relations and policy at the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, a lobbying group for 963 private, nonprofit schools.

The debate took a new turn last week when think tank New America Foundation released a report criticizing Naicu and other school lobby groups for their efforts to "keep students in the dark" on outcomes information. Naicu President David L. Warren wrote in response, "We do not believe that the price for enrolling in college should be permanent entry into a massive data registry."

At the same time, admissions officers have realized the lure of using data about graduates' success in their marketing materials and websites.

Ionie Arredondo, a senior at YES Prep East End, a Houston charter school, isn't sure what she wants to do after college. So she was impressed when a representative from Iona College in New Rochelle, N.Y., told her that job prospects were strong even for those who enter that school undecided on a career path. "They were so confident in their numbers," said the 17-year-old.

Iona's undergraduate-admissions website says 93% of graduates have landed jobs or entered grad school within six months of graduation. What it doesn't say is that the figure is based on responses of only 17% of 743 graduates who were surveyed in 2011.

"Response rate is always a challenge," but the number is "still a valid sample rate" said Todd Wilson, Iona's senior director of marketing and communications.

Alumni polls are "not scientifically sound surveys," said Mark Schneider, president of College Measures. He lamented their "horrific" response rates and selection bias, noting that those with good news to report are more likely to respond.

In January, the National Association of Colleges and Employers released a new set of standards for the reports that career-services offices compile on graduates' first jobs and graduate-school destinations, including a goal of having verifiable data on 65% of a graduating class. The average response rate for member schools is 48%, according to a recent NACE report.

There has been "great inconsistency" in how outcomes are reported, including disagreement on how to define "employed," said Manny Contomanolis, associate vice president and director of the career-services office at Rochester Institute of Technology and the leader of the NACE standards effort.

But some schools are finding that meaningful information isn't far out of reach.

St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minn., with a graduating class of more than 700, didn't add any staff or create a new budget line to raise the response rate to its survey of students one year after graduation to 92% from about 30%. The whole project costs $750, including a subscription to an online-survey generator and pizza for student volunteers.

"We are in many ways a black box. People are hungry for information," said David Anderson, St. Olaf's president. He said schools need to share outcomes "as part of our institutional credibility and integrity."

And Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pa., with a graduating class of 1,020, managed an 88% response rate for its 2013 survey. That school's report is the culmination of a 12-month process that relies on input from faculty, recruiters and the graduates themselves.

Lori Kennedy, Lehigh's director of career services, estimates the school spends $10,000 to $12,000 on its report, most of which is for staff time. Prospective students are asking "more focused questions" about outcomes, Ms. Kennedy said. "We're using it much more proactively."

Credit: Melissa Korn

(c) 2014 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

---

**Indexing (details)**

**Author**
Korn, Melissa

**Company / organization**

Name: Syracuse University
NAICS: 611310