

Graduation and Retention Study

Phase 3

Gender and Financial Aid

In this report gender and financial aid are examined together because they are both either/or situations with rather obvious comparative questions to address. There are also differing views on campus about the effects of gender and financial aid. Thus separating the myths from reality is one of the goals of this phase of the Graduation and Retention Project.

The focus will be on the 1995, 1996, and 1997 cohorts so that we at least have 4-year graduation data for all the students studied. For the 1995 cohort, we also have 6-year graduation data, which is the critical final measure. The sub populations – female, male, aided, unaided – will each be treated as separate cohorts. As in Phase 1 and 2 we will track the status – active, inactive or graduated – from fall to fall for up to 6 years and compare various transition rates.

For financial aid we make the simplifying assumption that for all practical purposes the aided students are those who came to Lehigh with financial aid. Yes, some of them may lose their aid for academic reasons, but most students do not lose their eligibility for aid. In other words, we treat the loss of financial aid as a risk that all students coming to Lehigh with financial aid face.

A small number of students may also become eligible for aid during their time at Lehigh. However, students decide to attend Lehigh knowing whether or not they will receive financial aid and their financial perspective is usually a key factor in a student's decision. By focusing on the financial circumstances under which students come to Lehigh, we have a clear dichotomy that simplifies the analysis. Specifically, changes in financial aid and, more obviously, gender will not be tracked. As a result, yearly retention rates and graduation rates are the key metrics.

The financial aid data for the 1995, 1996, and 1997 cohorts is lodged in the old information system and is difficult to extract. The data used was taken from a file prepared for the Arts and Sciences Group consulting project. It was then verified that the students identified as aided did have a financial aid award in the fall of their first year. It could not be completely verified that none of the others had a financial aid award. However, the proportion of students known to have financial aid is approximately correct.

For retention and graduation rates we test a simple null hypothesis in each case. These null hypotheses are:

- 1) The rate for female students is not greater than the rate for male students.
- 2) The rate for aided students is not greater than the rate for male students.

We perform the statistical testing by treating retention and graduation rates as the probabilities that a random student is still an active student or has graduated.

For gender the same analysis was repeated on the 1995 admit cohorts in the three undergraduate colleges. At this time it seems unlikely that a gender analysis of the 1996 and 1997 college cohorts would provide any additional insights. The college cohorts could also be divided and analyzed by financial aid, but that analysis is not part of this report.

Tables summarizing the gender and financial aid data appear in the next several pages and are followed by a page of findings.

Retention, Persistence, and Graduation Rates By Gender

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Findings

1. In 7 out of the 9 retention rates for the 1995, 1996, and 1997 cohorts, the rate for female students was higher than male students.
2. For two retention rates – year 2 to 3 in 1996 and year 3 to 4 in 1997 – the null hypothesis can be rejected at the 5% and the 1% level respectively. In general, gender does not turn up as a significant factor in retention on a year-by-year basis.
3. There is, however, a significant accumulative effect on gender that appears in persistence rates and in graduation rates. For example, the null hypothesis for persistence to the fourth year can be rejected at the 3% level in 1995 and 1996.
4. For the 1995 six-year graduation rate the gender null hypothesis can be rejected at the 0.5% level. In other words, if the 1995 six-year graduation rate for women were no greater than the men's, then the probability of seeing 1995 results would be less than 0.5%.
5. The gender null hypothesis can also be rejected at much less than the 0.5% level for four-year graduation rates in all three cohorts.
6. Higher six-year graduation rates for women persist in all three colleges for 1995. Furthermore, the differences are statistically significant in CBE and CEAS at less than a 5% level.
7. In 8 out of the 9 retention rates for the 1995, 1996, and 1997 cohorts, the rate for aided students was higher than for unaided students.
8. The accumulative effect of these differences in retention rates is not as great as it is for gender and appears to be diminishing. For example, the null hypothesis for four-year graduation rates can be rejected at the 1% level in 1995, the 6% level in 1996, and cannot be rejected at any level for 1997 because the two rates are 73.1% and 73.0%. This phenomenon may or may not be linked to changes in the awarding of financial aid.
9. For the 1995 six-year graduation rate the aided null hypothesis can be rejected at the 1% level.