

**Special Report from the Accrediting Commission**  
**Announcing Graduation Rate Benchmarks for 2016-2017**

**October 3, 2016**

The issue of student achievement has justifiably been the focus of much discussion both within the regulatory world and across the larger public over the past several years. As recent events have made clear, scrutiny of student achievement levels -- measured primarily in terms of completion/graduation rates -- will continue to be particularly intense with respect to accreditation and its accountability for institution performance. The Commission, as both a champion for distance education and a committed guardian of its ongoing quality, fully recognizes the importance of student achievement. Its accreditation process has long embraced metrics of student achievement, assessed in multiple contexts, in the evaluation of institutional effectiveness. At the same time, the Commission has recognized that meaningful graduation benchmarks for distance learning institutions must factor in the varied learning models, diversity of educational missions across institutions, open admissions practice followed by many DEAC-accredited institutions, and the non-traditional, often financially vulnerable profile of the student populations they serve.

In light of the heightened focus on student graduation rates as well as the complex dynamics associated with the same, we embarked on, in 2015, a reorganization and streamlining of the *DEAC Accreditation Handbook* that included strengthened expectations for student achievement and program outcomes.<sup>1</sup> An outgrowth of that review was the revision to the student graduation/completion rate reporting requirements which all of you saw in the annual reporting form you received this past January. Your collective response to the new requirements provided DEAC with a current and more comprehensive database on student completion/graduation rates which a Commission task force, aided by external statisticians, then used to develop student outcome benchmarks more calibrated to, and therefore more useful for evaluating, distance education programs.

From the beginning of the initiative, the Commission recognized that there would be few 'apples to apples' comparisons and that any benchmarking would need to reflect the variability across DEAC institutions, in terms of their size, missions, teaching models, and student base. In addition, it became quickly apparent that setting fixed benchmarks utilizing programs with very small enrollments (e.g. those with fewer than 10 participants) did not make statistical sense simply because the outcomes for one or two students in those programs, in any given year, could cause such a material shift in the resulting percentiles. Graduation rate data gathered for these programs was therefore excluded from subsequent calculations of institutional averages.<sup>2</sup>

Upon further analysis, the Commission expected to see material differences in the data between institutions which offer fixed-time cohort-based programs that entail regular and substantive interaction between faculty and students (defined as distance education by the U.S. Department of Education) and institutions which offer flexible-time programs on an asynchronous basis (defined as correspondence by the U.S. Department of Education) with institutions offering the intermediate model (flexible-time with regular and substantive interaction between faculty and students, e.g., competency-based) falling someplace in the middle. In fact, the data found that pronounced differences in outcomes consistently emerged at the associate degree program level.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, as further described below, the Commission task force recommended that the same graduation benchmarks be implemented across all institutions for bachelor

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<sup>1</sup> See also, Standard V(A), Student Achievement, *2016 DEAC Accreditation Handbook*.

<sup>2</sup> The benchmarks established for larger institutions will provide points of orientation in DEAC's evaluation of its smaller institutions; however, DEAC may undertake an individualized examination of program and student outcomes in those institutions if and when a smaller institution appears to be materially underperforming.

<sup>3</sup> This divergence is not surprising given not just the differentiation in the teaching and learning models but also the different goals and expectations of students electing to enroll in an associate degree program.

through doctoral degree programs with disparate benchmarks applied to correspondence/competency-based schools only at the associate degree level.

The degree program benchmarks adopted by the Commission are set forth in the table below and are consistent with the task force’s recommendation. You will note that, with one exception, the Commission is continuing with its historical practice of setting graduation rate benchmarks at approximately 15 points below the average. This practice is intended to accommodate both annual fluctuations within institutions as well as variable factors across institutions and programs.

	<b>Average Graduation Rate</b>	<b>Graduation Rate Benchmark for 2016-2017</b>
Associate Degree Programs		
<i>Distance Education</i>	47%	32%
<i>Correspondence/Competency-Based</i>	28%	*
Bachelor Degree Programs	58%	43%
Master’s Degree Programs	69%	54%
First Professional Degree Programs	88%	73%
Doctorate Degree Programs	55%	40%

*\*Because the reported graduation rates were already relatively low for associate degree programs offered by correspondence /competency-based programs, the Commission did not set a benchmark at 15 points below the average. However, it recognizes that different factors could fairly account for an institution reporting a rate below the 28% average. Accordingly, with respect to schools reporting a lower rate, the Commission will conduct a secondary analysis of individual course completion rates and other information that would reasonably demonstrate institutional effectiveness.*

The Commission task force also recommended that the Commission apply a single completion rate for non-degree programs rather than implementing different benchmark categories for non-profit postsecondary, specialized for-profit postsecondary and for-profit postsecondary as has previously been DEAC’s practice. The task force recognizes that non-degree program outcomes span significant variability as do degree programs. Accordingly, the task force recommended setting the completion benchmark at approximately 20 points below the average to accommodate variables such as length in clock or credit hours, correspondence methodology, and other factors related to non-degree distance education offerings.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, within the next cycle of annual reporting (January 1, 2016 – December 31, 2016) the Commission will work with its independent statisticians on enhancements to the methodology for collecting and analyzing non-degree program completion rate data.

	<b>Average Completion Rate</b>	<b>Completion Rate Benchmark for 2016-2017</b>
Non-degree Programs	80%	60%

Please note that the new benchmarks are effective immediately and will be operative in our review of the Annual Reports submitted for the January 1, 2015 – December 31, 2015 reporting period (the 2015 Annual Reports) as well as in the overall institutional effectiveness assessments made by the Commission in connection with Fall 2016 and Spring 2017 on-site evaluations. However, please be aware that, consistent

<sup>4</sup>Amends Section XVI(F)(2), Processes and Procedures, *DEAC Accreditation Handbook*.

with its commitment to ongoing review and improvement of its operations, DEAC will continue to monitor student outcome data and subsequent annual report data which could result in future adjustments to applicable benchmarks. We will, of course, communicate with you regarding any such changes.

Finally, we realize that the above provides in summary form a considerable amount of very significant information. Accordingly, the Commission and staff, joined by our independent statisticians, Dr. Robert Brodnick and Dr. Don Norris, from Strategic Initiatives, will discuss the new benchmarking at the October Accreditation Workshop and will be available to answer your questions.