On January 16th, President Obama held a White House Summit regarding income inequality in higher education, discussing how better to recruit and graduate more students from low-income families. This is a timely topic since future projections of high school graduates show the composition changing. The demographics shift in the future shows there will be fewer students, with a larger proportion from the lower income strata and more diversity. Of the counties across the nation that have significantly more younger children than older ones, 73% have median incomes below $50,000 (Lipka, 2014). Additionally, it is projected that 45% of the nation’s public high school graduates will be non-white by 2019-20 (WICHE, 2012). The U.S. Department of Education projects the number of Hispanic students to grow by 42%, black students by 25%, Asian/Pacific Islander students by 20%, while white students will increase by just 4% by 2021. (American Indian/Alaska native students will grow by 1%). (Schnoebelen, 2013) “Basically, all groups besides Hispanics have birthrates lower than replacement…. You’re likely to need to diversify in order to maintain enrollment.” Steve Murdock, professor of sociology at Rice University and a former director of the Census Bureau (Lipka, 2014; pg. 3). The figure below shows similar projected trends in Indiana of fewer but more ethnically diverse students.

On average, 87% of all students signed up for 30 Purdue credit hours, and 65% actual completed the 30 credit hours. Of those students approximately 19% received Pell Grants. For students with Pell Grants, 84% attempt 30 credit hours, but only 61% completed them. The gap between the percentage of Pell Grant recipients earning the total 30 credit hours and the overall average rate of 65% is -4.5.

This report focuses on the 30 credit hours attempted and earned at Purdue (not including transfer credit) and disseminates the data by minority categories and by income, using the Federal Pell Grant as marker for low-income. It uses data from a three-year time span (2010 - 2012) that has been gathered for the Equity Scorecard self-study.
There are large differences among the ethnicities. At the high end, 90% of the multiracial students attempted 30 credit hours and 72% completed that amount. At the low end, 80% of African American students attempted but only 49% completed 30 credit hours. However, given the small cohort size, it would simply take 50 more African American students earning the 30 credit hours to match the highest earning rate of 72%.

There are variations between the colleges/schools as well. The percentage for the African American students who earn 30 credits in their first year range from 40% in Management to 62% in Agriculture. The range for Asian/Pacific Islander students is from 42% in Liberal Arts to 78% in Pharmacy. A surprise is only 33% of the international students in Liberal Arts earn 30 credits their first year. Even though the percentages are a three-year average, there are very few diverse students in some colleges/schools. There had to be at least ten students in the average cohort size to be included in the table. Yet, the small size means that even helping a few students can dramatically increase the percentage. For example, although the average percentage of African American students is 40% for Management, having four more students earn 30 credits would bring their percentage up to the overall rate.

Indiana is helping to guide college students to graduate with a degree within four years. The Indiana General Assembly passed a requirement that public colleges provide degree maps to all new full-time students. The degree map is a semester-by-semester list of courses a student must take to graduate on-time. The degree maps, along with Commission for Higher Education's "15-to-Finish" public awareness campaign, the maximum Baccalaureate credit hour degree requirements, and the new financial aid requirements all help students recognize what they need to do to graduate on-time.

The University has implemented the State requirement with a multi-faceted, multi-office effort to make sure students are more aware. The degree map will be available to all incoming freshmen this fall. A new webpage specifically addressing the new financial aid program requirements has been created for students, along with an extensive awareness campaign with the academic advising community, Student Success area, and the Purdue Promise classrooms. With the assistance of the Office of Student Affairs, a new scholarship program is specifically targeting the students who fall under this financial aid change. Additional program components have been enacted as part of the Foundation of Excellence. For example, a new focused curriculum for Boiler Gold Rush has been designed, the undergraduate academic advising has been coordinated, tutoring efforts have been coordinated, and a study skills pilot program has been developed for most at-risk beginning students.

There can always be more that can be done. An examination of the change of degree objectives policies and procedures could help smooth student transitions and an emphasis on the core curriculum and how it helps students complete basic requirements in first year could increase the number of students that earn 30 credit hours the first year. Also, raising awareness with advisors, faculty, and other internal stakeholders and encouraging professional development for faculty and staff who teach and interact with first-year students, along with expanding efforts to produce a consistent and coordinated training for new academic advisors would all help better serve our future diverse student body.

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