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## WEB TOOL LETS USERS SCRUTINIZE UNIVERSITY GRADUATION RATES

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Despite San Jose State University's overall graduation rate of 39.4 percent, just half that rate of male Latinos who entered the university in 1997 had received a degree from there six years later. Could San Jose State take a lesson from California State University-Sacramento, which in the same period graduated 31.6 percent of its Latino males, compared with San Jose State's 19.7 percent?

Why was the University of California-San Diego able to graduate 73 percent of its underrepresented minority students while UC-Santa Barbara graduated 64 percent? How did some campuses, such as UC-Santa Cruz and CSU-Stanislaus, close the graduation gap between white and Latino students?

These are the types of questions provoked by a new Web tool unveiled Tuesday by The Education Trust, a national advocacy group for high academic achievement, that can be used to compare graduation rates among similar public and private universities.

With College Results Online, students, parents, educators and policymakers for the first time can easily discover the percentages of students individual schools are graduating -- not just overall, but by race, ethnicity and gender -- and how those rates stack up against schools that serve the same kinds of students.

The site, [www.college-results.org](http://www.college-results.org), is expected to fuel a growing national movement for accountability in higher education, which has led to some calls to link government funding to graduation rates.

For universities, "it kind of takes all the excuses away," said Joni Finney, vice president of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education in San Jose. "Now this data is out there and you can compare. It's very powerful."

The Education Trust hopes the site will bring public attention to the issue.

"It's important that folks bring pressure on institutions that don't choose to improve themselves," said Kati Haycock, the trust's director.

Whether students graduate matters in terms of an individual's economic future and the economic competitiveness of a society, said Kevin Carey, an analyst with The Education Trust. And he said educated people tend to be involved citizens.

High stakes

"The value of a college degree is much greater now than it used to be," Carey said. "The pressures of globalization are creeping up the skills ladder. The stakes are a lot higher now."

The graduation rate in the United States has not changed significantly for decades, but other countries are improving theirs.

"There is an increasing sense we are wasting a lot of our talent," Haycock said, noting that if the country cut its black-white graduation gap in half, it would gain an additional 10,000 African-American college graduates a year.

The point of the Web site and an accompanying study, "One Step From the Finish Line," is that how schools relate to their students, particularly freshmen and sophomores, can affect how many will graduate.

Typically, universities say that who their students are largely will determine the graduation rate.

A highly selective school, such as Stanford -- which in 2003 had a 94.1 percent six-year graduation rate - will have a better track record than a less selective school, such as Menlo College (36.3 percent) or any of the CSU campuses, which ranged from 30 percent to 65 percent.

But when comparing similar schools serving roughly similar students, "you find institutions that are not doing just a little bit better, but a lot better" Haycock said. Universities should "stop blaming graduation problems on students."

But there are many reasons students might not graduate in six years, and not all of them have to do with the educational quality of the institution.

'Not the end all'

"It's an important measure but it's being overemphasized. It's not the end all and be all," said Nancy Shullock, executive director of the Institute for Higher Education and Leadership Policy at CSU-Sacramento. "So many factors go into graduation rates. I'm not saying they shouldn't be improved, but if you build it into a high-stakes formula where you punish and reward," some schools might begin to reduce access for riskier students to make themselves look good.

San Jose State began looking closely at its graduation rates in the 1990s, said Robert Cooper, associate vice president for undergraduate studies.

In the past three years, it has begun a freshman seminar program to help connect students to the university and give them the study skills they need and an overnight summer orientation for freshmen. It also is working to provide students with a clear road map so they can graduate as quickly as possible.

"Am I satisfied with how we're doing?" Cooper said. "No. I am pretty pleased with the university's response to make it better."

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NOTES: IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

More information about comparative graduation rates and strategies that help improve those rates can be found in two reports, "One Step from the Finish Line" and "Choosing to Improve" on The Education Trust Web site, [www.edtrust.org](http://www.edtrust.org)

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