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FastStats 2016: College Graduation Trends for Independent School Students

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Perhaps the primary outcome of an independent school education is to be prepared for and graduate from college. For this FastStats, I will analyze the 50-year trends for college graduation among independent school graduates. Specifically, I will use *undergraduate completion, whether students are graduating in four years, the percentage of students who have transferred out of a college program, and first-year GPA* as measures of preparedness for college.

Fairly recently, as part of the [Value Narrative Survey](#), SAIS began asking specific questions about the college outcomes of independent school graduates. As of April 1, 2016, the SAIS Value Narrative survey has been completed by 72,585 individuals, spanning 141 schools. Of this number, 13,945 are alumni/ae of their school. This study focuses on a cohort group of 7,174 graduates who answered the survey during the 2015 calendar year.

The Lovett School in Atlanta originally requested that SAIS add demographic questions to the alumni/ae section of the survey. These questions yielded rich data that SAIS felt would be of value to other schools utilizing the alumni section of the survey, and so added the questions permanently.

Overall, the trend over the past 50 years clearly indicates that independent school graduates seem to fare better and better on a number of key college-related outcome variables.

Figure 1 depicts the percentage of independent school graduates who ultimately received an undergraduate degree. Although the percentage that receives their undergraduate degree is high historically (88% in 1965), the outlook is even better since 1986. From 1986 to the present, 98% have graduated college.



Figure 1. Completed Undergrad

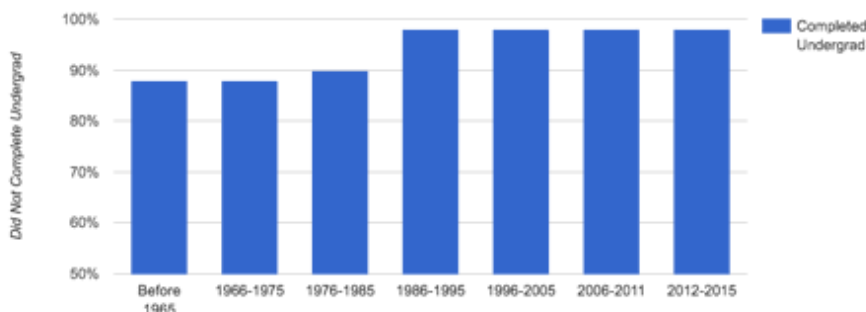
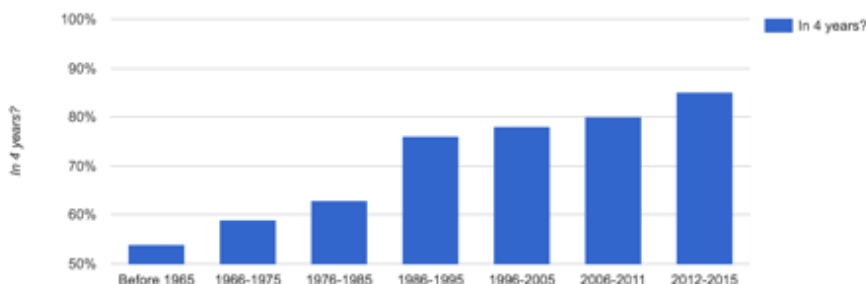


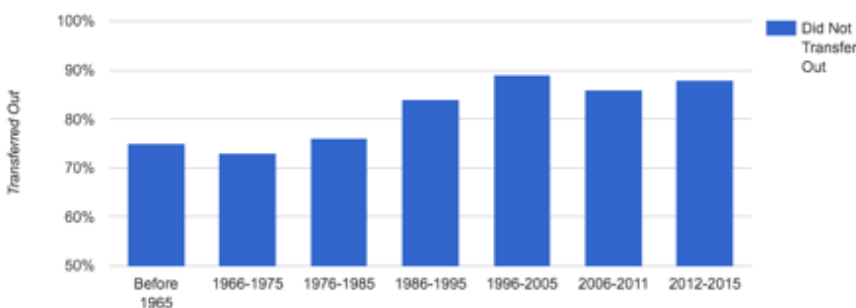
Figure 2 shows the percentage of independent school graduates that graduate college in four years. Before 1965, about 54% graduated in four years. Between 2012 and 2015, the percentage rose by 30 to 84%, with a particularly big (13%) jump from 1986 to 1995.

Figure 2. In 4 years?



As another indicator of the improving college outcome trends for independent school graduates, Figure 3 shows the percentage of independent school graduates who did *not* transfer out of at least one college. Before 1965, approximately 75% of the students did not transfer once they got to college. By 2015, 88% of students stayed at the college they first entered.

Figure 3. Did Not Transfer Out



Finally, Figure 4 depicts the percentage of students with an above 3.0 GPA in their first year of college. This graph indicates that the percentage of first-year college GPAs between 3 and 4 have more than doubled over the past 50 years, from 43% in 1965 to 88% in 2015.



So what does this tell us? This certainly seems to be a good news story. After all, our students are completing college at a higher rate, with more and more doing so in four years, while not transferring to another college and with better grades than 50 years ago. It should be noted that there is no question that college graduation rates have increased for all students. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, between 1990 and 2014, the percentage of the population who had received at least a high school diploma or its equivalent increased from 86 to 91 percent. Moreover, the percentage who had completed a bachelor's or higher degree increased from 23% in 1990 to 34% in 2014.

It would seem that we are preparing our students better for college. It is reasonable to conclude that our college-prep programs have been further refined, thus allowing a larger proportion of our students to be successful in college. It might also be reasonable to conclude that a greater emphasis on college counseling in our schools has led to improved trends, especially in terms of finding good matches for our students. Perhaps a greater variety of colleges and college programs has made for better fits for a lot of our students as well.

But some caution ought to be taken when interpreting the results. Over the past 50 years, immensely complex societal variables have been at play, all of which could have had an impact on these positive trends. There's no question, for example, that our economy has become more "knowledge-based," requiring higher educational attainment. Similarly, with the Baby Boomers moving through the workforce, other generations simply may have had to stay in school longer, waiting for jobs to open up.

Perhaps the most caution might be taken with the interpretation of Figure 4, increasing GPA -- although there's empirical support for the idea that students have indeed become "smarter" in the last 50 years. For example, the well-documented [Flynn Effect](#) has shown a substantial and long-sustained increase in IQ scores since about 1930. Researchers, however, have attributed the Flynn Effect to improved overall living conditions, including a better economy, health conditions, nutrition and educational opportunities, as opposed to one generation being "smarter" than the previous.

Grade inflation may also play a role. For any of us old enough to remember, it certainly seems that landing in the 3-4 range for your GPA seems easier than it did "back in the day." (I must admit that could just be my experience.) Perhaps, there's a decrease in the overall rigor at colleges? With so many out there and such stiff competition for the tuition dollar, perhaps more students are landing in "softer" situations?

No doubt there are mitigating factors, but it does seem to be the case that more of our students are achieving greater success in college as measured by a number of factors. As always, we would love to hear your thoughts on this or any other issue.



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